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 April, 2002

The Secretary,  
 Senate Employment, Workplace  
 Relations and Education References  
 Committee  
 Suite S1.61, Parliament House  
 CANBERRA, ACT 2600



Dear Secretary

Re: **Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

We respectfully request that your committee consider the following submissions which are based upon the premises that:

- all children should have equal access to education;
- the Government recognises the special needs of children with disabilities;
- the Government should embrace the findings of the Integration/inclusion Feasibility Study and the recommendations of the McRae Report (1996);
- it is a responsibility of Government to provide adequate and equitable funding for educating children with special needs regardless of whether they receive a public or a private education; and
- children enrolled in the private sector should not be disadvantaged.

The McRae Report (1996)

The McRae Report recognised that both state law and policy clearly establish the right of students with disabilities to be educated in the regular classes of schools. The Report identified structural barriers that impeded the intent of that law and policy.

The recommendations of the Report include:

- a system that provides for parent choice of placement on a balanced and informed basis;
- guaranteed levels of resource support according to students' needs in educational settings; and
- equitable distribution of available resources regardless of location or setting.

A key proposal of the Report was the introduction of a new form of transferable resource support directed to individual students and based on support needs. In other words, it recognised the need to provide funding for the individual child as opposed to general funding for the school.

### Private as opposed to Public Education

The Government has responsibility for ensuring that all children are educated. It has the authority to regulate and control how that education is dispensed. The fact that a significant proportion of the student population is presently educated in the private sector gives validity to the notion that the Government recognises that the private system of education legitimately exists. In fact, the public education system simply could not cope and would collapse in the unlikely event that all non-government schools simultaneously ceased to exist.

### Education Funding

It is a well established fact that the federal funding of non-government school produces substantial savings to the national cost of education. Some estimates<sup>1</sup> suggest that the existence of non-government schools generates savings to Australian taxpayers of more than \$2.6 billion each year. The annual cost to Government (both State and Commonwealth) for each child in a government school is stated<sup>2</sup> to be \$7,500.00 compared to \$4,100.00 for each child in a non-government school. Therefore, the parents of students in non-government schools meet 45% of the costs of educating their children.

### Children with Disabilities

It is fair to say that in these times, both the community and the government recognise that children with disabilities should not be disadvantaged by their disability in obtaining access to education. The government has responsibility for ensuring that all children receive an education, not only those who are without disability. To do otherwise would be discriminatory and contrary to law<sup>3</sup>.

### Funding for Education of Children with Disabilities

From the limited information available to us, it appears that significant funds are provided to the public education sector to meet the special needs of children with disabilities. Non-government schools do not receive the same financial support. So as to ensure that there is no discrimination shown towards children with disabilities who attend non-government schools, it follows that the funds dedicated to the education of children with disabilities should be allocated for the needs of the individual child rather than being determined by the type of school which the child attends.

### Our Circumstances

We are a young couple with a limited income and 3 children, aged 7, 5 and 1. Our 7 year old daughter, Caitlyn, is presently attending the Green Point Christian College. We enrolled Caitlyn at that school primarily because we are Christians who regard it as important that what is taught in the school is consistent with what is taught in the home. We also selected this school for its high standards of education, its mission and the pastoral support which it offers to students, not for elitist reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> As published by the NSW Parents Council Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> ie. Anti-Discrimination legislation

Our 5 year old daughter, Bethany, has Down Syndrome with related disabilities. She presently attends the Highland Grove Pre-School at Green Point and has the assistance of a full-time teachers aide with State funding provided through the Special Needs Subsidy Scheme. We propose to commence her schooling at the beginning of the 2003 school year. We are in the process of investigating and assessing the possibilities for Bethany to attend the same school as her older sister, Caitlyn. It would be beneficial for Bethany and Caitlyn if they could both attend the same school. Our inquiries to date indicate that:

- a child with the level of Bethany's disabilities would usually be afforded the support of a full-time teachers aide<sup>4</sup>;
- if Bethany is enrolled in a public school, that school would receive a funding allocation in the region of \$20,000.00 for her 2003 schooling; and
- if Bethany is enrolled at the Green Point Christian College, it will receive (from its parent body) an amount of \$1,300.00 for her 2003 schooling.

The executive staff who we have spoken to at the Green Point Christian College have expressed a keen desire to have Bethany attend at their school. However, we gained the impression that without additional funding the school may not be able to offer Bethany the same level of dedicated support which would be available to her in the State system. We believe this to be inequitable.

#### Observations and Comments

We are faced with the decision of whether we should enrol Bethany in a public school or a private school. The decision as to whether we send our children to a government or non-government school is a matter of choice for us with the financial costs to be weighed against the importance of our beliefs.

We have great difficulty in accepting that Bethany's disabilities are likely to dictate whether we select a government or a non-government school.

#### Our Recommendations

1. That the education of a child with a disability should not be affected by discriminatory allocation of funding;
2. That funding for the education of children with disabilities should be directed to the educational establishment which the child attends; and
3. That such funding should not be dictated by the type of school which the child attends.

We thank you for considering this submission.

Yours faithfully



Denise & Anthony de Witte

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<sup>4</sup> from advice given to us by Bethany's treating therapists and teachers in both the private and public sector.