AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL Inc.

The national federation of organisations representing parents of students attending Catholic and Independent schools to achieve choice, quality, equity and voice

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SUBMISSION TO

SENATE EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT & WORKPLACE RELATIONS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the provisions of the Australian Education Bill 2012

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Introduction

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the national federation of organisations representing the parents of students attending Catholic and Independent Schools. We thank the Committee for the opportunity to present this submission to the Inquiry into the provisions of the Australian Education Bill 2012.

We note that the intention of the Bill was to establish a broad framework for the Government's intentions in reforming the funding of schooling. We also note the Government's stated purpose for the Bill, being to enable Australian schooling to achieve three goals, namely:

- for Australian schooling to provide an excellent education for all students;
- for Australian schooling to be highly equitable; and for Australia to be placed in the top five countries in reading, science and mathematics,
- quality and equity in recognised international testing by 2025.

We acknowledge the Government's commitment to work collaboratively with States, Territories, the non-government sector, and other partners to improve school performance through developing and implementing a national plan for school improvement and needs-based funding arrangements and look forward to seeing in due course the results of the Government's activities as it works towards those ends.

While the Australian Parents Council is generally supportive of the Government's aspirations and intentions that have informed the development of the Australian Education Bill 2012 there are several matters that we wish to address.

Funding of schooling a 'right'

The Prime Minister has on a number of occasions said that the Government's new model for funding schooling, "strips away all the old debates about private versus public and puts children at the centre of the funding system". Indeed, she has introduced new language by stating, "The Australian Education Act will erect our nation's support for a child's education as one of the entitlements of citizenship," (address to the National Press Club, 3 September 2012). It concerns us that the right for every Australian school student to share equitably in government funding for schooling is not included as a key statement in the Australian Education Bill.

We also wish to place on record APC's concern in respect of another three key undertakings made by the Prime Minister following her address to the National Press Club, and which have subsequently been restated by both the Prime Minister and/or the Minister for School Education, but which are not referred to in the Bill, namely that:

i. students with special needs attending non-government schools will receive full funding;
ii. the funding received by non-government schools will be indexed annually to protect the real value of funding levels; and

iii. there will be adjustments made to payments to non-government schools based on the capacity of the parents of their students to pay.

It is most disappointing that the Government felt these four important issues relating to the funding of schooling did not warrant specific mention in the Bill, while elements of the *Reform directions for the national plan* for schooling are spelt out in some detail.

Parent Engagement

The Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling identified family and community engagement as one of the five key reform strategies required to achieve greater equity and improved educational outcomes. The Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) has determined that parent/ family engagement and student wellbeing will now be pursued as new directions, in addition to a continuing focus on teacher quality. APC was also pleased to learn that during its latest restructure the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations established a Student and Parent Engagement Branch.

In early December 2012 the Minister for School Education announced continued funding support for the Family School and Community Partnerships Bureau. At the same time he launched a research paper prepared by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) titled *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research.* The paper found that, on the basis of available evidence, positive parental engagement in learning improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity. It further concluded that resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to, education reform and the future of Australia.

The lack of acknowledgement of the parent engagement imperative for school reform in the Australian Education Bill is therefore very disappointing. Simply lumping parents in with the 'broader community' (Section 1, Lines 23-25) and absorbing parents into the category of 'other partners' (Section 1, Line 28) is grossly insufficient.

Preamble - Section 1

If in the opinion of the Government a student's right to receive an equitable contribution from governments towards the cost of their education truly is a 'right of citizenship', the right of all students in Australian schools to share equitably in government funding for schooling should be enunciated in the Preamble. It would then be accorded the status of a core underpinning principle serving to ensure that all young Australians are treated equitably in the allocation of public funding, regardless of the school chosen for them by their parents and their individual learning needs.

While references to parents are made within the Bill and the Minister for School Education acknowledges within the Explanatory Memorandum which accompanies the Bill that, "… strong partnerships across the broader community are necessary to support school students, including partnerships between teachers, parents and families", these give insufficient weight to the parent engagement imperative if real school reform is to be achieved.

The second paragraph of Section 1 could have had the following wording (in bold) added: "It is essential that Australian schooling be of a high quality, be highly equitable **and work in partnership with families and communities** in order to create a highly skilled and successful workforce, strengthen the economy and increase productivity, leading to greater prosperity for all.

The final paragraph of Section 1 should be amended as follows to clearly prioritise parent engagement: "… the Australian Government will recognise the role of the Governments of the States and Territories, non-government education authorities, ***parents,*** other partners and schools in

delivering school education, and work with them to support and lift the performance of schools and school students."

Part 6 Developing a national plan

Paragraph (a) would be strengthened by an amendment to the wording to read: "**build family school partnerships,** improve school performance and educational outcomes of school students"

Section 7 Reform directions for the national plan

Given the evidence that parental engagement is one of the key strategies required to achieve greater equity and improved educational outcomes and that it has been recognised as such by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, it is surely deserving of being articulated as a specific area of reform, alongside quality learning, empowered school leadership, *et cetera*. Any articulation of key schooling reform areas that excludes parental engagement as a core strand alongside others can only serve to devalue its importance in the eyes of educators and others who contribute to the delivery of quality schooling.

This Section also needs some rewording if it is to fully encapsulate contemporary schooling reform concepts.

i. Quality Teaching: Today there is widespread recognition that quality teaching is a broad concept that goes well beyond effective classroom pedagogy. Today's teachers need to be able to establish and sustain effective relationships with their peers and with the families of their students. Clause 1b) should therefore be amended as follows to reflect that reality: "… be based on evidence of successful teaching methods ***and effective professional relationships'***;

ii. Quality Learning: Following on from our previous comments in respect of parent engagement, we believe it is vitally important that the Bill clearly acknowledges that learning does not only happen in schools and that learning opportunities are maximised when families and schools work together in a spirit of true partnership.

    This clause should therefore be amended to read: "Australian schooling will provide a high quality educational experience with an environment and curriculum that supports all school students to reach their full potential **and which recognises the pivotal roles that families and communities play in the learning process**."

iii. Leadership: In line with our previous comments, the notion of school leadership today entails a broader definition of 'school' that extends beyond the school gate. An effective school leader today is a collaborative leader who draws upon the skills and support of their school staff and the wider school community, including parents and local community agencies and services.

    This clause would therefore benefit from being amended to read: "Leaders in schools will have the resources, the skills, and greater power, to make decisions ***collaboratively with the local school community*** and implement strategies at the local level to obtain the best outcomes for their schools and school students."

iv. Transparency and accountability: APC supports moves that will improve transparency regarding the performance of schools and teachers. We propose the following amendments to the wording of this clause that would align it with our previous comments and sharpen it in the case of (5) (b):

Sub-clause (4): "Support will be provided to schools to find ways to improve continuously by: … (b) making schools more accountable to ***parents and the broader*** community in relation to their performance and the performance of their school students.

Sub-clause (5): "Data collected on schools and school students will: … (b) contain more detail ***that is relevant to improving student outcomes and assessing the performance of schools***; … and (d) be more ***accessible to parents and*** available to the public; than data currently collected on schools and school students."

School funding

The heading of Section 9 of the Bill, "School funding", is unfortunate as it could be interpreted as shifting the focus of the Bill from the funding of students to the funding of schools. This would appear to be inconsistent with the Government's stated intentions to fund schooling in ways that ensure the needs of every student are met and that the allocation of funding is equitable.

It would be much better if the terminology in the Bill remained consistent with that used in the recent Gonski Review, which was entitled "Review of **funding for schooling**" (our emphasis). Therefore, we propose that the heading for Section 9 should read "Funding for schooling".

Similarly, if the Government's stated intentions are to be faithfully pursued students should be the primary and clearly articulated target for funding for schooling. Therefore, we propose the following change to the first paragraph of Section 9:

- The current wording, "… the Commonwealth will provide funding for schools or school systems through grants of financial assistance to States and Territories …" be changed to, "… the Commonwealth will provide funding for schooling to schools and school systems through grants of financial assistance to States and Territories …";

It is the view of APC that the above changes will more adequately reflect the intentions of the Government in reforming the funding of schooling and remove the possibility of the current wording in the Bill being misinterpreted.

In conclusion

The Australian Parents Council and its member organisations are grateful to the Chair and members of the Standing Committee for the opportunity to inform their deliberations through this submission.

Australia's continued standing as a free, progressive and productive nation will be dependant upon the quality of education that is available to its citizens, young and old. The current schooling reform process is an opportunity for political differences to be cast aside in the quest to ensure that every young person who is enrolled at an Australian school is afforded the best possible opportunities to reach their full potential as individuals, citizens and students.

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