
Catholic education welcomes bipartisan support for faith-based schools in Religious Discrimination legislation

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the bipartisan support of faith-based schools by Australia's major parties and calls on the Parliament to pass the Religious Discrimination legislation without delay.

"Both major parties have acknowledged the importance of our schools maintaining their religious ethos with their support for the protections proposed in the Religious Discrimination Bill," National Catholic Education executive director Jacinta Collins said.

"This important legislation realises Australia's international responsibility to protect religious freedom including establishing religious schools and the rights of parents to ensure the education of their children in line with their religious beliefs and values."

For Catholic schools this means being able to preference the employment of staff who share our faith or are willing to support the ethos and mission of the school.

"We thank Labor for affirming, through Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus' statement this afternoon, "the right of religious schools to give preference to hiring school staff of their own faith" and understand the need to refer more complex matters for further consideration to the Australian Law Reform Commission," Ms Collins said.

"A recent survey shows broad community support for faith-based schools in Australia. 63% of the general population, 82% of Catholics and 79% of parents with children in Catholic schools believe religious schools should be 'entitled to require employees to act in their roles that uphold the ethos and values of that faith and the school should be free to favour hiring employees who share these values'.*

Ms Collins said the considerations around the Religious Discrimination Bill are highly complex and protections for religious freedom need to be balanced with other human rights.

"Catholic schools provide a universal education and do not discriminate, and are not seeking to discriminate, against students based on their personal attributes including sexual orientation and gender identity, or other attributes such as disability or ethnicity.

"We support further work occurring with the Sex Discrimination Act to ensure an appropriate balance of protections, and at the same time, welcome the acknowledgment that faith-based schools should maintain their capacity to operate within their religious ethos.

"It's important to recognise that in their day-to-day operations faith-based school communities already work with students, families and staff to find this balance and to respond in a pastoral way to the needs of their members," she said.

Ms Collins said she hopes the parties will work together to achieve a bipartisan outcome and pass the legislation without delay.

* Finding from a large community issues survey on a range of issues from school funding to religious freedom undertaken by a respected national pollster, John Utting Research (November 2021).