

October 31, 2008

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

eewr.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for report by 27 November, 2008.

I wish to submit the following opinion and proposal in relation to the above.

Summation of my Proposal:

The Senate has referred the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 to the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for report by 27 November, 2008. I understand that the purpose of the Schools Assistance Bill is to implement the government's commitment to provide stability in Commonwealth funding for non-government schools for 2009-2012.

My remarks are respectfully brought to the attention of members of the Standing Committee as a means of attempting to address and negotiate a solution to the extraordinarily complex and divisive contexts in which funding by the Commonwealth Government of non-Government schools is viewed and decided and which exerts a powerful negative effect on the government's proposed policy preference as well as that of other parties to the policy process. I am available to enlarge on the detail of points tendered in this submission on request.

Introduction:

The purpose of the Schools Assistance Bill is to implement the government's commitment to provide stability in Commonwealth funding for non-government schools for 2009-2012. This submission accepts the premise and intention of such a Bill and applauds the work of various Governments and Standing Committees over many years to find a just solution to the continued problem of state-aid apportionment to all Australian schools, both government and non-government.

My submission further commends the intention of the Government to attempt to permanently heal and remove the suppurating sore of the public versus private policy debate in which the discourse of schools funding is perpetually mired. While the submission may not completely offer an absolute means of achieving such a worthy and permanent objective it is hopefully one that offers some benefits for all sides of politics as well as cohering with the objectives of all schools providing an education, whether government or non-government, and also with the overriding objectives of all parties to this matter to improve the quality of Australian school outcomes.

Proposal:

The question of state aid has been one that most OECD polities have had to resolve over many years. This problem has taken many forms but has usually been referred to as the Catholic Schools Question or the issue of Confessional Parties.

This is not to discount the equal claims that all kinds of alternative providers legitimately have in relation to their claim on a share of public revenue for the provision of Australian schools. However, the genealogy of the problem demonstrates that it is the Catholics who have universally pressed the strongest claims for a share of the public purse in relation to support for their schools, in respect of which they have historically provided the bulwark of resistance to governments and political parties unprepared to successfully meet such claims.

In all of the above polities, with the exception of the Western provinces of Canada, where Roman Catholic numbers are small, and the United States, in which the Constitution resolutely debar religious schools from being funded, Catholic schools are part and parcel of the public provision of education.

This is not to say that in some OECD polities there are not any Catholic independent schools. However, where these exist they are treated as part and parcel of the independent school system and do not occupy or reinforce the kind of hybrid position that Australian governments of all complexions must contend with in determining a solution to the complex policy problem of non-government school funding.

It follows that my policy proposal, to shift all non-government schools into a special category of Commonwealth schools that are fully-funded on condition of enrolling all who support their ethos, will attract the support of several providers of non-government education (not just the Catholics, for there are Anglican, Methodist, Hindu and Islamic government schools in several OECD polities) as well as guarantee, by legislation, a preservation of their ethos and special character.

While this would undoubtedly entail a cost to the public purse in the short run, it would solve several problems in the long term. Firstly, it would provide much needed choice and competition for all or most parents, without making the exercise of such choice dependent on the personal wealth of families.

Secondly the application of competition policy in this domain would lift the standards of all schools, both state and territorial as well as Commonwealth schools, as it has done where such arrangements have been introduced, and put paid to the persistent claims of state school adherents, and especially the teacher unions, that current funding arrangements residualise their schools and make them available only for the very poor, after non-government schools have taken their prior share of the pickings.

Thirdly, such a funding arrangement would free up those independent, as well as potentially some state schools that are able to do so, to raise their own revenue and pursue policies of selection that are the entitlement of those who offer a service on the totally open market and who can find clients whose needs are met through the provision of such a service which they can purchase without interference or subsidy

from the state or Commonwealth. This arrangement works well in several OECD countries.

Fourthly, the wider advantages to the polity have also been remarkable, with both sides of politics in several countries agreed about the removal of confessionalism, especially before elections, thus creating an opportunity for the Churches to address their legitimate concerns about social and political issues without allowing the schools question and matters of positional advantage for them to impact unduly on the voting patterns of particular groups. Equally the chain of reactions triggered by such a political culture exerts equal and countervailing pressures for teacher unions to exert on the other side of politics to dislocate and disenfranchise the legitimate rights of religious groups to their own forms of schooling.

Finally and in effect, when this happens and one issue dominates all others, a form of sectional politics can come to usurp the policy process, to the frustration and exclusion of effective leadership as well as progress on the major issues that face Australians as a matter of the common good, such as climate change, the global economic crisis and indigenous affairs. Besides, it cannot and should not be that Australians are destined forever to have to deal with the state aid issue every quadrennium and before each budget. There is much, much more of pressing importance that should command our attention and priority for our future as a nation.

Recommendation for a Research Project to Investigate my Proposal:

The question then remains as to how the above recommendation is to be investigated. This cannot be done without reference to a major research project, requiring consultation with all major stakeholders in the schools provision and funding policy question.

While school funding policy attracts many opinions, some passionate and undoubtedly prejudiced, my submission proposes a research project which ought generally to call up participants' most thoughtful and knowledgeable responses to ensure that the success of such a project will depend on hard data and harness participants' outrage into positive channels.

There are several research methodologies that enable this to happen; and while the government does have at its service the resources of an efficient, loyal and unbiased bureaucracy, it sometimes happens that the bipolarity of politics, especially on the schools funding question, adversely effects the legislative framework and hinders the kind of policy initiatives necessary for establishing common ground on so divisive a policy issue.

I am able to offer some experience, knowledge and expertise in this, as I have a Master's degree in public policy (with reference to the funding of school systems) as well as a PhD which examines the propensity for a New Zealand, British Isles (all jurisdictions) and Netherlands-style integrated school system to be introduced to Australia.

Conclusion:

I respectfully remind Honourable Senators that the time is never right to do such a thing as I propose. However, given that the current Bill is intended for enactment for

the 2009-2012 quadrennium, I most humbly and earnestly urge that attention be given to my suggestion.

This that that the matter of what is to happen thereafter be considered as part of the current consultation and terms of reference, and referred back to the House of Representatives for their consideration of adequate resources to be set aside to progress research into the ongoing deregulation and equitable treatment of all publicly funded Australian schools, as reflected in the inevitable impacts of globalisation and competition policy on them.

My rationale for doing this is that the next four years will be crucial in contributing to the success of school funding policy arrangements thereafter, and in emphasising the clear need for transparency and comparability that is bound to follow as a matter of good public policy.

Alternatively, this submission contends that any similar proposal should be investigated and, if viable, endorsed on the same basis as the funding model and changes that I propose, which is intended for the betterment of all Australian schools.

Yours sincerely

(Dr) Michael L. Furtado