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Australian Education Bill 2012

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PREAMBLE¹

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that all students have the capacity to learn and Governments have prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular. Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world. Parents as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

Introduction

P&C Federation is thankful for the opportunity to submit our comments in response to the 'Australian Education Bill 2012' (the Bill).

P&C Federation would like to commend the Parliament of Australia for inviting submissions to the Australian Education Bill 2012 from parents, principals, teachers, business and greater communities. This permits a broad and diverse range of opinion to be heard as well as acknowledging the partnerships that are essential between parents, the government and the wider community in order to ensure that education is a matter of priority both in notion and in the everyday of us, the Australian peoples. P&C Federation asserts that Australia is able to place a higher priority on education than at present if desirable national and individual goals are to be achieved. It is the responsibility of state and federal governments to provide a system of free and secular government schools open to all in order to spread the benefits of education as widely as possible.'(Premise 1.1.A)²

Our Organisation strongly believes that the long term benefits of a great education system far outreach any other reforms that can be offered. The positive influence that is projected throughout society is greater reaching when we as a society are educated to a global standard.

What is the basic entitlement needed to provide a child with a high quality education?

P&C Federation believes that the basic entitlement needed to provide a child with a high quality education is to meet both the educational needs of each student as an individual and the school community as a collective. Our Organisation's ambition is mirrored in the Australian Government's vision for the system of schooling '*in which every child is able to progress and achieve their full potential, whatever their background, circumstances and location.*'³

¹ Preamble of Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. 2010 P&C Handbook (6)

² Premise 1.1.A Chapter 6 Role of Education P&C Handbook (2010) page 6-2

³ Australian Government Review of Funding for Schooling, 2010, Emerging Issues Paper, April, Canberra: Australian Government, page 2.

P&C Federation believe that the basic aim of education is to help each individual to progress toward the attainment of their full potential, both as a person and as a member of society⁴. In achieving this, at a minimum, an adequate amount of funding must be made available for the educational needs and educational environment of our students. This is inclusive of the many aspects of their environment from the early years of education through to further education and lifelong learning opportunities. Education is our nation's future.

P&C Federation would urge the Parliament of Australia to take into account the following comments as a priority when discussing and deliberating the Australian Education Bill 2012.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Preamble

P&C Federation would like to firstly call attention to the Bill and reference to communities. As a state representative of communities by way of parents and citizens P&C Federation feels that there is a lack of language throughout the Bill to describe community. As well, we attest that there is an absence of recognition for the community to which a child belongs and enters school from. Whilst strong partnerships are described in Section 1 there is an absence of this collaboration throughout the legislative instrument proper. A community is not something that stands apart from a child and their education experiences. Communities are a crucial part of the child's education. The notion of community contribution is clearly favourable as a national objective however it must be appreciated that the child contributes and belongs to community prior to becoming the student. Education does not entitle us to be a member of the community, whilst education increases the attributes a member brings to community, where there is an absence of education it cannot be said that there is an absence of community.

P&C Federation is surprised that there is no recognition of the child before formal education but instead our children are referred to as students throughout the Bill. Keeping with the relationship and belonging of the child to community it appears to us more appropriate for the Bill to call for an excellent education for children. The child has indeed been an informal student in the home and community prior to the academic setting. Acknowledgement should be made of a child's first educators; parents, kinships and communities involved and influential to the child. This seemingly minor oversight sets the tone for the totality of the document.

P&C Federation noted subjective language in the Bill such as "quality, excellent, high" and whilst these ordinary words are aspirational and positive in sentiment the ambiguity of the description can be anticipated to differ from one State and Territory to another, one teacher to another, one parent to another and certainly one student to another. In Prime Minister Julia Gillard's second reading of the Bill five priorities were outlined however, it was not until the third priority that school improvement was mentioned. Ms Gillard also went on to state; "*this is a truly national plan for a matter of the greatest national import: the education of all our nation's children*"⁵ P&C Federation would agree that a commitment needs to be made for all children in Australia to have entitlement to an excellent education.

⁴ Premise 1.1.B Chapter 6 Role of Education P&C Handbook (2010) page 6-2

⁵ Second reading of the Australian Education Bill 2012 Julia Gillard P13639 2012

P&C Federation believe there must be more importance in placing our children's education before our political aspirations of global stance. Global goals are not denied but, P&C Federation insists that these goals have to be an outcome of our children's successful education not an object of.

P&C Federation would also like to express our hesitance to fully embrace the federal government's interest in national education. This is due to the historical nature of the responsibilities and obligations being delegation as "State matters". There is always the obvious concern of inconsistency in reforms and programs between state and territory governments. It is not unreasonable to imagine that each of state will claim to have the best educational system and the model to implement nationally. P&C Federation has been involved in the discussions before implementation of national programs. Being witness to these conversations that have included the National curriculum, digital education revolution and the National Chaplaincy Program have permitted us to evidence how quickly communication can break down, how swiftly funding can be withdrawn and how children may not necessarily have their education experiences maximised due to the "external factors" on foot.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Section 1

P&C Federation feels that the high aspirations of the Bill are eroded by the attempt to use education as a means of producing "workers". We argue that if the end outcome of the Bill is to produce an employable workforce we have concerns for those learners, who learn for: survival, personal improvement, passion, enjoyment, challenge and any other non-specific purpose. A successful education will allow a person to accomplish employment if that is their intention however it is limiting and perhaps worse yet, disengaging, where education is offered for the object of employment.

Our Organisation feels that a federal government who seeks an employable nation would be naive to pin their hopes on a legislative instrument that depends upon state relationships, community consultation and most importantly a true and sincere ability to deliver. The government should continue to look at broadening recognition of skills and up skilling all of community rather than the restricting the goal to the academically enrolled student.

P&C Federation holds concerns for the priority the federal government places on prosperity. The standard of living and the education of children, if offered at a high standard will naturally result in prosperity as a nation with recognised strong global standing. Indeed the statement 7-11 section 1 is not unlike the words our children sing of so ambitiously at every opportunity in our schools 'We've golden soil and wealth for toil....., we'll toil with hearts and hands, to make this Commonwealth of ours renowned of all the lands,'⁶, this ambition is a foundation of our nation. Whilst we don't deny any sitting government the right to proudly extol the virtues of the community in the nation, these acknowledgments and accolades must come as a true result of educational investment, where the child realises their potential.

⁶ Australian National Anthem verse one and two.

To be of a high standard P&C Federation feels that contemporary teaching and learning must embrace digital education. Our rationale for this is the belief that children thrive on technology and there are many barriers to education that technology overcomes, e.g. disability, remoteness and access. Australia's education future and its successes will surely depend upon flexible and pioneering methods of teaching. Federal government led the way for digital reform by way of Digital Education Revolution which in NSW public schools has been, for the majority a wonderful contribution to the everyday learning experience of students. This initiative highlights the issues that we hold concerns for regarding "politics" as the project has not secured guaranteed future funding and schools have been left worried that they have issued assets that they have no means to maintain. This type of inconsistency with the policy and funding sends mixed messages to the school community and diminishes the positive persuasion that saw the establishment of the program to start with. P&C Federation in highlighting this example implores all governments to ensure the priority is on the educational need of the child, is sustainable and is not ever politically motivated.

P&C Federation agree that partnerships are necessary and critical between our educators and our parents, these partnerships are essential, not negotiable. Where true partnerships occur and the community has shared ideals, positive relationships and success are the natural outcome. P&C Federation reminds legislators that community does not belong to "others" and that teachers, family, students and employers **are** the community.

P&C Federation identifies that the federal government plays an increasing role in areas historically limited to State and Territory governments. Whilst not necessarily wanting to add another layer of bureaucracy to education it is important to recognise that some of the national aspirations fit within our state educational focuses and vice versa. However, the relationship between the State and Territory governments, education regulators, partners and schools has not demonstrated that it is functioning well. P&C Federation's experience has been one of increased consultation by academic submission, with often short and competing timeframes. The accessibility of meeting with federal members and federal agencies has been less than satisfactory and, when held to state counterparts where there is ongoing and frequent consultation and meetings the model of partnership with our Organisation and Australian government could be considered nothing less than poor.

As the state representative for parents and citizens in New South Wales public schools, we rightfully represent ourselves on a national level. We need the government to understand and appreciate that the voice of school communities makes a greater mark on school communities than any legislative instrument ever could. To this end improved relationships need to be established by the federal government as a priority.

PART 1 - PRELIMINARY

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Commencement

P&C Federation has concerns about the time that the Bill is expected to be implemented. There are many factors that the Bill depends on to move forward and P&C Federation are concerned that the anticipated timeframes may not be realistic and could witness unnecessary pressure on State and Territory governments and school communities. Will the commencement hinge on all State and Territory consensus, and if not will it be forced upon all states or be left in continued discussion? Our Organisation calls upon the government to be courageous enough to postpone the date of the commencement if it were to increase the likelihood of the Act's success.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Objects of the Act

In relation to 3(b)(i&ii) P&C Federation does not disagree with these objectives however, we would reiterate comments made by us relating to the Preamble that the words of the Bill should recognise the child, before their introduction to formal education, and not just the student.

In relation to 3(b)(iii) P&C Federation vehemently rejects the inclusion of this objective in the Act. It is our strongest argument that global ranking with performance based on the narrow educational disciplines of reading, mathematics and science, is actually subversive to the majority of the preamble and objectives 3(b)(i&ii). Whilst a government has a right to be global in their vision the prescriptive ambition identified in this objective seems contrary to the broad language in the rest of the Bill. The subjective nature of “excellence” means that Australian schooling may indeed realise object 3(b)(i&ii) without ever realising object 3(b)(iii). If P&C Federation has any persuasion to this Bill by our submission or our testimony, we consider it significant to persuade a removal of 3(b)(iii) from the wording of the Act. We are confident if focus is placed on the first two objectives as described the last objective could likely be an outcome, but it should not be a described aim.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Definitions

P&C Federation recognise all of the definitions in the act but particularly appreciates 4(b) and the notion that education is not an industry where profit should be sought.

PART 2 - IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL STUDENTS

P&C Federation would like to reiterate the comments made regarding the Preamble of the Bill in reference to this section.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Developing a national plan

P&C Federation recognises that federal government plays an increasing role in areas historically limited to state and territory governments. In looking globally and not seeking to limit education for the sake of political dictates it would be our strongest desire to see our children develop capabilities to engage with all nations and territories not just our Asian neighbours.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Reform directions for a national plan

P&C Federation welcomes continued discussion regarding ‘what is quality teaching’? We look forward to the utmost professional support for the learner. Currently, students in New South Wales schools are experiencing educational reforms. P&C Federation are curious as to how the national commitment will be or, can be coupled with state reforms and realised to achieve better educational experiences for our children. In terms of quality teaching and quality learning there needs to be shared vision and standards to ensure that no child’s education suffers at the ambiguous nature of the term “quality”.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Empowering school leadership

Empowering school leadership will only succeed where all members of the education community are recognised as possessing leaders, Principals in particular with a background in education rather than management must be supported to hold all decisions up against the objective of providing an education to the child.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Transparency and accountability

The very real need to have quantitative and quality data that takes into account the real situations that the community, parents and students face is significant. P&C Federation believe a schools' culture is a discrete factor that is typically revealed by way of conversation and dialogue rather than data collection, and thus differential ways of collecting this data must be found.

School communities should be held to account to ensure their engagement in the education of the student. Whilst we agree that schools are fundamentally accountable to community we do not believe that this is a process that community sits aside from. Accountability is more than just exposure and delivering answers to questions, it is about recognising responsibilities and respecting roles in the education of the child.

There is a demonstrated absence of quality informative evidence; P&C Federation knows this because the government seeks to improve the calibre of data. P&C Federation has long championed the right for a student as learner to have their education experiences measured in ways which are not just merely competitive. A serious concern our organisation would like raised would be any continued, increased and rigorous federal government push for school rankings. P&C Federation strongly believed that education and education communities are distinct to themselves and that a well-rounded education where a student reaches their potential and where community and schools work in partnership for the success of the child, cannot be restricted.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Meeting student need

P&C Federation believe that any assistance offered to students must be flexible and timely and proven. Funding shouldn't just be continuous funding for the sake of it or because it has always been in place. Funding needs to be reviewed and discussed openly on a regular basis. Where changes or cessation is to occur there needs to be a vehicle by which to do so, it is often that communities need explanation of changes as well as the critical consultation.

An assurance needs to be made that any assessment process is full and diverse and allows for a broad range of "need" to be encompassed. When defining need the actual requirements of the student can be ambiguous, the need may not necessarily be measurable or able to be diagnosed but does not mean that it is less impacting on the child.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - Benchmarks and supporting improvement

P&C Federation acknowledges the need for shared visions and shared standards but in developing benchmarks we need to witness broad assessments. To place any value on benchmarks they must be more than just the known rankings, tables and assessments. A true assessment captures conversations that speak the truth of school performance and school figures. The relationship between the federal and State governments are essential.

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012 - School Funding

In relation to school funding P&C Federation calls for all governments to recognise their responsibility to public education first and foremost. Public education is the largest provider of education to students and communities in the nation as well as New South Wales. This is a fact that is unlikely to change in the near future.

Where school funding is provided by any government there is an obligation to ensure that the monies are directed specifically to the educational needs of the child. In providing funding P&C Federation urges the government to broaden loadings to include assets and resources held by the school and take into consideration the overall demographic of the school. The type of model proposed in the Act is not unlike the recommendations of the Gonski report of which P&C Federation acknowledges could very well be a more equitable and preferred funding model.

PART 3 - MISCELLANEOUS

Response to Australian Education Bill 2012

In recognising that the Australian government constitution does not reach to education and it has no right to legally enforce obligations P&C Federation still seeks to see national goals be realised through State and Territory relationships that focus on the education of the nation's children. Enforcement should not be required where true agreement is reached to adopt and realise the objectives of the Act.

SUMMARY

The fundamental issues that we have discussed are those that our Organisation considers most important to our children and their education. P&C Federation will not sit back and pretend that through competition alone the government can create a greater national education system for our children. The focus must be placed on the basics of education to ensure that school performance is improved whilst enabling equity for all children in our nation. The partnership between community and education is of great importance and cannot be discounted. Children are members of a community before they undertake formal education; they become students but have no lesser learning experiences before reaching this milestone in their lives. A real priority in the implementation of this Bill is that of relationships between governments. This will ultimately prove the success in implementation of the Bill. P&C Federation calls on the Australian Government to ensure that our children's education is of the highest quality and that it is equitable for all. As parents, our main concern is the quality of the education our children are afforded, to ensure that each and every child reaches their potential.

P&C Federation acknowledges the need for wider involvement in discussion and hopes that the government takes into account many of the key areas that concern parents, students and school communities. We hope the comments made in this submission are of assistance with decisions around this subject.

P&C Federation look forward to witnessing positive results regarding the Australian Education Bill 2012 and welcome any further dialogue this may evoke.