



Australian Council of State School Organisations Ltd.

One voice for every child in public education

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President's Message, August 2018

Australia's welcome embrace

I write this as our population passes 25 million people; in world terms a tiny nation and yet one that occupies a vast land mass that uniquely is both a continent and a country – albeit as a Federation of independent nation states and dependant territories; a structure that brings its own unique challenges for government. Within this we have a tremendous diversity of culture, climate and sense of community of its residents – both in that intangible sense of belonging and the ability to pull together as a collective whole. Interestingly, it's the diversity of our population and the freedoms we all enjoy that makes Australia such an attractive place to live and raise our families – and as such it exposes us all to a fascinating range of cultures from which we can all embrace our appreciation and tolerance of those with different views – even down to whichever sports team you might support. It's within this spirit of appreciation and tolerance within each local community where we see our fully inclusive public-school system at its very best - as a true reflection of the strengths of the families who enrol their children and the wider communities in which they are based.

What is so extraordinary of late is the blatantly xenophobic ranting of certain elected representatives. They seem to have forgotten that they themselves are here as the result of immigration into this extraordinary nation – either directly through their own actions or as the descendants of migrants. That these out-of-touch politicians can attempt to defend their vacuous and deeply offensive comments behind parliamentary privilege is an appalling abuse of the sense of fair-go for all; a value that is an essential part of being an Australian.

There is a certain irony in the sense that the children in our nation's fully inclusive and welcoming public schools have a far deeper sense of what respectful relationships and personal wellbeing are all about, over that of certain populist politicians and their respective parties. As a point of reflection, it's interesting to note that our national symbol of the wattle is currently in flower, and as the iconic green and gold emblem of our nation's unity, resilience and the inclusive and indefatigable spirit of the Australian people it's maybe something for our politicians to take note of.

Feuding fiefdoms

From all of this it seems politics and certain politicians are finding ingenious new ways of losing the respect of the people they seek to represent. There are non-government school lobby groups that seek to use their powerful political connections and influence in brazen attempts to force special deals for their peculiar advantage. An example of this has been the fallout from the release National School Resourcing Board's report on the review of the socio-economic status score methodology.

It seems the Catholic Bishops and their education commissions, whilst initially appearing to welcome the initiation of a review, are not at all happy with its findings and have launched another vitriolic campaign to seek a special deal just for them at the expense of the independent non-government schools. The independent school sector has responded with equal vigour with letters and demands of face to face meetings with the PM and Education Minister. This shrill cry of entitlement is coming from both sides in what appears to be an undignified scrabble for cash from already wealthy sectors. One of ACSSO's major misgivings in the review is that no account has been taken of non-government schools' access to additional sources of income and wealth that are unavailable to public schools, and not necessarily open to public scrutiny or acquittal - a point from our submission highlighted by Professor Greg Craven's dissenting view in an appendix to the report. Peter Goss, from the Grattan Institute, offers an objective interpretation of the review's findings [here](#) that gives a deeper context to the whole debate, and one that will probably run and run.

ACSSO's long held policy position is for Fair, Simple and Transparent, and truly needs based funding agreements with no special deals. What is particularly irritating is the apparent expectation from the Catholic Bishops that failing Catholic schools should now be given additional taxpayer funding to prop up their collapsing viability. For any non-government education service-provider that receives huge tranches of tax-free revenue in a direct taxpayer subsidy, it seems only fair that checks and measures are in place to ensure that the need is genuine, and not inflated by having to maintain extensive facilities with increasing fixed costs and collapsing exclusive enrolments; especially if those facilities have no direct bearing on improving core educational outcomes.

It's also worth reflecting that in the 2018-19 Federal Budget, non-government school representative bodies, including those of the Catholics, are set to receive \$42m an additional \$16-18m ongoing improvement on last year's allocation. It seems that the prospect of this additional funding is being put to very good use on their part.

The irony in this is that we have surging enrolments in our nation's fully inclusive public schools, as families increasingly consider the price and value quotient of education, the strengths of public education and the system most appropriate for their family's needs. This is a topic that is increasingly attracting welcome public debate and media attention. The latest of which is a fascinating two-part discussion from Kelsey Munro, on the price tag of private schooling, available [here](#) and the follow-up piece on school choice available [here](#).

Public education has long been a common good in our nation's history and with it comes the growing awareness that many of the claims made about the advantages of non-government schools apply equally and with additional strengths to our nation's public schools. It's then how to get that message across given the extensive advertising and marketing programmes enjoyed by the non-government school sector – something public schools naturally shy away from as not being part of their core business. Perhaps it comes down to finding a way to share the authenticity, inclusivity and provenance that public schools effortlessly display with the wider community. A current state-level example of this is the Tasmanian Department's welcome celebration of 150 years of public education in Tasmania, as in 1868 it became the first colony of Australia to legislate for compulsory school attendance. There is a call for current and past students and staff to become ambassadors to help champion this yearlong celebration of public education under the theme of 'then, now and beyond'. Further details are available [here](#).

Early years are forever

There is an increasingly furious debate about the value of early childhood and the vexing question of how and who will resource it. Education departments describe the early years as being technically beyond their legislated funding envelope as the compulsory schooling years are the key point of interest. This is highlighted by the heated debate around terms such as falling in international rankings of PISA and TIMSS, the flatlining of NAPLAN outcomes, Y11/12 retention, ATAR results and transitions into employment – be it via vocational or tertiary education. As a result, it's all too easy for many politicians to think that early childhood education is just the warm-up act for the real thing – this antiquated view couldn't be further from the truth.

There are now huge swaths of research and champions of professional practice demonstrating that high-quality early childhood education is the critical foundation for future learning. The first 1,000 days of life are everything as it's this period that unlocks the latent potential in every child – regardless of background. In policy terms it's deeply gratifying to see the Gonski panel make specific recommendations for early childhood education and the essential role of parent engagement with their children's learning at this crucial time. This is not to talk of formal education – it's play-based and social-emotional education that is the crucial element, with the support of early education teachers that are respected and appreciated as a truly unique profession with skills far beyond those that can be measured by formal assessments.

The Mitchell Institute is an independent champion of early childhood education with a portfolio of research findings and reports available [here](#) that demonstrate the value of high quality early childhood education – and one that isn't necessarily down to bespoke facilities, but rather passionate and professional early educators who have to be recognised for the vital contribution they make in defining our children's future success. To quote Stephen Covey – we have to 'begin with the end in mind'.

To explore this point further we are in the middle of an ongoing debate around universal access to early childhood education – usually delivered as 15 hours per week or 600 hours in total in the year of voluntary pre-school Kindergarten before the start of compulsory full-time schooling, details available [here](#). Its value is incalculable – especially for those families that may not have the means to otherwise engage in pre-school education. What is particularly frustrating is that the scheme’s funding is only funded on an annual basis – with no sign of permanency as yet. There has also been an observation that a note in this year’s budget papers seem to indicate that it will cease in 2020.

Perhaps we need to look again at this whole scheme, as with a federal election due next year, now is the time to begin with the end in mind. As parents we need to engage with our local politicians and future candidates, and drive the point home about the essential value of early childhood education and the profession of early childhood educators. In Western Scotland, with some of the most disadvantaged communities in Europe, there is a move to 1,140 hours of universal access to early childhood education for every child – and free on the point of delivery – such is the recognition of its value in addressing disadvantage and the fiscal efficiency of high quality early childhood education on future learning outcomes.

With the Mitchell Institute’s findings of the value of two-year’s high-quality pre-school education we, as parents and voters, need to call on all sides of politics to re-set the paradigm so that a minimum of two-years universal access to early childhood education is the expected norm in our children’s educational experience. Our proudly inclusive nation with a sense of fair-go for all demands nothing less; especially where public education that is open to all and truly appreciates diversity is increasingly the first choice for our children’s future.

Phillip Spratt

18th August, 2018

Stop Press: A New PM

Following a fractious few days in Canberra, culminating in a Liberal party leadership spill, this newsletter will reach you with the announcement that the Hon. Scott Morrison will be Australia’s 30th Prime Minister. With the sudden voluntary departure of so many Ministers over the last few days we await the Cabinet reshuffle and position appointment process with keen interest – especially the announcement as to who will be the Education Minister in the lead up to the next Federal election; and one that could come sooner rather than later.

It’s interesting to note that the new PM once had early childhood education as part of a past Ministerial portfolio; we can expect that his support and understanding of its value of this will be fulsome and generous. ACSSO is committed to Fair, Simple and Transparent, and truly needs based funding agreements, with no special deals and expects all sides of politics to act

with integrity and the best interests of the students, staff, families and communities that support our nation's fully inclusive public schools. The vested interests and incessant lobbying of the non-government schools for yet more money has to be resisted – it's something that all of us as supporters and champions of public education need to say loud and clear in every politician's ear.

Phillip Spratt

24th August, 2018