

SENATE INQUIRY
INTO
SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE BILL 2008



SUBMISSION FROM
CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA

Friday, 31 October 2008

For further comment please contact

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Inquiry into Schools Assistance Bill 2008

INTRODUCTION

Christian Schools Australia (CSA) is a peak group representing some 150 Christian schools nationally. Member schools are located in all Australian states and the ACT. These schools educate nearly 60,000 students in co-educational schools serving metropolitan, provincial, rural and remote communities.

CSA's policy is to support affordable, accessible, Christian schooling. We acknowledge and appreciate the policies of the Government which have allowed Christian schools to establish and grow with affordable fee structures. This is particularly important with regard to low income families, students with disabilities and indigenous students.

GROWTH IN THE NON GOVERNMENT SECTOR

On the basis of data supplied by the ABS and DEEWR (formerly DEST) growth in student numbers is strongest in the independent sector.

Student numbers Australia 2001-2009

Sector Year	Government	Catholic	Independent	Totals Aust
2001	2.248 m	648,530	371,826	3.268 m
2004	2.249 m	666,130	416,115	3.331 m
2009	2.262 m	681,610	475,452	3.419 m
Change	+ 14,600 + .65%	+ 33,000 + 5%	+ 103,600 + 28%	+ 0.151 m + 4.6%

Source: ABS Schools 2004 & DEST (DEEWR)

While there is projected positive growth in student numbers in QLD, VIC, WA and the NT, the data projections provided by DEST/DEEWR show a decrease in the numbers of students in NSW, SA, TAS and the ACT between 2001 and 2009.

In all states and territories over the same period, regardless of whether there are increases or decreases in student numbers, **DEST/DEEWR has projected student increases in all states and territories for the independent sector.** For example, in NSW where student numbers will decrease, the independent sector is projected to increase its numbers by 30,000.

It has already been shown that the projections for growth in the Catholic sector for 2009 are below what has already been recorded in ABS data for 2007. This underlies the continued strong growth across the whole non-government sector of schooling.

PROFILE OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

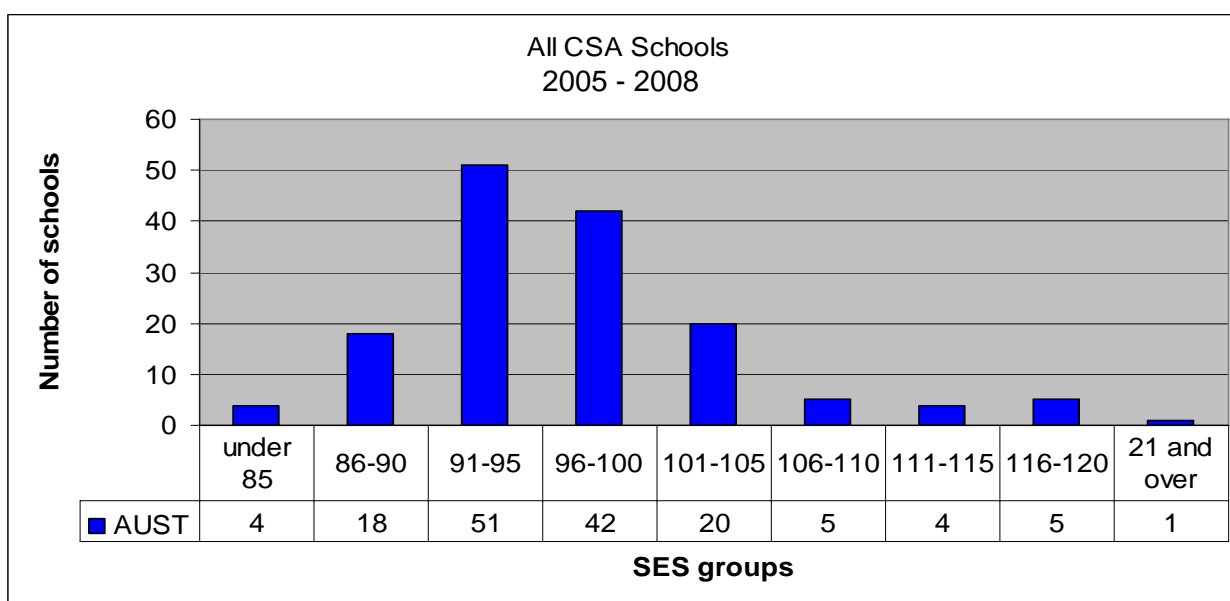
Student numbers have grown significantly in the Christian school sector over the years 1991 to 2005. There is no evidence to suggest that this increase will not continue within the Christian school sector.

Growth in Christian Schools 1991 - 2005

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Students
1991	151	30,477
1995	194	46,036
2000	238	62,000
2005	253	83,500

The data above reflects growth in Christian schools represented by Christian Schools Australia (CSA) and the Australian Associations of Christian Schools (AACS), including Christian Education National (CEN).

CSA member schools serve dominantly middle and working-class Australian families. This can be best illustrated by highlighting the dominant socio-economic status characteristics of our members in the current funding quadrennium 2005-2008.



2005-2008 Quadrennium – CSA Member Schools

CSA	Data	Explanation
MEAN	96.76	average SES score
SES	66%	schools funded on their SES score
FG	18%	schools funding guaranteed ie \$ paid as for previous quadrennium.
FM	16%	schools funding maintained ie funded at the same level as they were prior to the introduction of the SES

On advice provided by DEEWR to member schools for the 2009-12 quadrennium, the percentage of funding-guaranteed schools has decreased to 2%. More than 80% of CSA member schools are

funded according to their SES score (i.e. not in the Funding Maintained or Funding Guaranteed categories).

CSA has done an analysis of SES scores for the whole non-government sector for the current quadrennium 2005-2008. From this analysis, CSA has derived the SES mean for CSA schools, Catholic schools and Independent schools, excluding CSA members.

SES Means Non-government Sectors (2005-2008)

Australia	CSA	Catholic	Independent minus CSA
Mean SES	96.76	99.46	103.46

SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE BILL 2008

GENERAL RECURRENT GRANT FUNDING (Part 4 – Divisions 1 – 6 & 11)

At the outset Christian Schools Australia wants to record its support for and appreciation of, the following elements that characterize General Recurrent Grant (GRG) funding to non-government schools in the Schools Assistance Bill 2008.

The SES model. Christian Schools Australia supports the SES model as a way of determining need in the non-government sector. Essentially the model measures the capacity to pay of the communities served by the schools. The SES methodology is transparent and at arms length from both school authorities and government.

Quadrennium funding. In providing legislative support for GRG funding over a four year period, (2009-2012), the Government gives schools in the non-government sector certainty in planning. CSA supports legislation that provides for a four year funding agreement.

AGSRC and SES Funding. In the development of the SES model the Government clearly linked the funding to non-government schools as a percentage of Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC). This enables all interested parties, including tax payers, to clearly see the relationship between government school costs and SES funding to non-government schools. CSA supports this nexus in the current Bill before Parliament.

Annual Supplementation. Successive Australian Governments have maintained annual supplementation (indexation) to non-government schools based on movements in the AGSRC. This is essential if the nexus between the AGSRC and SES funding is to be maintained.

CSA wants to emphasize its support for all of the above elements of GRG funding to non-government schools that are included in the Schools Assistance Bill 2008.

OTHER RECURRENT GRANTS (Part 4 – Divisions 7, 8, 9, & 10)

Christian Schools Australia welcomes and supports the following recurrent grant provisions included in the 2008 Bill:-

- ❖ Continued **distance education** funding for non-government schools;
- ❖ Maintenance of the **remoteness loading** for non-government schools serving rural and remote communities;
- ❖ The introduction of **indigenous supplementary assistance** and increased general recurrent grants to schools with significant percentages of indigenous students.

APPROVED SCHOOL SYSTEMS (Part 8)

CSA welcomes the reintroduction of legislation that recognises former approved school systems, and provides for the establishment of new systemic authorities in the non-government sector.

FUNDING AGREEMENT (Division 3)

Principles of accountability by schools are a feature of the existing arrangements, are in the public interest, and have CSA's support. The same principles should apply to all school sectors.

CSA agrees with the need for common participation by both government and non-government sectors in national student assessment and reporting procedures.

The Government has emphasized its intention of directing additional resources to schools in most need, and to closing the gap between students from low socio-economic and indigenous backgrounds and their peers and we endorse this principle together with the collection of data on which to make evidence-based decisions.

AREAS OF CONCERN

NATIONAL CURRICULUM (Section 22)

This section of the Bill provides for a nexus between funding and the introduction of the National Curriculum in 2012.

As a general principle CSA supports the introduction of a national curriculum in line with the decision of MCEETYA ministers.

However it is imperative that the curriculum framework adopted contains provisions that allow schools to include content concerning local communities, their student population and needs, and in the case of schools established as faith-based schools, the teaching of values and beliefs of the faith. We regard it as essential that faith-based perspectives are not precluded by any compulsory curriculum framework. There must remain the ability to genuinely reflect the tenets of a faith in the curriculum of a school established for such a purpose, including the integration of these perspectives alongside the state curriculum in identified Key Learning Areas. CSA has no doubt that this intention has been clearly evident in discussions/consultations to date.

However, the Bill is asking schools effectively to give blanket agreement to a curriculum framework which does not yet exist.

Therefore, we seek an explicit guarantee from the Government (Minister), through the Senate Inquiry process or subsequently in the House of Representatives, that such freedoms and professional discretion currently enjoyed will remain. Until such a guarantee is given, and the details of the framework are known, any support must be qualified.

REPORTS ON PROGRAMS AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS (Section 24)

A great deal of information already is available regarding the financial position of schools through the Financial Questionnaire which is already a condition of funding. In addition those schools established as companies limited by guarantee are required to report annually in a public form all income and expenditure of the legal entity operating the school.

The Australian Government has made clear its intentions to review the current SES model of General Recurrent Grant funding to non-government schools in 2010. This Review would allow for the introduction of any changes in the quadrennium commencing 2013. It also provides all stakeholders with adequate time to consider and prepare their submissions to the Review.

The Government has made it equally clear that it wants to ensure that GRG funding is determined by need, a principle we endorse. The SES model, in the opinion of CSA, provides a clear and objective way of determining the capacity of communities to support their schools. Discussion about the adequacy of the SES alone to determine 'need' for funding purposes will take place from 2010. Until that time no case has been made for the collection and publication of financial information not already publicly available.

There has been public discussion about the establishment of financial benchmarks against which to judge the efficacy of public funding and to assist in the department's audit and assessment requirements. A public interest case may be made for additional criteria to be added to the Financial Questionnaire to enable such benchmarks to be measured and for this purpose alone. Any other use of commercial in confidence information must be prohibited, including the distribution of this data outside of DEEWR.

Therefore, we seek an amendment to the effect that to release a school's private financial data would be an offence.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES – FUNDING

Funding for students with disabilities and diagnosed learning needs is grossly deficient in **both** government and non-government schools, and especially so in non-government schools. All data is indicating an ongoing significant increase in the number of students entering schools with disabilities and learning needs and therefore this must be adequately addressed through a substantial increase in funding support for these young Australians.

This Bill does not provide for any additional support in this area. **CSA considers that the additional funds to educate these students should be the same across all sectors.**

CSA urges that the funding of education for students with disabilities in all sectors should be the subject of a National Partnership Payment.

This submission made on behalf of Christian Schools Australia by:

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31 October 2008

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