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Submission from the Australian Federation of Graduate Women (Inc) to Senate Committee examining the Australian Education Bill (2012).

1. Introduction

The Australian Federation of Graduate Women (formerly the Australian Federation of University Women) is one of seventy-one national affiliates of the International Federation of University Women, the only education-based NGO with status with UNESCO. We are the national body of the Federation, which has Associations and branches in the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. By adding our voice to other submissions by interested parties, we are continuing the century-long involvement of our Association with the progress towards gender equality in Australian society.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission, and are happy for the contents to form part of the public agenda. AFGW would welcome further opportunities to be involved in any ongoing consultation process.

2. Response to the National Plan for School Improvement

AFGW commends the Australian Government on the development of the National Plan for School Improvement. We understand the historical and geographic imperatives that led to the development of separate education systems in each state and territory; however we support the proposition that contemporary social and economic circumstances require a comprehensive approach to educational policy, planning, resource allocation and funding. Nevertheless, AFGW is that the Australian Education Bill does not address a number of specific issues in sufficient detail. These issues are:

- the disproportionate allocation of funding to private schools,
- the quality of teaching.

3. The disproportionate allocation of funding to private schools

In its submission to the Review of Funding for Schooling (2011), AFGW expressed concern at the proposal to directing public funding towards private schools that possess substantial assets and have the capacity to draw on the support of affluent communities would be detrimental to the quality of public education. We were profoundly disappointed by Prime Minister Gillard's pledge that no private school would lose a dollar in funding since the continued funding of some extremely wealthy schools means that schools in need of support will have to make do with less. This is

not acceptable. AFGW submits that funding should be allocated on the basis of need. It should be flexible enough to meet the wide range of circumstances that exist in public schools and should include provision for multi-disciplinary, digital and non-digital library resource centres and teacher librarians. Care also needs to be taken to that funding is not dissipated by administrative barriers; therefore we would welcome a breakdown of allocated funds within each school on the *MySchool* website.

AFGW also noted in its submission to the Review of Funding for Schooling (2011) that the effective implementation of the funding model relies on data provided to *MySchool* and on NAPLAN results. At that time AFGW expressed the hope that care would be taken to monitor the manner in which NAPLAN tests were administered; we are not convinced that sufficient care has been taken with regard to monitoring the NAPLAN process to the detriment of teaching and learning (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012).

Funding for students with disabilities is a separate issue and AFGW is of the opinion that funding should follow the child to their school; however we note that the great majority of students with disabilities attend public schools.

Disadvantaged schools

AFGW continues to be concerned that the National Plan for School Improvement does not adequately address the needs of schools with a high concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Poverty, which is often combined with a lack of fluency in English, impedes young people's educational achievements and undermines attempts to improve Australia's productivity through education. As a matter of urgency, these schools need funding for professional support staff including nurses, accredited counsellors, social workers and community liaison staff who can assist students and their families.

One further aspect of disadvantage is geographical isolation. Disadvantaged areas are usually concentrated in the outer metropolitan areas, or in regional and rural towns. Schools in these areas need additional support to ensure that they education they offer is comparable to the education available in larger regional centres and the inner metropolitan areas. Access to educational and experiential opportunities that are likely to encourage students and their families to value tertiary education are further away from their location and transport costs are high. Parents less likely to be able to afford the costs of time-consuming and financially demanding excursions, camps, visits to other schools and/or international school exchanges, yet these extra-curricular activities are often the key to engaging students and broadening their horizons.

4. Quality teaching

There are three aspects to this topic:

- recruitment and training of teachers
- retention of teaching staff
- the impact of NAPLAN

Each of threes aspects are addressed in detail in the remainder of this submission.

Recruitment and training of teachers

Teacher recruitment continues to be a vexed issue in Australia. Teaching has traditionally been one avenue for the social advancement of talented young women and men from disadvantaged backgrounds; many gifted teachers have come from low socioeconomic status and culturally diverse backgrounds. Such teachers play a crucial role in the education of young people as role models, mentors and community leaders as well as instructors. Nevertheless, teaching is a highly skilled and demanding profession. Preservice education programs will provide the necessary professional skills and knowledge, but applicants who have excellent cognitive skills, good academic literacy, problem solving skills and a broad general knowledge are more able to master the course content, which now includes theories of knowledge, instructional design, assessment procedures, classroom management strategies, child and adolescent development, and pedagogy. These last two areas include differentiation the curriculum to accommodate children with special needs, gifted children, refugee and migrant children who are learning English or who have had little formal schooling. More recently, teachers have been asked to take on "mental health first aid", noting signs of incipient mental illness among their students and referring them for professional assessment. Secondary teachers are also expected to have a sound knowledge of their discipline area. AFGW does not suggest any particular ATAR score as the absolute cut off for teacher education courses, but it does submit that any applicant who has struggled with the demands of their own schooling will have difficulty teaching others. Bridging courses in literacy, numeracy, science and the humanities should be available to assist applicants who wish to teach, but have low or very low ATAR scores and admission to a teaching degree should be conditional on their performance in these programs.

AFGW submits that further investigation into the quality of teacher education is not required at this time. We respectfully direct members of the Senate to the 2007 House of House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training report on teacher education (Hartsuyker, 2007). Recommendations from this comprehensive inquiry have not been fully implemented.

Retention of teaching staff

Estimates of the per centage of teachers who leave the profession within the first five years vary (Australian Education Union, 2008; Australian Primary Principals Association, 2007; Plunket & Dyson, 2011), but it is generally understood to be high in comparison with other professions. Australia's poor record in regard to the retention of teaching staff is linked directly to their employment conditions. Teachers earn significantly less than other professionals who undergo a similar period of professional education or training, yet the media frequent portray them as lazy and overpaid. They are expected to take responsibility for the students' well being in areas that are well outside their professional role and they are often forced to rely on short term contract positions for the first few years of their careers. It is not surprising that teachers leave when there are alternatives available (Laming & Horne, 2013).

The Impact of NAPLAN

AFGW submits that teachers' professional standing is being undermined by publication of NAPLAN scores on the *My School*. Publishing these results in such as manner has transformed NAPLAN from a diagnostic instrument into a form of high stakes testing. Evidence has emerged that teachers are restricting the amount of

inquiry-based learning in favour of direct instruction to improve test scores (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012) even though the Australian Curriculum advises that this approach should be kept to a minimum. Publication of NAPLAN scores encourages the community to make judgments about the quality of teachers in a particular school. The National Professional Standards for Teachers were intended to describe those qualities that make teachers effective, but linking them to students' NAPLAN scores, and including both in teachers' annual performance reviews has transformed them into an accountability measure of the type identified by Smyth and Shacklock (1998). AFGW contends that education systems that develop a culture of "performativity" are more likely to focus on short term goals, less interested in equity, less capable of producing high quality educational experiences and results, and more prone to cheating and other forms of corruption (Perryman, 2012; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998; Sahlberg, 2010). There have been reports in the media of students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students whose performance is deemed unacceptable being excluded from the NAPLAN tests in order to protect the school's reputation (Bantick, 2011)

5. Conclusion

AFGW re-iterates that education for all Australians must be catered for with a generosity of spirit not evident in the current approach. The Australian Federation of Graduate Women asks that the Senate Committee recognises the centrality of education to quality of life in Australia. We further hope that it recognises the crucial role of public schools, and of high quality professional teachers in creating and maintaining a prosperous and happy society.

Submitted on behalf of the Australian Federation of Graduate Women, Inc.

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This submission was prepared by Dr Laming with the assistance of Ms Erica Jolly MACE, Education/health liaison, Graduate Women-South Australia.

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