Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc Established 1970
Promoting scientifically credible & factually reliable evidence

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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
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The Atheist Foundation of Australia is pleased to make a submission to the *Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee's/House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee's Inquiry into the Australia Education Bill 2012*. The 2011 Census found that 22.3 per cent of Australians had no religion, an increase of 7 per cent since 2001. Additionally, since the Census question is phrased to assume religious belief, the actual number of Australians who are non-religious may be higher. The Atheist Foundation is Australia's premier organisation of atheists, humanists and freethinkers, and supports ethics and evidence-based public policy.

Brief statement on school education

Education, particularly in primary and secondary school, must combine developing a base of knowledge, skills and character. The first two of these cover what and how to think, with the latter being more important, as skills support intellectual discovery, technological development and entrepreneurial ingenuity. The last of these matters concerns developing young people into responsible members of the Australian and world communities. While the Atheist Foundation broadly supports the idea put forward in the Melbourne Declaration — adults who are honest, resilient, optimistic, tolerant, enterprising and ethical, and who have a commitment to democracy and fairness — the AFA stresses that education must prepare young people for successful lives and careers, and support a thirst for lifelong learning.

Education also has a strong role in strengthening economic mobility, as it can help enable people to overcome disadvantage. Lower levels of education are strongly associated with long-term unemployment, as jobseekers in this category are less likely to have the necessary skills either to find work or, once in employment, to perform adequately to retain the position.

Australian Education Bill 2012

The Atheist Foundation applauds the Government's commitment to ensuring an excellent education for all Australian children, recognising that education is vital to a growing economy and cohesive society, and for each individual to realise her or his potential. The Atheist Foundation also supports the goals of achieving top five OECD rankings in reading, mathematics and science, as these are expected to give young Australians a strong base of knowledge and critical-thinking skills in pursuing their careers and higher education. The emphasis on science education is particularly welcome, as future innovation depends on not only an understanding of the natural world but also on skills such as thinking critically and gathering evidence.

It should be noted that, in supporting science education, the Atheist Foundation strongly opposes any recognition in the classroom of intelligent design and other forms of pseudoscience, other than to encourage students to use critical analysis to expose such concepts as fraudulent.

Transparency and accountability

The focus on transparency and accountability is significant. In advocating evidence-based public policy, the Atheist Foundation supports greater data collection and analysis to promote better educational outcomes.

In this context, the AFA looks forward to assessments on the tangible benefits and effectiveness of the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program. The Foundation recognises that young people can require social and emotional assistance, and supports students' access to trained mental health professionals in school. However, the Atheist Foundation rejects the notion that such support should be provided by religious personnel whose chief raison d'être, as has been revealed in a number of cases, is likely to wish to convert new followers rather than to assist students. Although the Program has been amended to require religious personnel to complete training in mental health, this does not address the inherent inappropriateness of their performing this role at all. Mr Gonski recognises this inappropriateness in *Review of the Funding of Schools in Australia Final Report*, noting that since Federation governments have been responsible for providing "secular" education (p5). It follows that funding or providing staff whose normal function is religious is inconsistent with this responsibility.

Therefore, the Atheist Foundation submits that the Program should be renamed the National Students' Welfare Program and provide funding for secular mental health professionals only. In contrast to religious staff, secular mental health professionals are less likely to alienate students of different faiths (or no faith), will not risk using taxpayer funds for proselytising, and do not have any conflict of interest in providing advice that contradicts their own personal religion.

The very presence of Christian, and in the main, fundamentalist religious persons on state school grounds authorised by the school principal and the government sends a distinct message to students that the religion they represent is valid in its supernatural claims. Apart from this being an evidentially unsupported assertion, as stated, it is divisive in the present and does not bode well for the future when the students are adults.

School funding

The Atheist Foundation appreciates the desirability of providing a legal basis for an agreement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories, and independent schools sector to

implement the National Plan for School Improvement. This should help ensure that the Plan's goals are met and value for money achieved. However, the AFA is concerned that taxpayer funds will still be provided to religious institutions. As well as representing an obvious breach of the separation of church and state, these subsidies distort the market and it means that private enterprises do not compete fairly with government schools.

Additionally, exemptions proposed in the Anti-discrimination and Human Rights Bill 2012 Exposure Draft would give religious businesses the right to discriminate in their hiring practices according to sexuality, marital status, pregnancy or potential pregnancy, and religious beliefs. That these exemptions were sought by religious institutions is clear evidence that their schools are not interested in hiring the best teachers and other staff, but rather in adhering to and imparting dogma, including the notion of discrimination.

This reveals that any religious school making use of such exemptions does not share the highest priority of Australian schooling (as declared in the Bill's Explanatory Memorandum) of "identifying and addressing the needs of school students and providing additional support to school students who require it." It is inappropriate for the Government to fund an organisation under the National Plan for School Improvement when that organisation does not share the program's goals.

Conclusion

The Atheist Foundation supports the goal of ensuring all Australian children receive an excellent education and the target of achieving top five rankings in reading, mathematics and science by 2025. Because of the Atheist Foundation's strong support for education, it remains deeply concerned that religious schools do not share this priority despite receiving taxpayer funds. Therefore, the Atheist Foundation welcomes the Bill's improvements in transparency and accountability for schools that should lead to funding arrangements being rectified.

The Atheist Foundation thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission on this Bill and other matters related to education in Australia.

Yours sincerely,

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