

**I commend the Bill to the House**  
**The Schools Assistance Bill must be passed through the Senate**

Politics is often a matter of scoring points against those sitting on the parliamentary benches opposite, whatever the topic might be. This is an accepted part of the political 'game'. However, there are times when political differences must be put aside to allow for critical pieces of legislation to be passed for the benefit of the community.

The *Schools Assistance Bill 2008*, which provides for the funding of nearly 1.2 million Australian students in more than 2,700 independent and Catholic schools, is one such piece of legislation. This funding of \$28 billion over the next four years represents the Australian government's support for parents to be able to choose the type of education they want for their child. It provides much needed funding certainty to non-government schools for the next four years.

Firstly, it is important to realise that this Bill has no effect on the funding of government schools. That is part of an entirely separate process which is negotiated between the federal government and states and territories. Funding of over \$23 billion per year for government schools is provided by state governments with additional funding provided by the federal government. Despite the many myths that are circulated, the funding of students in non-government schools does not occur at the expense of students in government schools.

Attempts to amend the Bill in the Senate may put at risk funding for non-government schools for the commencement of 2009. Certainty has been replaced with uncertainty and attempts by the Government to move past the unproductive debate about government versus non-government schools. Referral of the Bill to a Senate Standing Committee provided another opportunity for some vested interests to reignite this debate, exemplified by the Greens' dissenting report on the Bill.

There are two areas in particular that have been highlighted as concerns in this Bill – a requirement to implement an unknown national curriculum and the publication of financial data. Non-government schools are very concerned that while compliance in these areas is a condition of government funding, no specific details are provided in the Bill. These, however, are matters best dealt with when the details of the Regulations associated with the legislation are known.

Non-government schools do not want a national curriculum that reduces their ability to deliver the highest quality education possible. A high quality education needs a high quality curriculum to underpin it. It is also important that well regarded alternative curricula such as the International Baccalaureate, curriculum in special schools and Steiner and Montessori schools can continue to be delivered. In addition, many non-government schools are faith-based and must be able to deliver the curriculum within a framework of their religious values and ethos.

Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard has now indicated that the new Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority will be asked to look at ways in which the national curriculum can provide

flexibility and allow for differences that still meet the required standards. This is reassuring and represents a commonsense approach to implementing a national curriculum that takes into account the diversity that is a feature of our existing school education system.

The second issue relates to the potential publication of financial data from all schools. Non-government schools already provide government with full details of their financial operations and many lodge financial statements with the Australian Securities and Investment Commission. Many non-government schools set up foundations and use fees collected from parents plus donations and fundraising to provide for capital development whereas in government schools this is paid for centrally by governments.

It is not the disclosure of sources of income per se that concerns non-government schools. It is the ability to make valid comparisons between government and non-government schools as, financially, they are structured very differently. The publication of this type of information will inevitably lead to misrepresentation and misuse of the data and has the potential to deter parents from choosing to invest their own 'after tax' dollars on their child's education if they think this will affect their child's access to government funding support for their education.

The fees and donations paid by parents to non-government schools save governments billions of dollars in direct education costs, help provide much needed infrastructure to local communities when schools are developed, and contribute significantly to the employment of thousands of teachers and support staff.

Non government schools will work with the government to ensure their ongoing delivery of high quality education and their commitment to the high levels of accountability which currently exists. However, non-government schools have already prepared budgets and cashflow forecasts for 2009 which, in many cases, have factored in their receipt of government funding in January next year.

Any delay in passing the Bill would have a major impact on the financial operations of some independent schools, possibly resulting in an inability to pay teachers and other staff in early 2009.

This funding is critical to the education of over one million Australian children over the next four years. A great deal depends on this Bill. Let the Bill pass.

**Dr Geoff Newcombe**  
**Executive Director**  
**Association of Independent Schools of NSW**  
**Level 12, 99 York Street**  
**SYDNEY NSW 2000**  
**Ph: (02) 9299 2845**  
**Mob: 0417 024 001**