
EDUCATION FRONT AND CENTRE AS ELECTION CAMPAIGN NEARS

How government policy supports quality teaching and learning and how schools are funded will be a focus of the upcoming federal election campaign, National Catholic Education Commission executive director Ross Fox has said.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in the coming days is expected to ask Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove to dissolve Parliament and thereby start the countdown to a July 2 election.

“Over the next eight weeks, political parties and candidates will outline their vision for the future of Australia, and that future is dependent on how students and schools are supported,” Mr Fox said.

“With the ‘Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes’ policy and the ‘Your Child. Our Future’ policy, the Coalition and the Australian Labor Party have given their respective blueprints on school education over the short and medium term.”

Mr Fox said those policies and any other announcements during the election campaign will be assessed through the lens of the new *Funding Principles for Catholic Schools* document.

“Education policies should be assessed holistically, with a recognition that funding is significant for school education, but it is part of broader considerations of what schools and students need,” he said.

“How funding reflects the needs of students and schools is crucial. How quality teaching is supported is crucial. How policies support the learning of each child is crucial.”

Mr Fox said parents of school students and those who value school education should take a keen interest the federal election. In 2014, the Commonwealth spent more than \$14 billion to support students in all schools.

For Catholic and independent schools, in particular, Commonwealth funding is hugely important.

“With 70 per cent of the cost of educating a Catholic school student, on average, coming from governments, and mostly from the Commonwealth, school funding policy is a very important election issue for the 765,000 students in Catholic schools and their families,” Mr Fox explained.

“And with the level of fees required by schools directly linked to levels of government funding, families will also be affected by the funding policy implemented by whichever party forms government after the upcoming election.”

Mr Fox said neither major party has yet addressed how increasing demand for school places in the coming years will be met.

“As many as 180,000 additional students are expected to be receiving a Catholic education by 2025, and how new schools are paid for and how existing schools can provide places for additional students is an issue of national significance,” he said.

“There is a need for financial support from the government to construct and expand schools to meet the growing school-aged population.”

Mr Fox said more than 70 new Catholic schools are planned to start construction in the next five years, as part of a \$3.3 billion capital works program. Under current arrangements, parents will pay the vast majority of that cost, but a lack of funding means many of those schools may not be built.

The new *Funding Principles for Catholic Schools* document provides Catholic education's vision for how all schools should be supported by governments. Principles include funding certainty, funding equity, needs-based funding, parental choice and religious freedom.

The National Catholic Education Commission has also launched a new website – SchoolFundingFacts.com – to inform parents and the community about how Australian schools are funded and to explain the important role of Catholic education in Australia.

“The 1,731 Catholic schools across the country are seen as ‘Partners in Australia’s Future’ – partners with students and families, partners with governments, and partners with government and independent schools,” Mr Fox said.

“Catholic education is focused on how government policy supports all students in all schools, and students with additional learning needs should receive extra support for their education, regardless of which school they attend.

“Over the past decade, the number of students with disability and the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools has doubled.”

Mr Fox reiterated the importance of education in the upcoming election campaign.

“We understand that Australia’s future is brightest when all students and schools receive the necessary support to create quality learning opportunities in every Australian school. This election will shape how those opportunities are created,” he concluded.

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