



*Australian Council  
of State School  
Organisations Inc.*

10<sup>th</sup> March 2014

Senator the Hon Jacinta Collins  
Chair  
Senate Select Committee on School Funding  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Collins,

Please find attached the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSso) submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Peter Garrigan', written over a blue horizontal line.

Peter Garrigan  
**President**

Australian Council of State School Organisations

# Senate Select Committee on School Funding

Submission

Peter Garrigan, President  
6<sup>th</sup> March 2014

# **AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS**

## **Senate Select Committee on School Funding**

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the voice for parents in government schools in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding.

The outcomes from this committee's deliberations will provide an opportunity for a responsive government to support a funding system that will not only deliver learning opportunities for every young Australian but will put Australia's economy on a firm and competitive footing. In every state and territory public schools must be well-resourced and appropriately funded providing access to a free, high quality and secular education for all Australian students, irrespective of postcode or parental capacity to pay.

Public education is rich in cultural diversity, but the gifts and challenges of students are many – it is critical therefore that the funding of public education is of paramount importance to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding.

ACSSO's policy is very clear with regard to the fact that education must be seen as an investment in nation building.

**The interests of the Australian nation, its diverse communities, and the educational needs of Australian children, are best served through the maintenance of a strong public education system.**

**A strong and viable government school system is vital for the nation's future. Australian society and its distinctive values depend on the practical expression of tolerance, fairness, egalitarianism and equality of opportunity that public schools provide.**

**A public education system must be designed and resourced to ensure that all young people develop the skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to contribute constructively to the social, political, ecological and economic future of the community and the country.**

**All parents and parent organisations should be encouraged to actively promote the public education system and its schools.**

ACSSO policy is unapologetic in its emphasis that the funding of public education must be recognised by all governments as their first priority. The policy also states that it is not the responsibility of governments to fund private schools or persons using private schools; that responsibility rests with the private individual or the private institution.

However, also according to ACSSO policy, when governments do fund non-government schools, aid should only be granted on the following conditions:

- **funding is based on the criteria of need and not on a per capita basis which is inequitable and unfair to children;**
- **this needs-based funding should not allow per-capita resources in the non-government sector from all sources to exceed average per capita funding in the government school system;**
- **the school agrees to fulfill the obligations incumbent on government schools in the public system;**
- **public funds are not used for any religious or political indoctrination;**
- **the school has an open enrolment policy – students cannot be refused entry or excluded on the basis of race, religion, financial status or ability;**
- **the school accepts responsibility for meeting the full range of educational needs of students;**

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians provides a starting point in outlining the goals of schools (MCEETYA 2008). It clearly states that Australian schooling should promote equity and excellence. What underpins this is that the primary goal of schooling is to provide an opportunity for all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens (MCEETYA 2008, p. 8).

It is our understanding that since the 1970s, Australia has seen significant increase in inequity of funding and has a much wider achievement gap. International comparisons show Australian students are among the best performers in the world, but are one of the lowest ranking in terms of the size of the achievement gap

### ***Equity of Outcomes***

***“A real revolution in education will only come when a government ensures that its state schools set the standard of excellence. Then and only then will we have equity.”***

### ***Geoffrey Robertson QC***

True equity can only exist when our public schools set the standard for high quality education. The idea of equality draws on notions of all people in our society being of equal value. This democratic principle underpins the provisions of public schooling.

All students are entitled to fair, equitable, and significant opportunities to obtain a high quality education and reach the achievement standards for their stage of schooling to enrich their life choices.

Equity groups are varied and have difference resourcing needs. Some are groups of students with a specified background such as Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE), or those students identifying as Aboriginal or low socio-economic status. However, increasingly sophisticated assessment and outcomes data demonstrate that not all members of a defined equity group are equally disadvantaged in an educational sense. For example, there are large variations in student outcomes within existing categories; language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) is one example of this. There are also complex interactions between variables at the school level, such as the effect of

concentrations of disadvantaged students. Socio-economic differences are strongly associated with patterns in the outcomes of schooling.

One only has to step inside schools in any given area and see the distinct difference in resourcing from one system to another – sometimes this degree in difference is evident in our public schools from one region to another.

School education plays a key role by developing fundamental skills and providing the platform for tertiary education. A highly qualified workforce is important for jobs not only in the high-end skills sector but throughout a nation's workforce, as the demand for non-skilled labour declines and greater levels of technical expertise will be required in all sectors (OECD 2010, 170).

Society as a whole benefits from an increased level of education e.g. lower crime rates, a healthier population living more rewarding and productive lives.

It should also be noted that education cannot operate in isolation from other key services designed to support families outside the school system. Many of our students at risk, and their families, are in need of additional support from a range of government agencies if equity of outcome it to be achieved. While the provision of funding to these other services is outside the range of this review it should be noted that no specific funding provision is made for schools to network and tap into outside service agencies. Schools which engage such agencies do so by stretching existing human resources in order to meet the specific needs of students.

Schools are increasingly being asked to address the social needs of students. Most schools in the public system, struggle to provide an adequate level of school counsellor time for students. Much of the current counsellor workload is directed to students of extreme need.

Currently the school counsellor to student ratio stands at about 1:850 in metropolitan Queensland, 1:1250 in regional Queensland and around 1:1000 in NSW schools alone. ACSSO strongly believes this is an area of increasing need.

The transitional points of education are places where children can become disengaged in education. Many schools find it difficult to deliver a quality transition program from the points of transition due to the restriction of funding. However, there are many highly successful transition programs that support the student at these vulnerable points in their education journey and we need to ensure schools have the resources to guarantee that they are embedded in school practice and culture. Transition programs at each stage of schooling must be resourced as a regular part of funding, rather than, short-term, project-specific allocations.

Additional programs to address specific issues including school bullying, appropriate use of ICT, drug education, sex education, homophobia, to name but a few are all funded out of existing recurrent funding allocations. While some can be delivered under allocations to PDHPE programs many go beyond the requirement of the school curriculum and must be funded in addition to allocations made to specific faculties. Often these programs are directly supported by parents through the application of a fee for

service. Many parents, and indeed usually those of greatest need, are not in a financial position to pay the cost.

There has been some suggestion that equity in funding could be achieved with the introduction of a voucher system. Advocates of such schemes argue that they provide increased choice for parents. However, evidence suggests that introducing a voucher scheme would significantly increase the investment of Commonwealth funding and according to Macintosh and Wilkinson (2006, p. xi), “the schemes would increase subsidies to wealthy non-government schools.” As such, voucher schemes do not address the concerns of achieving equity of educational opportunities between students.

ACSSO strongly opposes the funding of education or educational services through school voucher schemes. Funding should continue to be directed to students through their school systems and funding systems should be designed to ensure that these funds are directed to the schools on the basis of need.

### ***Recurrent funding***

ACSSO believes that the priority for government funding in Australia is public education and that this should be made the benchmark to which other systems aspire. In general it is ACSSO’s belief that recurrent funding levels to public schools require a massive boost if educational standards are to be maintained and, indeed, improved if we are ever to close the gap of achievement levels.

There are significant achievement gaps in Australia between high and low socio economic status. There is evidence that low SES students are up to 36 months behind their high SES peers, as are students in rural and remote areas – more concerning are our Indigenous students who can be up to 48 months behind.

In excess of 80% of these students attend Australia’s public schools – yet government school expenditure is about half of that of wealthy non-government schools. Governments must increase significantly the funding to public schools so that specific needs of students and the most marginalized in our community can be addressed. At the same time public education must be sustained as the highest level to ensure provision for all – it cannot be allowed to become the domain of the most marginalized.

In all socio-economic areas, non-government schools select who they will enrol and most notable reject the neediest or those who might be seen as “less able”, lacking aspirations or who may not reflect well on the school. Government schools encompass all and endeavour within the scope of their resources to provide educationally and socially for them and thus should be funded appropriately.

As part of a public system, government schools are required to accept all enrolments from within a given area. This requirement does not allow them to “cherry pick” selected students or to withhold enrolment from students who may require additional resources. Government schools therefore experience a higher demand on their existing resource base than similar private schools operating within the same area. Indeed, they can find themselves in the position of having to cater for students where the private systems have been unable to meet a student’s educational needs. Additional funding is an immediate requirement if equity of outcome is to be achieved by all students.

There is much debate about what type of data should be used to determine where true educational need exists and which will subsequently inform the calculation and allocation of recurrent funding to schools. In terms of recurrent funding, it has been argued that a more direct measure of need should be used that is less reliant on broad geographic measures or census data, and which instead relies on data which more directly measures the characteristics. Currently government schools are forced to supplement some of the cost burden by applying a school fee, more correctly termed a voluntary donation (it should be noted that South Australia has a compulsory fee and may also have voluntary fees). Despite the voluntary nature of this fee, schools still issue invoices and use a variety of means to solicit these funds. In low SES communities the rate of fee payment is relatively low due to the limited ability to pay. This can create tensions in terms of the method used to solicit the payment of the fee and in a parent's inability to meet the cost. It also creates great inequities within the system. Increasing the recurrent funding levels to public schools would reduce the requirement to charge a fee at all and fulfil the provision of a free public education system.

In 2009 the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens Association conducted research across the 10 regions of the Department of Education and Training revealing parent contributions are paying for essential educational resources, toilet paper, air conditioning units, science labs, textbooks, staplers, pens and pencils, as well as literacy and special needs teachers. The survey results – published on ABC News Online (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/documents/scribd.htm?id=24100687&key=key-bhh2hzpdr9n0wkgeesk>) revealed that fundraising, rather than educational outcomes, is now the key priority in many schools, and that many principals are distracted by the need to find money for basic educational and teaching resources.

Changes in state policy can also impact on the availability of resources in order to support student need. The recent change to the school leaving age in NSW is one example where a change to government policy has directly impacted on the schools recurrent funding usage. In order to meet the diverse needs of students for an additional two years schools have had to make available additional funding for the provision of resources. Some would argue that the increased retention rate automatically entitles the school to additional government funding. However any additional funding due to increased student numbers does not necessarily meet the required level of resources. These students, who previously would have left school, require innovative programs to engage them in school and provide them with learning experiences that are worthwhile; some may also require holistic support.

While many of government students aspire to a university education an increased number are choosing trade related courses in their senior years. Recurrent funding levels are not currently meeting the demand for the required resources. The shortfall is being made up by additional fees being charged. These fees often discriminate and impact on the quality of the educational experience of the student.

### ***Support for students with special needs and students with disability***

Funding for students with a disability is complex; identifying a diagnosis and defining disability is still an issue to be dealt with. Disabilities are funded through a mix of Commonwealth, State and private

funding streams and the large fixed costs. The numbers of students identifying with a disability is increasing at a rapid pace and a new response is needed to adequately support these students.

Higher level skills are vital for students with a disability, unfortunately though these students are over-represented amongst those not completing school or continuing education. A new resourcing settlement that increases these students' prospects of employment and greater engagement in society is therefore required.

All schools in Australia are experiencing a trend of increasing enrolments by students with a disability.

Intellectual disabilities are the major type of disability in most government schools but their incidence has remained fairly constant from 2005-09, as has physical disabilities. Sensory disability (which includes vision and hearing impairment) has actually fallen by eight per cent. However, mental health and autism has increased by 36 per cent and 88 per cent respectively. Expanding the time frame to seven years, from 2003-09, shows a more dramatic increase in mental (non-normative) disabilities

The shift from 'normative' to 'non-normative' disabilities appears to be a world-wide phenomenon. When referring to the rising prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the United Kingdom (estimated to be 116.1 cases per 10,000 children, or just over one per cent) the OECD has observed the following:

"Although it is not yet clear whether this increase is due to broader diagnostic criteria, better identification procedures or a true rise in incidence, similar increases in prevalence rates have been reported in several studies recently and our data seem to support this trend" (OECD, 2007, p. 153).

Autism spectrum disorders are a lifelong developmental disorder that affects the way a person communicates, relates to people and to the world around them. There is general agreement that the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders is increasing, is disproportionate to the general growth in the population and is overrepresented amongst males with a male to female ratio of 4:1 (Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders 2007, 55).

In Australia, the estimated prevalence of autism spectrum disorder is 62.5 per 10,000 for 6-12 year old children (Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders 2007).

There has been a pronounced shift in government schools from physical ('normative') disabilities to mental ('non-normative') disabilities. The reasons for this growth are complex but it is a world-wide phenomenon.

Funding students with a disability faces many challenges, including:

- a) A mix of State, Commonwealth and private funding;*
- b) Enormous cost variation depending on type of disability and setting;*
- c) Parents navigating across services (e.g., health, community services and schooling), which can be complex and not always timely;*



*d) The significant fixed costs associated with this type of funding and the need to assess individual requirements.*

Funding arrangements involving students with a disability are complex, parents and often students are frustrated and confused by the funding system. There is merit in a simplified funding system that addresses the needs of students with a disability or special needs. It is important to support the right of students with special educational needs to a quality education and recognise parents' right to choose the educational setting they believe is best suited to their children.

**ACSSO's policy states:**

- **Where a class includes the integration of a student with special needs, all needs of the student must be met.**
- **Regular classes within which students with developmental disability and/or special needs are integrated must have the staffing allocation adjusted to support the learning needs of the whole class.**
- **Identified disadvantaged schools must have an increased differential staffing allocation which reduces the class size further to provide equitable outcomes**

There are many schools in which numbers of students have a recognised medical or physical disability requiring additional support within the classroom. Some of these conditions attract significant support in terms of human resources and funding. However, there are, regrettably, a significant number of students where the support is insufficient and increases in the level of support they receive are urgently required.

Of major concern to ACSSO are students who present with many challenges that prevent them from accessing and achieving outcomes appropriate for their age and stage. Many of these young people present as behaviour challenges to their teachers and are disruptive in the classroom. Due to the lack of support or diagnosis (if there is one) for these students they are often offered places in the special education unit or "life ed" class. Most of these students do not meet the criteria (i.e. their IQ is well above requirement) but due to the school's inability to cater for them in the classroom the school chooses this path. This limits their learning growth and often is regressive in their academic outcomes. Support is desperately needed to ensure that schools use the specialised units appropriately and do not pigeon hole a child due to lack of resources.

There are in other cases where students do meet the criteria and are offered a placement in these units. Parents may choose to take up the placement or, as has occurred in some cases, choose to continue with mainstream education. The level of support for students whose parents choose to continue in mainstream classes can be severely limited. This can only be addressed by increases in the levels of funding.

In addition a significant number of students are in foster arrangements or cared for by family members other than their parents or in Out of Home Care. Counselling services, as mentioned previously are

critical in achieving the required educational outcomes for many of these students. Indeed, the lack of counselling services is seen as a significant barrier to educational success.

### ***Community and family engagement***

It should be noted that achieving educational outcomes can only be successfully achieved through the development of a partnership with parents and the community the school serves.

Current research states “When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (Henderson and Mapp, 2002 p.7) Further to this research has shown that ‘what makes the difference to student achievement is not parental involvement in schooling but parental engagement in learning [in the home]’ (Harris and Goodall, 2007 p.38).

Research investigating factors that influence academic achievement in Yr. 7-9 adolescent’s shows that positive community engagement is essential for academic achievement. The development of these relationships requires time and commitment that extends beyond the classroom. “The study clearly points to the importance of positive connections and quality relationships with teachers and parents in adolescents’ lives” (Andrew Martin, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney (2009).

The development of these relationships is not the work of one or two individuals but should be the responsibility of all members of school staff. It must be embedded in all aspects of school life. In order to achieve this, additional funding and resources should be made available to free up additional time for all members of staff, particularly classroom teachers, to make positive contacts with parents and their community.

The education of children and young people must be a joint venture between the parents, family, the school and the community. A funding model which promotes schools working in partnership with parents and community must be highly valued as the means to achieving greater equity of outcomes. Much of the innovation of practice under the national partnerships recognises the fundamental importance of the educational relationships. Funding and professional support for teachers and principals to develop and foster the relationship with parents and the community is a key mechanism to achieving meaningful educational engagement. Public schools should be community schools supporting and networking with the community.

In developing this partnership the school should be reflective of the values held by the local community, develop sensitivities to the cultural diversity of the individuals that make up the community and engage in a genuine two way partnership. This philosophy should permeate the culture of the school.

The delivery of educational services to students is improved when local educational decisions are a consequence of the engagement of students, parents and the local community. Democratic educational pedagogy and participatory school organisation are the way in which students learn about active citizenship, creativity and problem solving.

ACSSO also notes that considerable resources were recently allocated to a school funding review undertaken by a panel of eminent Australians. Headed by David Gonski a highly regarded business man; the research that was undertaken/commissioned by the Gonski review panel should be acknowledged; that the recommendations in their report were only made after considerable consultation and research; and that it should not be discounted (particularly for political reasons).

While we appreciate the fiscal realities the government faces, providing a high quality education for all young people is an investment in Australia's future. Any future identified funding models must be needs based and if funding for education is to be reduced it should not be given to those who need it the least but to those who need it the most. We believe it is the responsibility of the government to give all the young people in Australia a fair go.

In conclusion, the Australian Council of State School Organisations stresses that the most important investment a nation can make for its future is the funding of the highest quality public education system – accessible, free and secular.

#### **References:**

Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (2008) *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*  
[http://www.mceecdy.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/national\\_declaration\\_on\\_the\\_educational\\_goals\\_for\\_young\\_australians.pdf](http://www.mceecdy.edu.au/verve/_resources/national_declaration_on_the_educational_goals_for_young_australians.pdf)

Robertson, G (2009) *The public good and the education of children*. Keynote address at National Public Education Forum 27-28 March 2009  
<http://www.aefederal.org.au/Publications/2009/NPEF/GRobertson.pdf>

Macintosh, A and Wilkinson, D (2006) *Schools vouchers: an evaluation of their impact on education outcomes*. Australia Institute discussion paper 88  
[http://www.tai.org.au/documents/dp\\_fulltext/DP88.pdf](http://www.tai.org.au/documents/dp_fulltext/DP88.pdf)

OECD (2007) *Students with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages: policies, statistics and indicators*. Paris: OECD

Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders (2007) *The prevalence of autism in Australia - can it be established from existing data? Overview and report*  
<http://www.autismadvisoryboard.org.au/uploads/pdfs/PrevalenceReport.pdf>

Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory  
<http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>

Harris, A. and J. Goodall. J (2007) *Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter?* London: Department for Children, Schools and Families <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6639/1/DCSF-RW004.pdf>

Martin, A <http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=3392>