



Thursday, 30th October 2008

Mr John Carter
Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear John,

RE: Schools Assistance Bill

I am the principal of Hillcrest Christian College, a P-12 Independent school on the outskirts of Melbourne. Our enrolment this year is approximately 740 students and will grow to 820 in 2009. Additionally, we will start an Early Learning Centre with 75 students in 2009. Our families are working class, heartland Australia families, located in the fastest growing growth corridor in Victoria. We have an SES ranking of 98 which is indicative of our community status.

Our school is focussed on providing the widest access for parents to education. To this end, we charge very low fees to our parents to ensure the greatest access possible. When the College first started, 30 years ago, our parents only had the opportunity of sending their children to large Government schools. Many Government schools taught no form of religious education and were very politically sensitive.

Over thirty years, our parents have scraped, saved and borrowed funds to build our College. It is a Christian school which has at its heart the desire to provide excellent education, strong Christian values and a disciplined, caring environment. To this end we have been faithful for many years.

During our thirty years, we have been a socially active organisation. We have been a school of the community, opening our facilities for sporting groups, churches, charities and community meetings. We have felt that we had the opportunity, but also the obligation to be investors into our local community. To this end we have built roads, revegetated river ways and opened up our water storage for the CFA.

The College has been able to function over these thirty years because it has partnered with the Government. I fear that this partnership may be put in jeopardy due to the Schools Assistance Bill before parliament.

The concerns of our College community are twofold:

On a curriculum level:

We are concerned that the bill will restrict the ability of the College to address the cultural backgrounds and values of our families. Our concern is that in adopting a prescriptive bill the interests and needs of our families will be either ignored or downgraded.

We have always promoted the fact that the school is based upon Christian values. Families actively choose to send their children to this faith environment. But we are not a closed environment. Our enrolments consist of





fifty percent church families and fifty percent non-church families. On enrolment, I explain to families about the fact that Christian values and perspectives are part of our community but also part of our curriculum. Families who enrol state clearly that this is the very basis of their enrolment, that they want a school which promotes these faith values.

Furthermore, the freedom to incorporate faith elements and values into our curriculum is culturally important to many of our families. We have Greek, Egyptian, Arabic and many other family backgrounds which do not separate their faith from their culture. In being able to discuss freely aspects of faith in the curriculum we are able to support and recognise the cultural diversity of our community. Sharing one faith has helped to unite many cultures. For many of our families this bill threatens their right to choose what is best for their children and pushes a monoculture mentality.

On a funding level:

Parents are concerned that the sacrifice they make, in terms of school fees or donations, will incur a cut in the funding provided by the Government. Many already question why they do not receive equal funding with that of local Government schools? Our families often question why as tax payers their school of choice does not receive support for children with disabilities or intellectual needs that is rightfully theirs?

The Government speaks of making the system open and transparent in terms of contributions made by families and philanthropic donations, but is not open and honest about the inequity of issues related to special needs, disability provisions etc. The Government is not prepared to acknowledge the huge cost burden placed on parents because they want an independent school education.

How will Hillcrest families be better off by the Government knowing parent contributions? Furthermore, will the Government be equally interested in finding out the contribution made by families to build infrastructure for basic amenities such as water, roadways and electricity? All of these our families our families have paid for.

Furthermore, how will this information be used? Too frequently we see information gathered by the Government end up in the media only to be distorted and misrepresented. How will the rights of our community be respected and protected in such an information gathering exercise?

Will the Government at both a State and Federal level be using this information to develop a new funding model? Will the broader factors I have noted above be taken into consideration? Will stakeholders have an opportunity to be participants in this vital decision making process or will it occur behind closed doors?

I look forward to a response from you on these matters. I attended a meeting last night about these very issues with our College Board and they too are eager to know the Governments' response to their concerns and needs.

I trust that you will do all within your power to ensure the right outcome is achieved. We as a community thank you for taking the time to read our concerns.

Sincerely

Mr Daniel Pampuch
Principal
Hillcrest Christian College

