

From:
Education Committee
Currambena School
205 Longueville Road
Lane Cove NSW 2066

To:
The Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Legislation
Committee
S1.61 Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

**SUBMISSION ON STATES GRANTS (PRIMARY AND SECONDARY
EDUCATION ASSISTANCE) BILL 2000**

RE: CLAUSES 23 AND 24

We are writing on behalf of the Education Committee of Currambena Primary School. Currambena is a small, independent and secular community-based school located in North Sydney and established in 1969. The school draws its pupils from a wide catchment area around Sydney and environs and also has significant numbers of single and blended parent families.

The Currambena Education Committee, comprising parents and teachers, reports to Currambena Council, the executive body of the school, on matters relating to curriculum and education within the school. In relation to the Bill before your committee our school has a particular concern with Clauses 23 and 24.

It is our concern that these clauses will make our recurrent funding contingent on our participation in the preparation of a national report on the outcomes of schooling (Clause 23[a]) and that there is no provision for exemption from this.

In “Outcomes Reporting and Accountable Schooling” Dr Kemp states that “one of the strong arguments in favour of national goals, targets and benchmarks is that they can provide a framework for providing parents with the information they are seeking. Within this framework schools need the autonomy to be able to tailor their reporting to the needs of their community.” This statement indicates to us that the language of national goals, targets and benchmarks do indeed constitute a framework, which by definition necessarily

excludes certain possibilities and options. Our concern is that “the needs of our community” are not met within this framework

In effect Clause 23 of this bill seems to mean that in order to receive funding, our school will need to administer a form of standardised testing (in the form of the Basic Skills Test or an equivalent). A practice such as this runs directly counter to the ethos, policy and practice of the school as stated in the Memorandum and Articles of Association:

"There shall be individual assessment and not competitive examinations".

Memorandum and Articles of Association of Currambena Ltd, Section 2(4) e.

Our position is based on educational, theoretical and philosophical grounds which have formed the basis for Currambena's existence and establishment. Currambena is the oldest alternative school in NSW. In its thirty years existence it has piloted and developed innovative approaches to education. To compromise our position could therefore threaten the legitimacy of the school as an organization. Conversely, with the grants under this bill comprising over thirty per cent of our total income, to lose our funding due to the requirements of the clauses mentioned may threaten the school's viability.

Issues Concerning Assessment.

Space does not permit a full outline of the basis for the school's objections to such testing in this submission, and these are probably beyond the scope of this inquiry. They can, briefly, be summarised as follows:

- the assumption that outcomes and standards are universal and objective, and that they are identifiable through the application of expert knowledge and reducible to accurate measurement given the right techniques
- that standardised testing contains a range of inherent flaws which prevent effective measurement of educational outcomes
- theoretical concerns that such tests are based on models of education and behavioural psychology which have been extensively problematised and challenged by a range of current theoretical perspectives
- the reduction of complex processes of teaching and learning to matters of technical and quantifiable dimensions
- concerns for the welfare of students who participate in these tests due to their educational invalidity
- conflict with current practices in terms of assessment
- equity and social justice concerns that the use and specifics of outcomes based education and standardised testing favours privileged groups within society

The Education Committee of Currambena School would be happy to provide more detail regarding any or all of these objections should you require.

Government's Stated Aims in Education

In addition to these objections, we are concerned that the implementation of this bill conflicts with many of the Government's stated aims with regard to education as outlined in the Adelaide Declaration of the National Goals for Education (1998).

According to Dr Kemp "the Bill gives legislative effect to a new accountability framework aimed at strengthening the link between the funding provided under Commonwealth schools programs and improved outcomes for all Australian students. Grantees will be required to commit to achieving performance measures or performance targets against the National Goals for Schooling and to report progress." We question whether current research has substantiated any links between the defining and measuring of outcomes and any increase in positive outcomes for students.

It is our view that outcome based education as measured by standardised testing works against National Goals as outlined in "The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century".

It is our belief that far from developing fully the talents and capacities of all students as outlined in Goal 1, standardised testing has adverse effects on student self-confidence and self-esteem (Goal 1.1).

Both the mechanism of testing and the construction and selection of outcomes to be measured are themselves social and cultural products that serve to disadvantage students from a range of social and cultural backgrounds in contradiction of Goals 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5. We would argue that outcome based measurement is inherently exclusive and discriminatory.

Parent Rights to Educational Choice

Finally we have grave concerns for the implications for parent choice in terms of education for their children. As a community-based school (that is, run by parents as well as teachers) we strongly advocate and support parent participation and choice in education. We see this as an issue of parent's rights and expect legislation to protect and support such rights. It is our view that in its present form, the bill challenges our rights as parents to make choices regarding our children's education. As a school, which explicitly promotes non-testing as its educational approach, Currumbena's entire parent body has in fact exercised their right to choose their preferred form of education. This choice specifically relates to non-testing, and was the subject of a school wide debate and review process in 1999 which resulted in a School Council decision to affirm Currumbena's non-testing practices and specifically reject registration for the Basic Skills Test. Instead, Currumbena School has a range of strategies in place to inform parents and children of educational issues.

We also point out that Dr. Kemp's argument that "better reporting and better accountability are crucial in providing parents and the community with the information they need to make informed choices about schooling:" does not sufficiently take into account queries regarding the efficacy of testing for providing accurate reports; the assumption that current outcomes and benchmarks accurately constitute education as understood within the wider Australian community; and issues of socio-economic and cultural diversity.

We wish to make it clear that we acknowledge and accept our responsibilities for accountability as a recipient of funds under this Bill. The school is happy to participate in this reporting using instruments in keeping with the school's Articles of Association. Our concern is that in its current form the Bill contains no provision to allow us to do so and in fact, will force us to use measures contrary to the school's Articles or risk viability by losing funding.

With this in mind, we propose a project such as a pilot study to investigate methods of participating in the requirements as outlined in Clause 23 that do not involve inappropriate and standardised testing. The school would be happy to consider participating in such a project, envisaging that it might benefit not only our school, but also the stated aims of government as well as the wider community.

We have separate though related concerns with regard to Clause 24. In light of the extent and severity of the implication of the requirements of Clause 23 for the school community we would envisage that decision-making processes regarding compliance with the Bill in its current form would require a substantial time frame. They would involve extensive consultation and debate within the wider school community within and through a range of forums, research and canvassing of a range of options and actions leading to a recommendation by the Education Committee to Currumbena Council for consideration. Previous debate over the matter of standardised testing within the school, indicative of the likely time frame in this case took nearly two years.

In conclusion we stand against the possibility of reducing the processes of education to quantifiable, measurable and technical matters, and believe that to do so devalues and destroys both education and the possibilities it holds out for "the best possible educational outcomes for young Australians" (The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century.). We emphasise the importance of choice in relation to educational alternatives, and wish to retain our viability as a progressive educational institution. We ask that consideration be given to the inclusion of provisions for exemption from these clauses.

Should further discussion be required representatives from our school would be willing to meet with the appropriate delegates to address ways of developing models that retain the integrity of our philosophy and educational goals along with ensuring mechanisms that

afford adequate and acceptable accountability and reporting. Please feel free to contact us as per the details below.

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