

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
Suite SG.52, Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Monday, 28 June 2004

Dear Sir or Madam,

Our 9 year old son is a student at Blue Gum Community School, a non-government primary school in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Our son loves his school. Every day he enthusiastically speaks to us about his friends, his teachers and the things he is learning.

As typical parents, our primary focus is on helping our child to develop as a happy, confident and positive contributor to the community. A contributor who has the opportunity to realise his full potential as a person and successful member of society.

We see schooling as a critical component of our son's and all childrens' development. Our view is that parents need to work in partnership with teachers, family, friends, the community and governments, to support our children in developing their talents, capacities and values. This type of approach, we feel, not only works to the benefit of each child but collectively helps create the type of community spirit, social understanding and equity that is crucial for the world to be a good place for all people and living things.

We chose Blue Gum Community School for our son after considering several schools in both the Government and non-Government systems. We did not make a choice based upon the system or resources. Rather our choice was based upon educational values and approach. We sought a school that suited our boy's temperament and learning approach, and that also espoused the values that we believe in. We found Blue Gum and have been delighted with the stimulating environment and support it provides for our son's holistic development.

Today, our choice as parents is under threat because of the current unfair and inequitable Australian Government funding arrangements - the SES funding scheme, and the divisive attitude of the ACT Government to non-Government vs Government school funding.

With regard to the ACT Government, we believe that an approach that drives a wedge between the schools and families in each system as outdated and ill-serving of the community the Government is there to serve.

In the ACT there is about a 60/40 split of students between Government and non-Government schools. Many families have children in both systems. The 40%-odd students that attend non-Government schools are largely from average middle class families. There are also disadvantaged and privileged families that are in the non-Government school system. The Government system, while having 20% more students has a very similar profile. Too often we see the ACT Government presenting a picture of wealth and privilege in the non-Government system while Government system families are "normal" or disadvantaged. This ideological dogma fails to recognise that most parents choose a school because it presents the best setting for their children, not because it is Government or non-Government.

We believe that the ACT Government (and States and Territories in general) should be equal partners with the Australian Government and families, where appropriate, in equitable funding of all schools, regardless of system. The approach to funding needs to focus on how best to achieve excellent educational outcomes for our children rather than be a battle ground between systems.

Today, the Australian Government and parents are the primary funding sources for non-Government schools. But, the Australian Government's SES funding Scheme does not work in the ACT. The socio-economic structure of the territory is planned to ensure that there are no suburbs of collective disadvantage. This means that the method used by SES for estimating average parental wealth in each school does not work.

The SES methodology calculates Blue Gum as being in the top ten wealthiest schools in Canberra. Nothing could be further from the truth. Blue Gum Community School is a low-fee not-for-profit school that aims to provide its unique approach to all Canberra parents who choose this approach for their children. As such it has families from all socio-economic backgrounds within its community. The majority of its families are low-to middle income earners.

But the inequity for Blue Gum is not just that the SES has incorrectly categorised the school. It is that Blue Gum is the only school in the ACT that is forced to be funded under SES.

All other schools have a choice to remain "funding maintained" and all but two have taken that choice. To do otherwise would mean that they would experience the same 40% - 50% cut in funding per student that Blue Gum has experienced. Only the two highest fee schools in Canberra have chosen SES as the better funding model.

Why are Blue Gum's parents being singled out for this unfair treatment? Why are the dedicated and excellent teaching staff and management of Blue Gum Community School having to live with the fear of the school closing?

We are aware that the families of all but two other schools in the ACT will face the same inequity as us when they no longer have the choice of remaining funding maintained.

We are aware that only some 55% of schools in Australia have chosen SES funding arrangements. In other words the families of 45% of non-government schools will be disadvantaged once they are no longer able to choose "funding maintenance".

We do not want the same inequity that we find our school community has borne for other families in Australia.

To achieve quality, equity, efficiency and effectiveness in public funding for government and non-government schools across Australia the first step must be to truly recognise and support the diversity and needs of our children and families. The funding model must be an enabler and not a divisive wedge between systems.

To achieve equity for the Blue Gum School Community then its funding per student must be restored to that of its comparable neighbouring schools, i.e. about a 58% increase in funding per student. This funding increase must be backdated to the schools inception in January 2001.

Your Sincerely

Artur Zawadski & Michelle Slezak
Parents, Blue Gum Community School