

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools

Submission no: 56

Received: 7/07/2004

Submitter: The Board of Directors

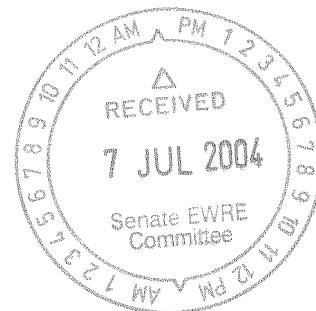
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The Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Suite SG52
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

INQUIRY INTO FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS

Introduction

Our school is a relatively small day school offering classes from pre-Kindy (age 4-5) to Year 7 (age 13-14). We are located in the heart of Coffs Harbour, which you are probably aware is on the mid-north coast of NSW. We are registered by the Board of Studies, NSW. The school was established in the late 1980's by parents wanting to provide their children with an education based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner.

The school now has enrolments of 110 and hopes to expand to between 150 and 200 children over the next 5-10 years. Given the rapid population expansion of the district, this school's expansion is unlikely to have an impact on the over 15 local government schools. The schools intake area ranges from Bellingen in the south to Corindi Beach in the north, a range of about 70 kilometres. That parents are willing to arrange for their primary school-age children to travel such distance to school is an indicator of the strength of their views about educational choice.

ABS statistics will tell you that the Coffs Harbour District has almost the lowest per capita income rate in Australia. Despite this, school fees contribute to 35% of school income. We have received Commonwealth support for construction in the school at a rate of about 1:2, that is, two thirds of capital costs have been paid for by parent contributions or loans. We currently receive interest rate subsidy for most of our loan interest.

Key Points

- We support the view of all governments that a good education is the right of every Australian child. Steiner philosophy supports education being provided in a school setting. We believe that Governments, both nationally and at state and territory level, have a responsibility to provide each Australian child – no matter what their family background or what school they attend – with a reasonable level of funding for their schooling. All school

students deserve government support for their education irrespective of the school they attend.

- Non-government schools are important providers of education for the children of Australia and should be recognised for their contribution to the economic wellbeing of the nation. Over one million students are currently enrolled in non-government schools. Non-government schools account for one-third of total school enrolments and some 37 per cent of secondary enrolments. In all capital cities other than Darwin, non-government schools educate over 40 per cent of secondary students.
- Governments must recognise that a substantial proportion of Australia's system of school education, like the public systems of health and transport, is delivered by private (not-for-profit) providers. Government schools funding models must recognise the validity of diversity in schooling provision.
- Non-government schools are registered to operate as schooling providers with their state or territory government. The school registration process ensures non-government schools meet the public goals of schooling and community standards. Students attending non-government schools should be eligible for a reasonable basic level of funding by governments in support of their education. In addition, students with special needs who attend non-government schools should be able to access the same needs-based funding and government services available to students attending government-owned schools.
- Steiner education occurs throughout the world. It's been operating with little change to the basic principles since the 1920's. Its graduates have achieved success in all walks of life. For example, our graduates are very apparent on awards night in the local high schools. In the past few years our graduates have come feature heavily as top performers in academic and a wide range of other pursuits. Some become school captains, school duxes and win prestigious prizes. Others make different choices about their personal goals. We think that their contribution to our whole community vindicates our choice of a Steiner education for our children. If this type of education were available in State Schools, we would be perfectly happy to send our children there.
- Parents value diversity in schooling options and the freedom to choose among them in order to best meet the educational needs of their children. Parents who choose to educate their children in non-government schools demonstrate their willingness to play a partnership role with governments in funding the cost of their children's education. They contribute to the cost of their children's education from their after-tax dollars.
- Parents who exercise their freedom of choice in schooling options for their children should not attract financial penalty. Parents should not be penalised for their willingness to spend money on their children's education.
- Parental contribution to the education of their children in non-government schools represents a significant proportion of Australia's expenditure on school education. If the students in non-government schools were educated in government-owned schools, governments would need to find another \$4.2 billion each year in recurrent funding alone to

be able to educate all students to the standard currently available in government-owned schools. In our school, parents are asked to pay around \$2700 in fees to meet the gap in funding from governments.

- Students in non-government schools are not eligible for the same level of government funding as students attending government-owned schools.
- The current system of allocating general recurrent grants for non-government schools from the Australian Government (the SES model) provides a reasonable measure of the capacity of school communities to contribute to the costs of schooling.
- In contrast, funding for government schools is provided without any assessment of the financial circumstances of their school communities.
- Much of the recent public debate on schools funding has focused on the facilities available to independent schools. Unlike the provision of capital infrastructure in government-owned schools, facilities in independent schools are largely funded through borrowings and the generosity of school communities. It is estimated that, nationally, 86 per cent of funds for capital development in independent schools has been contributed by the school communities. This is another saving to governments.
- As a minimum, Australian government funding should be retained in its current form for the coming quadrennial period (2005 – 2008) to allow our families some certainty to plan for their financial commitments. Stability and certainty in funding is most important for our school's continued viability and ability to sustain quality in educational provision.

Non-government schooling should not be available for only the financial elite

- We see many parents making immense sacrifices to permit their children to come to our school. They are surrounded by free government schools and lower cost religious schools, yet they choose to make the financial sacrifice to bring their children to our school. Our school doesn't promise superior academic outcomes (though we get them according to our scores on state-wide tests), nor rigorous discipline (though set and sustain high standards for acceptable behaviour in our school guidelines). We offer a rounded education of important academic, artistic and social learning. We believe that it is very much in any government's interest to financially support such an education, at least to the level of, say, government schools.

Supporting new schools

- We are a relatively new school. Apart from capital funds for the school to develop, there is also a need for increased recurrent funding during early times. To attract students, a school needs to show local families that it is a viable, long-term option for the education of their children. When a school inevitably begins with a few students and grows gradually, and when the school is not part of a larger system that can provide additional financial support during the early years, additional government support would be invaluable to its establishment. As long as basic requirements, such as Board of Studies registration, are met, a new school should receive additional, start-up funding.

Integration of children with special needs in non-government schools

- While integration of children with disabilities is a highly desirable objective in our community, the funding provided for children that need additional support is far too low. Given the cost of teaching and teaching support wages, the allocation of less than \$2000 per annum per child compromises the effectiveness of this objective. At an average of \$25 per hour, say, this provides 80 hours per year of support! The school year is at least 1200 hours. The award requires that an employee work for a minimum of 3 hours on any day that they come to work. This means that an employee supporting a child could attend for less than 30 days of a 200 day school year. How are these children to be supported for the other 1120 hours or 170 days per year? We don't believe that it's the government's intention that other children's education is compromised so that special needs children can attend their local school. If we are correct, non-government schools should be provided with at least the funding provided to government schools for the integration of high need students.

Accountability to school community and government

- Our school's legal entity is a cooperative. In other words, the people that have children in the school, who are employed by the school, or who make a significant voluntary contribution to the school are the virtual proprietors of the school. In this environment, and as a fee charging school we must be highly accountable to our school's families. If we fail to deliver acceptable standards of education performance our parents will take their children elsewhere. With 7% of the school population on the Board of Directors, there is a high level of scrutiny of the school's financial management. Having said that, our school is happy to provide reports to both the school community and the government about our operations. What is important, however, is that reporting doesn't take resources from the educational activities of the school. Requiring extensive reporting on student outcomes by teachers will be counter-productive. Our view is that teachers are fully occupied preparing for and delivering lessons and sustaining their high level of skill in our world of dramatic change. There is no scope for detailed additional reporting by teachers against learning outcomes for students. Our teachers provide very detailed and individually tailored reports to students and families twice a year and this should be sufficient.

Casuarina School offers these comments to the committee, as it believes that providing quality education is among the highest priorities of our country. Although ours is a small, non-government school, we know we are representative of working class Australians. We also speak with the authority of a service provider in a country/regional area. What all Australians seek is equality under the law, and the freedom of choice that is the essence of our country. As tax-paying members of the Australian community, we seek only that students in all schools receive the funding that their school needs given the economic resources of its local community.

Yours faithfully,



For The Board of Directors
Casuarina School Cooperative

25.6.04