

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools

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The Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Suite SG52
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Dear Sir

INQUIRY INTO FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS

Introduction

The Launceston Preparatory School is a small non-government primary school with an enrolment of 130 day students aged 4 – 12 years. The School was established in 1982 and is non-denominational and non-systemic. Special features of our School include the deliberate maintenance of small class sizes (15 – 18 children) and a Socratic strand of teaching and learning experiences which focus on the development of critical thinking skills and good citizenship.

Our SES score is currently 103, meaning that 32% of our funds are derived from the Australian Government. A further 15% is sourced from the Tasmanian State Government, leaving 53% of the costs of educating a student in our school to be raised from private sources.

Key Points

As Co-Principals of The Launceston Preparatory School, the most continuous demand we hear from current and prospective parents is their plea for choice in the education of their children. Too often the funding for schools debate degenerates to an "us and them" mentality where both government and non-government schools become defensive of their practices or feel compelled to prove superiority. This debate should rise above such pettiness. This debate is about providing to parents the choice they need to find the form of education that best suits the needs of their children and successive generations of young Australians.

One of the reasons why The Launceston Preparatory School has been so successful in its relatively short life is that it meets the needs of families who are looking for a form of education that only we provide in the wider Launceston area. This does mean to say that we are better than other schools; only that we are providing a different form of education from others which many families are seeking.

Freedom of choice in education is a precious right that the Australian Government can protect through its funding for schools. This is particularly the case in regional Australian areas like ours that, without assistance from the federal government, might not be otherwise able to support the choices which parents demand and which children deserve.

Unfortunately, another line of argument which blurs the real issues in the debate over funding for schools is that "all federally funded schools are wealthy and elitist" in terms of their physical resources. The Launceston Preparatory School is one example among many which prove the invalidity of this argument.

Like many other schools, we do not have the extensive physical facilities which many believe to be a characteristic of non-government schools in receipt of government funding. This is for two reasons, the first being our commitment to ensuring that all monies received by this school are invested in ways that directly contribute to the improved teaching and learning experiences of our students. Secondly, we believe in using existing resources already present within the community without duplicating them. Our city has a swimming pool, local tennis and netball courts, playing fields, a Police, Citizens and Youth Club gymnasium etc. to which we walk or hire buses to transport our students. This means that existing facilities are well-utilised and sets a good example to our students of community involvement.

The funding we receive from the Australian Government is therefore more fruitfully invested in resources such as teachers and classroom materials (including resources to foster the teaching and use of ICT), achieving positive outcomes in a very real sense for the students in our care. Even in instances where schools are independently well-resourced for physical facilities, the majority of funds are usually contributed by the school communities, saving governments massive sums of money.

One of the most important effects of the funding we (and other non-government schools) receive is that it enables us to keep as low as possible the fees we charge for schooling. In The Launceston Preparatory School in particular, our receipt of funding also enables us to make our school fees all-inclusive so that there are no hidden levies or "extras" costs other than those for uniforms and, later in the students' schooling, a contribution to the costs of school camps. This enfranchises families who might otherwise not be able to afford access to the school of their choice.

Not only is this an important freedom of choice issue, but it also ensures that schools like ours are microcosms of society, rather than artificial environments where the participants come from a narrow range of echelons in society. This enables students to grow in settings that are socially realistic, fostering the development of skills and understandings that will be equally applicable outside the school situation.

A further benefit of government funding for schools such as ours is that it enables us to keep our class sizes small. This is a feature of The Launceston Preparatory School which attracts an increasing number of families. If non-government schools were totally reliant on private funds for their continued existence, they would have to either increase enrolments or increase fees. It has already been explained above how funding to schools can mean being able to limit fee increases which, in turn, often makes educational choices more widely available.

Small class sizes is an important feature of schools for many families, particularly where family circumstances produce a need for strong social and emotional support for children and where children have other special learning needs that can be best met in a small class environment. Government funding allows schools like ours to make a very real and practical commitment to small class sizes. Without it, we would have to increase enrolments to keep pace with rising costs of salaries, teaching materials, insurance, maintenance etc.

There are many other important reasons why government funding for schools is important and should continue – issues of equity, economics and social responsibility. In this paper, I have attempted to canvass some issues that may be forgotten in the broader scope of things, but issues that are very real to the many small schools and small communities that make up the Australian scene.

I would be happy to pursue these matters further if required.

Yours sincerely,

Leonie McNair and Susan Wright
(Co-Principals)

cc: Mr Tony Crehan, Executive Director, AIST