



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

BILLS

Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 21 June 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Fawcett, Sen David

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator FAWCETT (South Australia—Deputy Government Whip in the Senate) (10:10): I rise to make a brief contribution to this debate on the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017. We have been hearing a lot about education funding and the need to reform, for the simple reason that children around Australia, for some years now, have been funded differently, with some 27 different agreements that have been struck by the previous Gillard government with states and territories. The community has been calling for some time for a fair and transparent system that will provide an equitable funding base for students. Speaking from a South Australian perspective, the agreement that was reached in South Australia—and I have spoken to a range of school sectors there—has seen many sectors with a very flat trajectory and increases only in the very latter part of what the agreement with the Gillard government had promised. They have maintained for a number of years that South Australian schools have not been treated well, for the simple reason that the level of funding has not been on par with interstate colleagues. What this agreement looks to do is to find and define a new baseline and bring all students from all states to a common point. Over a number of years, you will get that transition of increasing funding for students.

It is important to realise that, whilst there is the independent sector, the Catholic sector and the state sector, it is not only the federal government that provides funds to these schools. There are two particular concerns that I would like to briefly address as we look at this funding. First off, for state schools, it is state and territory governments that actually provide the majority of funding to those schools. So, when people see figures that highlight what the federal government provides to the different sectors and many people ask me why it is that the state schools seem to receive so little, it is because the primary responsibility for those state schools rests with the state governments. So if you look in net terms at what the taxpayer pays, whether that is through GST given to the states who then pass it on to the schools or whether that is funding given directly from the federal government to state schools, the state system is completely, or almost completely, funded by the taxpayer, whereas private schools do not receive the same extent of funding from states, and the majority of taxpayer subsidy for them comes through federal funding, with parents—often not high-income parents—working hard to make sure that they raise the additional funding to give children the schooling of the parents' choice. For many parents, it may come down to academic issues. For some, it may come down to issues of a faith-based education. But what we see is that all parents who are taxpayers pay money through their taxes, and the state and federal governments each make a contribution. But those who choose to pay extra not only take stress off the state system but pay for the quality and type of education that their children want.

The second point I would make, particularly around this current debate, is on the funding for Catholic schools. I have received a number of emails from people in the last few days talking about the funding for Catholic education. I just remind people who are listening to this debate that it was actually the Liberal Party and the coalition government who originally championed and pushed for the ability of parents to make that choice, and we have been a consistent supporter of funding schools of various kinds so that parents can make the choice as to where their children go. Those who wish for them to go to an independent or Catholic school top that up with fees.

The Catholic school system also makes its choices about where it allocates that taxpayer funding. So, part of the confusion in this debate is twofold. One aspect is that when people see some of the computer models that forecast the amount of funding that will be provided to a school they are seeing the SES based funding, such that the demographic of that school leads to the level of funding that will be attracted. That does not necessarily equate to the funding the school receives under the Catholic system. Under the Catholic system they receive a bulk payment, if you want to simplify the term, from the federal government, and they can then distribute that funding as they see fit within their school system. Some of the people who have contacted me have looked at what their school has been receiving through the Catholic system and then compared it with what is on the website for an estimator and saying, 'We appear to be receiving less funding.' But the way the Catholic system has always worked is that they have taken a bulk payment from the federal government and then distributed it across the schools in their diocese or in their network according to how they have calculated the need of the school. So

you cannot necessarily say that there will be less funding, because it depends very much on what the Catholic system wants to distribute.

The fact of the matter is that the Catholic system as an aggregated whole is receiving more funding year on year from the federal government under these arrangements, which is why you cannot say that schools are going to have to increase their fees as a result of federal government decisions, because the federal government is actually giving the Catholic system more money. If the Catholic system chooses to distribute that differently, that is up to them, but they have more money from the federal government to distribute to their school, so there is no school in any system—and certainly I can say this for South Australia—that will receive less money as a result of these changes. Every school in South Australia receives more money as a result of the changes this government is making.

The last area that is important to highlight is around what people have been saying in the media and in some of the letters I have received, particularly responding to comments from members opposite—that there have been cuts. Well, the reality is that the forward estimates—the four-year period—has in Australia's history always been the period when governments lock in and commit to spending, because the amount we have to spend should surely be based on what we can reasonably expect to have coming into the government, through individual corporate tax and through a range of revenue-raising measures. How far out can you predict that? If we said, 'Look, we think that in 100 years this will be happening,' people would laugh. In 50 years? People still would be pretty uncertain, or if we said in 20 years. You can bring it back four years. That, for many decades, has been the period for which governments can reasonably predict what our income will be and therefore what expenditure will be.

Prior to the 2013 election the Gillard government made promises going well into the future about very large amounts of money that they had not actually budgeted for. They could not explain where it might come from and could not give any guarantees. But that is the benchmark they are now claiming in saying that the record funding this government is giving to education is somehow a cut. So, people in the public are often—rightly—confused, because they hear one side of politics talking about cuts and the other side saying, 'Well, no, we're actually increasing funding.' I think it is really important for people who are listening to this debate to understand this. And I think Senator Xenophon made the comment that this is comparing apples with mythical pears. That funding in 2013 was a mythical pear that was held out as a promise but it was completely unfunded and there was no justifiable basis for how the Labor Party could ever deliver it. Yet, that is what people are now trying to say is the basis upon which the coalition government—they are saying—is cutting funding. That is just not correct.

We are delivering record amounts of funding this year to education. Every sector is receiving more funding. In South Australia's case, every single school is receiving more funding, which is why we have seen organisations such as the South Australian Primary Principals Association come out and say that this is a good deal for South Australian children. We have seen Catholic colleges, like Nazareth Catholic College, come out and say that this is a fair deal and a good deal, and we have seen independent schools and Christian schools come out and say that this funding model is good for South Australia. Because it is good for South Australian children and restores equity and transparency around the nation, I support this bill.