



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS LTD

RESPONSE TO THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS BILL

June 2020



Committee Secretary
FoRConsultation@ag.gov.au.

Response to the Religious Freedom Bills

The Australian Council of State Schools Organisations (ACSSO) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion with regards to the Religious Discrimination Bill (second draft). We understand that the closing date has passed (31 January) however we would still like to share our concerns with the Committee.

ACSSO represents the interests of the families and communities of more than 2.5 million children attending government schools in Australia. We are one of the oldest continuously operating parent organisations in Australia and possibly the world. We were formed in 1947 to bring together various state and territory parent groups to develop national policies reflecting the way families wanted public education to be offered for their children. Over time there have been some changes in the way our members in states and territory peak parent groups have approached national issues, so membership has occasionally varied.

We believe that the primary obligation of governments, both Federal and State, is to establish and maintain government systems of education which:

- **will be of the highest standard and open to all, irrespective of race, gender, religion, social-economic status, geographic location, disability (physical or intellectual);**
- can respond to changing circumstances and can develop the flexible and diverse programs necessary to meet individual needs;
- discriminate in favour of those schools and individual students facing disadvantage and/or disability;
- provide for participation by parents and community at all levels of education decision making.

We read this Bill with reference to our highlighted policy statement and to the recent [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration](#) (December 2019) endorsed by the Education Council which in Goal 1 states:

*"provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from **any** form of discrimination".*



This Bill is in direct conflict with this goal and opposes the very values and beliefs of a strong public education system of inclusion and acceptance. Values of which we believe should continue to be upheld in a multi-cultural, multi-faith nation built with families of all make up.

We are indeed puzzled as to why the national declaration of educational goals, have a number of its core statements in direct conflict with this Bill.

The Religious Discrimination Bill (second draft) is extremely disappointing especially in the context of our school communities – Australia's government schools are open to all.

We are fearful of what this Bill could allow in terms of employment of school staff, bullying and speech in the playground, classroom and staffroom and discrimination in the context of curriculum delivery – leading to further well-being and Mental Ill Health concerns.

We witnessed, often firsthand, in our communities the hate speech and anti-homophobic commentary whilst the Gay Marriage Postal Survey was conducted.

We are particularly concerned with section 8(3) and (4) and section 41 of the Bill, which read together will permit "statements of belief" in the workplace (and schools are the workplace of students as well as school staff) that condemn or offend other people of faith, people of no faith or other people who have been traditionally discriminated against or marginalised. These types of documents are not in line with an inclusive environment.

People of faith, along with people who do not hold religious views, expect that they will not be treated unfairly at work or school, refused services, or unreasonably prevented from wearing religious dress, because of their faith, (including having no faith).

All parents expect that their children or the staff at their child's school will not offend or condemn people of other faiths, people of no faith, or other people who have been traditionally discriminated against or marginalised (in particular LGBTIQ people). This capacity is essential to foster an inclusive culture and prevent harm to students and staff (particularly LGBTIQ students and staff).

We recommend the removal of Clause 42 – its definition of vilify is narrow and entrenches discrimination particularly in the hands of employer or people or in a position of authority, e.g principal, teacher or bully.

The National Goals for Schooling, as revised and endorsed in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration are clear, yet this Bill almost appears to institutionalise discrimination.

Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

One voice for every child in public education



PO Box 8221
WERRINGTON COUNTY
NSW 2747

☎ 0418 470 604

✉ contact@acssso.org.au

🌐 www.acssso.org.au

ACN: 611 783 218

With the recent Bushfires across the Eastern Coast of Australia, when some of our most vulnerable school children are experiencing increased hardships, this country must provide support and not further alienation, rejection and cause for hateful vitriol. We ask who and what is the Discrimination Bill trying to protect?

Thank you for your consideration – ACSSO is proudly public and inclusive. We wish you well in your deliberations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dianne Giblin'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line extending to the left.

Sincerely

Dianne Giblin

Chief Executive Officer