

National Catholic Education Commission

Commonwealth Review of Funding for Schooling

PREAMBLE

1. The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the matters proposed to be included in the draft terms of reference for the Commonwealth Review of Funding for Schooling.
2. NCEC is the body established by and responsible to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to advise on matters of Commonwealth Government education policy. It represents all Catholic schools in Australia.
3. NCEC notes that the Funding Review is properly premised on the Government's long-established policy of
 - maintaining choice and diversity in Australian education for young people and their families, and of providing Commonwealth funding to support that policy;
 - delivering educational excellence for every student; and of
 - confronting disadvantage wherever it may act as a barrier to achievement.
4. Catholic education is organised so that State/Territory Catholic Education Commissions have the major responsibility for Catholic education at the community level. Almost all Catholic schools across the country receive government funding through these State and Territory Catholic Education Commissions.
5. Catholic education is widely seen as contributing to improving educational outcomes for students in Catholic schools by ensuring the proper governance of Catholic schools, the financial viability of schools, the maintenance of academic standards and the effective implementation of the agreed national agenda for schools: the 2008 *Educational Goals*; the Australian Curriculum; the successful BER rollout; NAPLAN testing and the provision of data for the MySchool website.
6. Catholic education is characterised by “subsidiarity”, that is, a commitment to making decisions at the most appropriate level in the organisation. Research shows that subsidiarity contributes to local school communities being empowered to exercise initiative and take responsibility, which in turn leads to improved educational outcomes for students.

7. Catholic schools were operating from the earliest days in the Australian colonies in urban, regional and remote areas. The current reach of today's 1700 Australian Catholic schools is similar to that of State and Territory school systems - across the breadth of geographical areas and socio-economic strata.

8. Catholic schools offer a low-cost quality education to all Australian families who wish to share the Church's educational mission. The sustainability of this educational mission would be severely constrained if Catholic education was subject to a funding freeze from 2013. Catholic schools, through their active adherence to Christian values, contribute to the building of social capital, to the maintenance of community social cohesion and to the productivity of the nation.

THE DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

9. NCEC notes that, with our suggested changes, the scope of the draft Terms of Reference appears to be sufficiently broad so as to allow a full discussion of all relevant issues. The Terms of Reference could however be grouped under headings for enhanced clarity and succinctness.

10. NCEC makes the following suggestions to clarify some of the matters proposed for the Terms of Reference, and to make good certain key policy omissions.

(a) Term 5: Student and community need

The draft scope states:

The best way to take account of student and community need.

NCEC proposes:

The best way to take account of student, *school* and community need.

NCEC adds the proper recognition of the needs of schools and systems. NCEC is strongly of the view that schools do indeed make a difference to student learning outcomes, and that schools, too, have needs that are more than the sum total of the needs of their students. We request that the Review investigate the important contribution that schools and school systems make to improving student learning outcomes.

(b) Term 6: Factors of disadvantage

The draft scope states:

The best way to meet the costs of specific factors such as indigeneity, location, disability and socioeconomic disadvantage which can act as barriers to educational achievement.

NCEC proposes:

The best way for education funding to address needs created by factors such as indigeneity, location, disability, socioeconomic disadvantage and limited access to IT, which can act as barriers to educational achievement.

Costs are an important consideration in addressing disadvantage. But to adopt a child-centred approach demands that schools and systems first consider the specific needs of each child and each school. Once these needs are understood, the best approach to addressing them, and the role of funding in meeting needs, should be discerned.

(c) Term 7: Cost effectiveness

The draft scope states:

How to achieve cost effectiveness in the provision of school funding.

NCEC proposes:

How to achieve cost effectiveness in schooling provision, particularly with respect to system and administrative arrangements, and government funding and private investment, for schooling.

Cost effectiveness in schooling encompasses a number of important issues, including the efficacy of individual schools and school systems, and the interaction between private income and public funding.

In particular, examining the administrative efficiencies that are evident in different schooling contexts (including systems and other arrangements) could usefully inform the Review on cost effectiveness. The cost effectiveness of direct funding relationships between the Commonwealth and schools and systems will also be an issue worthy of consideration in this context.

(d) Term 8: School improvement

The draft scope states:

The role of funding in promoting school improvement and reducing the negative impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on student outcomes.

NCEC proposes:

The important factors that promote school improvement and reduce the negative impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on student outcomes, including funding, system arrangements and other structural characteristics.

NCEC believes that proper funding at school level is an essential building block for improving student learning outcomes. Of equal importance, however, is the use to which those funds are put, and the autonomy and encouragement given to school systems, to principals and to leading teachers to use funds imaginatively within broad accountability constraints.

The Review should, in our view, engage in a discussion about school improvement that goes beyond appropriate and necessary funding. Of particular interest is the variety of existing government and Catholic education systems across Australia and their relationship to educational outcomes and school improvement. The extent to which local factors (such as principal autonomy, distribution within systems according to school need

and school-level budget autonomy) vary across jurisdictions and sectors could be vital to the consideration of school improvement challenges.

(e) Term 10: International funding models

The draft scope states:

What lessons can be learned from funding arrangements overseas and in Australia, especially those in high performing schools systems.

NCEC proposes:

What lessons can be learned from funding and administrative arrangements in the variety of Australian educational systems and contexts (and in selected overseas countries), especially those in high-performing school systems.

NCEC is concerned that the “overseas” aspect of this term of reference could consume a great deal of time and energy with little practical benefit to the debate. NCEC believes that the developing narrative of schooling provision and school funding in Australia is unique. NCEC is open to the narrative continuing to explore new paths, but not to its history being re-written to conform to some overseas tradition.

NCEC is certainly convinced that the way a school system works with its schools and communities can contribute to improved learning outcomes for students. The Australian educational landscape is already rich with examples of different educational, administrative and funding approaches which should rightly be the starting point for examining what works best for Australia.

(f) Term 11: Funding composition

The draft scope states:

The appropriate composition of school funding, including teaching, capital and other costs of schooling.

NCEC proposes:

The overall resource needs for schooling, including recurrent, capital and other needs, and the rationale for funding responsibility for each area.

This is an important term of reference as Australian schools and school systems begin to chart the implementation of the Australian Curriculum and of the 2008 *Educational Goals* mandate. Schools need to design schooling processes, materials and facilities that meet both these national curriculum objectives and also the demand from parents for a more “personalised” learning experience for young people.

(g) Item 12: Indexation

The draft scope simply states “*indexation*”.

NCEC proposes:

Indexation against relevant benchmarks that appropriately reflect both costs and educational expectations.

NCEC strongly supports the inclusion of this term of reference. All schools will need to have their funding increased each year to reflect increases in the agreed national schools prices index (linked to government school costs) and also to meet rising community expectations. Catholic schools need an index that maintains both funding relativities and also the real value of government grants.

(h) Item 14: Accountability


The draft scope states:

What forms of public accountability are appropriate for schools receiving public funding.

NCEC proposes:

What forms of public accountability and reporting are appropriate for schools receiving public funding, while not placing inefficient burdens on schools and systems.

NCEC is committed to accountability as demonstrated by the detailed annual financial, enrolment and staffing returns (and agreed data for the MySchool website) submitted to the Commonwealth by each Catholic school. However, in determining accountability requirements, the workload for schools and systems needs to be taken into account.



Mrs Therese Temby
Chair
National Catholic Education Commission

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ncec@ncec.catholic.edu.au