

SUBMISSION

TO

THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL
BUSINESS AND EDUCATION LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

INQUIRING INTO THE
STATE GRANTS (PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
ASSISTANCE) BILL 2000.

FROM

WENDY AND LACHLAN MCMAHON AS PARENTS OF
CHILDREN ATTENDING AN AUSTRALIAN RUDOLF STEINER
SCHOOL

Wendy is currently President of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School Community Association, and member of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School's Executive Council. Wendy and Lachlan were founding members of the West Coast Steiner School community in Nollamara WA, and both (in different years) were Council members. We both have first hand experience in the management of an independent school.

A draft of this submission was circulated for comment to various Rudolf Steiner schools' Parents Associations and Councils. We had several responses in support of the broad thrust of the submission, however, there was insufficient time for them (or us) to consult widely and reply. As Rudolf Steiner schools are not systemic, a collective response to this would have required a lengthy process of consultation with each individual school. In addition, the Rudolf Steiner Schools Association is not adequately funded and hence, unable to take on this task either. It is therefore left to us, as interested parents with some overview, to make representation of these views to your inquiry.

SENATORS

“Education is what is left when what is learned has been forgotten.”
(Walter Murdoch)

General Comments

We wish to add our voices to this discussion from the perspective of parents whose children attend Rudolf Steiner (or Waldorf) Schools in Australia. A number of our comments may also be relevant to other independent schools in Australia. There are approximately 6000 children attending independent Rudolf Steiner schools in regional and metropolitan Australia. In 1973 there were 3 schools and by 1997 this had grown to 40. This number has increased again since then, as part of an educational movement that is growing world-wide.

By and large, parents with children in Steiner/Waldorf schools are average people on average incomes. Rudolf Steiner education has a unique child-centred curriculum with a significantly different perspective on child development, education and learning and their interconnectedness to the world. Based on strong philosophical underpinnings, points of departure from conventional education go beyond uniforms, standards of facilities and teachers’ salaries. We do not say that everyone should necessarily have a Rudolf Steiner education (although many would subscribe to the view that more study and examination of the tenets and results of this approach to education could have far-reaching benefits for the community as a whole).

What we do desire, however, is a fairer and more equitable slice of education funding.

A. The previous system (Education Resource Index)

The former ERI method of allocating education funding **failed dismally in living up to notions of Australia as a pluralist society**. Most children in non-Catholic, non-government schools were lucky to receive funding of one third of that of their state school counterparts. In addition, the New Schools Policy made it as difficult as possible for a new school to be established.

There appeared to be no equity in the system at all. Funding seemed to be granted to childrens’ education on the basis that if their parents had the temerity to think that the state (or Catholic) system was inappropriate for their children then they should pay top dollar for an alternative education. **Let us be clear here, we are not critical of the funding level for Catholic schools, we just believe we should all have access to this same level of funding – regardless of our lobbying power.**

B. The proposed method (Socio-Economic Status)

We believe the proposed SES model to be both **fairer and simpler**. By and large, Steiner/Waldorf schools will be better off, and our parents will be able to save a bit more and secure their futures. Whilst it is popular to type-cast all parents choosing independent schooling as wealthy, it is generally not the case within the Rudolf Steiner community. Many parents in our schools are stretched to the limit with school fees of between \$2000 and \$6000 each year per child. Their belief is that Waldorf/Steiner education is the one chance to give their child the best opportunity for a happy, balanced, well-adjusted and healthy life and therefore, worth some sacrifice.

However, we do feel that **the averaging process is fundamentally flawed**. For example, if 20% of your school community has a low socio-economic status and the other 80% are high, it is still **inherently discriminatory** against the 20%; it denies them choice in education.

We would prefer a funding process which has a fundamental commitment to choice, whereby **each child is allocated funding whichever school they attend**. We believe some people refer to this as a “token” system.

C. Improvement of SES model.

1. We, and many other parents, feel it is unfair that the current tax system gives incentives for expenditure in health insurance (rebates) and investment properties (negative gearing) and nothing to school fees when such a small amount of the total cost of independent education is funded through Recurrent Grants. Although the SES is a fairer method than the ERI, we believe that it could be improved upon. If the option of attaching funding to the child rather than the school (“token system”) is not taken up, **greater equity** could be achieved if parents electing to send their children to independent schools such as Steiner schools could claim some **tax deductibility on education expenses** (fees). Considering that so little of our tax dollar finds its way back into our childrens’ education, in comparison to our next door neighbours who elect to send their children to a state school, all we ask is our fair share of the pie!

Parents who choose to educate their children outside the state system should be given encouragement in the tax system in the same way that choices such as buying an investment property or taking out private health insurance are rewarded under our current system. Private investment in both these areas is beneficial to the whole community because it enables governments to focus their resources in other areas. Similarly, the non-government sector takes the pressure off the government sector, by reducing the requirement for fully publicly-funded facilities.

We feel it is probably fair that such “encouragements” (deductions) be **means tested** with a **sliding scale** and a cut off at perhaps \$75,000 for example. There are many different ways for legislators to meet this challenge.

2. We also have **some reservations** about the implications of this funding **for people wishing to establish Steiner (or indeed any non-Catholic independent) schools in inner city locations** which have seriously high housing costs. Our concern is for the group of parents who come together with an impulse to establish a Rudolf Steiner school in an inner-city location. Not only will they face the huge costs of real estate in purchasing the required amount of land, but will also face the possibility of not being viable because of the level of funding available. Some flexibility may need to be considered in this instance – perhaps a different arrangement for the first 5-7 years. This is especially for those community-based schools which do not have the sponsorship of a larger school or organisation. These schools do not aim to be exclusive, but the funding system forces them increasingly in that direction.

D. Let's move toward real choice in education

We feel strongly that **parents must be completely free to make choices about education**. That means we should have access to real choice in education regardless of our economic status - be it lower *or* higher. The notion that “one size fits all” and that as a nation we must offer one secular style of education free to all is problematic. It denies many parents the right to choice in education ... indeed it is tantamount to Henry Ford's *You can have any colour as long as its black*. We constantly meet people who tell us that for them alternative education is not an option for financial reasons.

E. Same produces same

The notion that everyone should receive the same packaged education deserves scrutiny. When everyone is taught to think the same way, we end up with the same old flaws, the same old tired answers and the same approach to problem solving. Our scientific community, while making many wonderful advances, is guilty of this. Questions relating to salinity, for example, have been looked at in the same way for at least the past twenty years. Where are the answers? Biodynamic agriculture has a remarkable record in this area, and has developed out of insights into agriculture provided by Rudolf Steiner, and yet it does not attract scientific study. Only one study into BD agriculture has been undertaken in Australia in the last 10 years and that looked at its viability in the Victorian dairy industry. A couple of years ago we heard that Anita Roddick of The Body Shop in addressing a conference of business leaders in Britain, criticised graduate business schools for teaching everyone to think and act in the same way. She went on and praised the Waldorf (Rudolf Steiner school) approach because it was about educating people for life, not simply for employment.

F. Literacy and Numeracy

Likewise we are concerned at the current approach to literacy and numeracy. If many of us had endured years of being force-fed “early-learning” and “educational programs” from age two or three as do so many children now, we doubt we’d be even vaguely interested in the basics by age 10. The approach seems to be “if they can’t get it at 6, start them at five or earlier”. Perhaps we need to nourish their imaginative lives, rather than fill them with a diet of largely inane children’s “educational material”. Perhaps we should consider starting them reading at 7 or 8, as practiced in Steiner/Waldorf education.

And what ever happened to our oral traditions. It is not computers which help children learn, it’s good teachers who are nourished and valued by the community as the builders of solid roots for the type of education envisaged in Walter Murdoch’s credo. Seems that the trap that policy-makers fall into these days whenever there’s a problem, is to ask “what technology can we put in place?” instead of “what additional human interaction is needed?”

Targeting funding to “outcomes” in education is living proof of the materialism in many sectors of our society. In stark contrast to the “education for life” notion of Walter Murdoch, the current form of education is in danger of becoming “training for economic activity” and little more. **This is lazy public policy because it dehumanises all of us and devalues human endeavour to the mechanistic.** To go down this path will be to our folly in the long run.

In conclusion Senators, our main point is that equity in education funding has eluded the legislation of the past and the SES model, while an improvement, falls short of the mark. We believe that if the assumption that all independent schools are wealthy is discarded in favour of the reality, then our voice will be heard. Alternative education must be placed within the reach of ordinary Australians.

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