

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
References Committee

## **Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools**

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**Organisation:** New Town Primary School

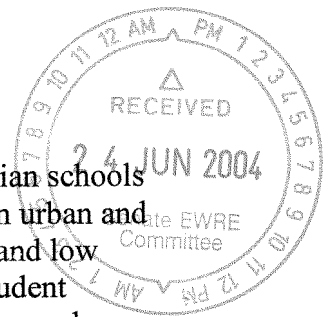
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My name is Danny Neal. I have been a school principal of Tasmanian schools since 1970, a period of 35 years. My experiences have included schools in urban and country areas, isolated areas, disadvantaged housing areas and both high and low socio-economic areas. I have experienced the extremes at either end of student behaviour and ability and also experienced the extremes at both ends of a very long range of teacher ability and parent's involvement. I would also like to say I have equally experienced both ends of school conditions such as the physical environment, equipment and resources but alas I have only experienced the less desirable end in terms of equipment.

During my journey I have experienced the greatest of highs where satisfaction and reward comes from seeing student, teacher and community achievement. But also throughout my 40 years I have plummeted to the deepest of despairs and depression and exasperation at experiencing the traumas of child abuse, teacher ineptitude and parental indifference to their children's talents and potential.

There is not time in this submission to share or even explain how one gets to a set of beliefs or understandings so I will move on and set out a series of recommendations and within them a short explanation.

### **Money is important.**

**Money can change and solve most problems in schools.** New Town Primary School gets very little of Commonwealth money. I estimate about \$20,000 including funds for LOTE (Languages other than English) and ESL (English as Second Language) programs. If the Commonwealth funding were distributed equally between all schools on a per capita basis New Town Primary School would receive an extra \$800,000. This would equate to an extra 16 teachers! Or a combination of teachers, teacher aides, equipment or building programs. This would provide teachers or aides to assist with individual students who are having problems with social or academic areas. The request is not to take money away from private schools but to share equally between government and private schools.

With such funding I could almost guarantee that no child would leave New Town Primary behind in their reading, writing or arithmetic or with social or psychological problems!

I could almost guarantee with such funding no parent would lack the social skills or awareness of what is required to help themselves and their children in their journeys through high school and within an increasingly complex society.

I could almost guarantee that no teacher would take stress leave but rather would find fulfilment and new energies for teaching and motivating the students in their care.

I could almost guarantee that all students would find success and individual talents and skills to enjoy their life.

I could almost guarantee that all students would be fit and healthy mentally and physically and would have adopted individual and team sports and goals for the future.

But without the money I couldn't guarantee any of these! Why? Does money make that much difference?

Yes because at present teachers have 28-30 students in their classes, not much less than when I started teaching in the sixties, and to have the ability to offer individual attention and guidance on a regular and consistent basis is just not possible. This has a spiralling culminating effect of the class dynamics with student failure and

a lack of motivation spawning behaviour problems that leads to a critical mass within a classroom eventually engulfing a tired and exhausted teacher. The gallant teacher battles bravely to implement the new curriculum where individual students are challenged to think for themselves and adopt ownership of their own learning. And this would be fine if there were only 20 students in the class and other teachers and aides to offer support for individuals and groups when individual social and academic problems become a hindrance to whole class involvement. This type of support of course costs money but it can be the difference to a teacher making a positive difference to students or succumbing to stress leave or sick leave or teaching in a 'dumbed down' way in order to cope. I'm certain all Senators can relate to how difficult the job of a modern teacher is and I will spare you the other thirty odd pages I could write in emphasising that. My main point here is that money can make an enormous difference in whether a school, teacher or student is a success or a failure. So my first recommendation would be:

**Recommendation 1: Distribute all Commonwealth funding equally.** I know there would be strong arguments for a needs index and I would support that for some percentage; maybe 20%, but I feel strongly that at least 80% of Commonwealth Education funds should be distributed equally. Or what percentage would Senators suggest? I'm not against private schools as I see the good they do and the fine teachers and students that go to these schools, many of whom I call friends. However surely the first priority of a government is to ensure government schools meet a certain standard before providing money to schools where parents are willing to pay. If private schools deem a quality education is only possible by spending \$16,000 per student (their fees plus government support) how can government schools possibly provide adequate education for \$4,000 per child?

### **Get funding through the school gate.**

Throughout my forty years I have seen a scandalous waste of Commonwealth money for education. There seems an announcement every few months about another Commonwealth initiative giving more funds to schools. My evaluation of most schemes, no matter how well intended, is that they are a waste of time and money. After the various Commonwealth and State agencies or departments skim off their staffing or use the money to justify their pet programs, very little if anything gets through the school gate. There might be a seminar, a consultant's visit, a pretty poster or a glossy handbook but no money; not one cent actually gets to a school!

If you could see how a staff of earnest, energetic, responsible teachers sit around and discuss at length, hours even, how to spend a grant of \$500 you would be amazed. The teachers at a school know the problems and in most cases know the solutions or with group dynamics and divergent thinking can solve just about any problem you could throw at them! Groups of teachers at schools have produced better curriculums than curriculum centres, better behaviour programs than support centres, better professional development programs than central officers. They just need the money to do it! My wish would be that 100% of funding goes directly to schools but what do Senators think? 80% or 50% ? How about 20%

**Recommendation 2: 40% of Commonwealth funds should be paid directly to schools.** Of course fiscal safeguards would apply with appropriate reports going to the Commonwealth and maybe even Senators?

### **Create an even playing field.**

When we talk about business economics the level playing field is often used as a metaphor to allow fair competitive practices. So how come this doesn't apply to schools?

At Hutchins School in Hobart they built their Infant School with classrooms for 15 students. Then they advertise that fact to attract clients away from Government schools. And they used my taxes to do it? That's not fair. How can my school compete with that? We have 25-28 students in our infant classes. Maybe if I charged levies of \$5,000 I could do it.

But if that is what private schools think is necessary to provide a quality education, ( and I wouldn't disagree) why cannot that standard be adopted by all schools and the Commonwealth fund such a standard? Or what would your standard on infant and primary classes be Senators? And why can Victoria offer a better ratio than Tasmania? Is that fair?

**Recommendation 3: Commonwealth funds will be distributed to allow all schools, private and government, to meet a common standard of pupil/teacher ratio of 20 for infant and 24 for primary classes.**

Twenty years ago I put down on the school levy sheet four packs of toilet rolls to be donated to the school at the time of paying levies. Superintendents were sent forth to squash my entrepreneurial skills at managing my school budget. Since then things have changed significantly with schools being trusted to manage funds for the various day to day running of their schools. However because schools have been so good for so long at running on shoestring budgets and coping I think we have become stuck in mediocrity in terms of equipment and resources for schools. It's been a long long long time since I purchased a significant package of science equipment. Well you can do most science experiments with a few rubber bands and empty bottles can't you? And we do. But often we are accused of not making schools interesting enough and not motivating our students. I look at science catalogues and drool at the exciting, brain stretching, hands-on equipment that is available. I do a few sums and calculate what it would cost to equip one class room. Wow! Sharing via a resource centre. Still wow! And that's one activity or science area. Sorry kids no exciting motivating science equipment this year I need the dough for relief teachers for teachers who are sick or tired or stressed? Or toilet rolls?

A few years ago I went on a tour of Melbourne schools. One private school had a complete room (a hall-sized proportioned room) that was called the Robotics Room. Talk about being gob smacked at the equipment that was available! Put that in any government school and I guarantee the difficult, unmotivated subset of students would cease to have attendance problems and attitudes and abilities in all their learning areas would increase!!! And it's the same for art, sport, computers, music, library, furniture and playground equipment. My point is schools continue to operate on entirely inadequate budgets and should have their operating costs increased in order to provide modern challenging environments for students. Again it is a case of providing more money through the school gate to allow schools independent discretion at planning their programs. So in case Senator's don't adopt my Recommendation 1, in order to give schools some flexibility in providing say teacher aides, teachers or equipment for remedial or extension or just to help cover ongoing day to day costs -

**Recommendation 4: That Commonwealth Education Funds of \$200 per student be allocated directly to schools to assist in managing school-initiated programs.**

**Standards**

I would like the Senators to consider developing a series of standards which would guide all states and schools throughout Australia. I considered the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century; The Hobart Declaration 1989 and the Adelaide revision of 1998, as an excellent charter to education and I am disappointed to see the downgrading of that as an important policy document. For example I don't believe schools should have the authority to determine whether kids have P.E. or sport. For a school to vote out sport or LOTE or any other core or mandated subject is mediocrity by majority or just plain laziness by some schools. Conversely I believe schools and their teachers should have autonomy in developing programs and plans to meet National policies and aims. Neither do I believe States should decide matters of starting school age, funding of Kindergartens, class size, building codes, teacher qualifications etc etc Why should a child simply because they are born in one State not have access to opportunities available in another state? I would like to see a National Education Department with agencies in each state and State Education Departments disappear! I would like to see teachers be accredited Australia wide and be able to transfer to any state or area. However I suppose that's a bit fanciful as I couldn't see the constitutional changes getting through wrangling State governments. However I would like to recommend that the Commonwealth develop the following standards for guidance of all Australian schools:

**1. A building standard for Australian schools.**

Principals in Tasmania constantly rail against old fashioned standards about the size of class rooms, halls, playing areas, music rooms, libraries etc etc. Canteens don't have hygiene standards. Inclusion students are not catered for with ramps and handrails or fences. Class sizes don't take into account students in wheel chairs or room to put computers or storage spaces or quiet withdrawal areas. The Tasmanian Education Department doesn't recognise a music room in primary schools. That's a silly as saying a library isn't necessary. Surely we can decide what is necessary in a modern Australian school to meet modern education standards of equity and inclusion.

**2. A Standard Assessment and Testing Resource**

Raising standards has almost become a hackneyed phrase where distrusting governments try to legislate to improve student learning outcomes. In my 40 years I don't know of any principal, teacher, school or parent that didn't want higher standards. And 99% have worked diligently to achieve that. Consolidating and widening testing agencies simply to produce statistics that politicians or states can argue about will not increase standards.

1. Producing a National Assessment Kit, a folder of testing and measurement devices for teachers to administer and advise principals, parents and even students would be far more efficient and cost effective. But then politicians and senior education bureaucrats would have to trust schools and teachers! I bet the parents would.

2. Providing an online assessment site where with strict teacher control of permissions and security would allow a centralised snapshot of student abilities, weaknesses and improvements almost immediately. Certainly it would beat the almost scandalous system we have now with testing in July/August and results in December ! Even Monty python would throw his hands up at that one!

### **3. A Standard of Instruction and Learning Time.**

How much P.E. time or sport time? How much music or library time? These are specialist subject areas in primary schools and their allocations have for a long time been left to the professional discretion of schools. But is it fair that one child gets 30 minutes P.E. in one school and another school allocates 60 minutes? Why that one school is able to offer guitar and choir and another can't? Art, I.T., extension or gifted classes, remedial or catch up classes are sometimes included in the mix. But what is the mix? Most times a school debates whether to have class sizes of 25/27 and have none or limited specialists or to have class sizes of 30/33 and have all the specialists. And is that a Greek tragedy where both sides are right and both sides are wrong. So come on Senators what is a recommended standard for staffing a school to provide an optimum level of class time, specialist time, senior staff time, counselling and behaviour resources. How would you staff a school ? It would be nice to see if the schools in your electorate came up to your standard?

### **3. A Standard National Curriculum**

This was tried a few years ago with publications from the Australian Curriculum Corporation and most schools and teachers adopted the knowledge and guidelines. Unfortunately the guidelines lost favour in Tasmania owing to the focus shifting to implementing our own curriculum based around a philosophy of getting children to think and take ownership of their learning through exploring the 'big ideas' involved in society. It is too early to see if schools and teachers are convinced as there is some apprehension that the approach may seem too generic and not discrete enough to pursue the rigours of the historical individual subjects. It seems the curriculum developers have difficulty in producing hands on materials to actually support teachers in the class room and I feel this may stem from a lack of resources within individual state governments. I still feel that it is economically more efficient for a national body to be funded to provide such a common facility to all states. Otherwise students in one state may miss out on say a clear and consistent and effective maths curriculum. Certainly in Tasmania a maths curriculum or class room support maths materials are non existent. NSW is pretty good in this area and SA is pretty good in the IT area. It seems to me that developing such materials is such a huge task that by the time a State gets halfway through it's time to start again and we never quite nail down all the areas. Perhaps each state could be funded to develop an individual area and then put the lot together? And of course the overall frame work to guide the separate components could be developed in Canberra?

### **IN CONCLUSION**

So in conclusion I would empathise the need for all schools in some way to share more equally the large amounts of money at the discretion of the Commonwealth and emphasise as strongly as possible for as much money as possible to actually get through the school gate!