
GROWING PRESSURE ON SCHOOL PLACES NEEDS ATTENTION

As demand for places in all Australian schools continues to grow on the back of a recent spike in births and strong migration, Commonwealth, state and territory governments must consider how they support the provision of contemporary learning environments for new and expanding schools, the National Catholic Education Commission has said.

NCEC executive director Ross Fox says a 20 per cent increase in the birth rate between 2004 and 2008 – about 50,000 additional births per year – and the sustained high number of births in subsequent years is now putting pressure on primary schools.

“By 2019, primary schools will have had to increase capacity at all year levels by 20 per cent to accommodate the growth in student numbers,” Mr Fox explained, saying migration has also pushed up demand for school places.

“The same challenge for additional places will soon confront secondary schools.”

Mr Fox said while the higher birth rate has been observed for several years, the responses of governments to that reality has been patchy and hasn't been well coordinated in all jurisdictions.

“Hundreds of thousands of additional students will be being educated in Australian schools over the coming years, compared with cohorts of students that have recently completed their schooling,” he said.

“Greater collaboration between governments, education authorities and Catholic and independent school systems is needed to make sure the school places are there to provide quality learning opportunities and maintain school choice.”

Mr Fox said given the historical relationship between non-government schools and the Australian Government, it is important that the Commonwealth considers how it will support the expansion of non-government schools. In Catholic education, existing Catholic schools will need to expand and the construction of more than 70 new Catholic schools over the next five years is needed.

“Some projections suggest Catholic schools will have 180,000 additional students by 2025 – the equivalent of almost 10,000 new classrooms in less than a decade,” he said.

“Many families across Australia, whether in city or country, want the choice of a Catholic education for their children. Wherever possible, Catholic education wants to provide that option for them.”

To meet demand for those new places, almost \$1 billion will be spent building new Catholic schools, and almost \$2.5 billion on expanding and upgrading schools across the country, by 2021. Catholic school parents are likely to have to cover \$3 billion of the \$3.4 billion total.

“The Commonwealth Capital Grants Program, the main source of government funding for building costs in Catholic schools, has been stagnant in recent years. That funding reality, when paired with strong growth in enrolments, has seen the program's value decrease,” Mr Fox said.

He said the \$3 billion price tag for Catholic school parents over the next five years “will create a significant burden for many Catholic school communities and could raise doubts about the ability of Catholic education to continue to be the provider of education to the traditional share of enrolments of one in five Australian students”.

“Governments know that Catholic schools in Australia are a great partner in the education system, providing choice for families, and that is one reason why they contribute significantly to support the education of all students, regardless of which school they attend,” Mr Fox explained.

“But governments must also recognise the significant contribution of school communities in funding the vast majority of the cost of building new Catholic schools and upgrading and expanding existing schools to meet growing demand.”

Mr Fox said the National Catholic Education Commission has written to MPs and candidates in federal electorates where enrolments are expected to grow most and where new Catholic schools are planned in the next five years. The letter explains the importance of Catholic education in their local community and the importance of government funding in their area to support the education of local students.

The NCEC has also written to Minister for Education and Training Senator Simon Birmingham and Shadow Education Minister Kate Ellis.

“The 1,731 Catholic schools already delivering a great education in every corner of the country are an important part of their local communities,” he explained.

“It is hoped that dozens more local communities will see a new Catholic school built in their neighbourhood in the coming years, but that prospect could well rely on how government supports capital projects to build those schools.”

The construction of new Catholic schools over the next five years will be most significant in Victoria and Queensland, with 21 new schools planned in each state. In New South Wales, 17 new Catholic schools are planned, and 10 are planned for Western Australia.

In both Victoria and New South Wales, capital spending on Catholic schools will total more than \$1 billion over that period, of the national plan to spend \$3.4 billion.

Mr Fox said the capital costs funded by Catholic school families will save money for governments and taxpayers.

“Each new Catholic school that is built is one fewer school governments must fully fund to meet growing demand across all school sectors. Each new Catholic school that is built saves taxpayers large amounts during construction and well into the future,” he said.

“The strong partnership between governments and Catholic schools should be strengthened by funding policies that would ease the capital expenditure burden Catholic school parents face.”

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