



Council of Catholic School Parents

Submission

Review of Socio-Economic Status  
(SES) Score Methodology

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## 1. Preamble

1.1. This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) on behalf of the parents of 257 000 students in Catholic schools in NSW/ACT.

1.2. CCSP is an independent association and the officially recognised body representing the interests of parents and carers with children in Catholic schools in NSW/ACT. The work of the Council is guided by the principles of choice, equity and social justice.

1.3. CCSP is a founding member of the national body Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) through which we have representation on the National Catholic Education Commission. This submission does not propose specific models as such, but presents the broad and diverse context of Catholic schooling in NSW/ACT and the implications of access for our parents. This submission provides general comments on key themes identified in the Terms of Reference for the National School Resourcing Board with a particular focus on equity, accessibility, and family and community engagement with schools.

1.4 CCSP believes that all children have a right to share equitably in the public expenditure on education. This right is aligned with the right of parents to choose the most appropriate education for their children, including the right to choose a faith- based education.

## 2. Catholic Schooling in NSW/ACT

2.1 Catholic schools in NSW have been providing quality education for Australian children for almost 200 years and educate more than one in five students. They have significant geographical and socio-economic coverage which reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary Australia.

2.2 The mission of Catholic schools is to be more than providers of high quality education - they also seek to support the spiritual life of students and families and exist to advance the common good of Australian society<sup>1</sup>

2.3 There are 595 Catholic schools in NSW/ACT serving educationally, geographically, culturally and socio-economically diverse communities. They enrol 257 000 students.

2.4 The range of types of schools is diverse covering infants, primary, secondary, senior secondary and central (K-10) models of schooling, special schools (for students with special needs and those with behavioural or other needs), vocational colleges and systemic and

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<sup>1</sup> NCEC (2015). Funding Principles for Catholic Schools. National Catholic Education Commission. Available at:<https://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/resources/publications/388-funding-principles-for-catholic-schools-2016/file>

Independent Catholic schools.

2.5 CCSP values the partnership with government and community that strives to maintain a society where diversity of religion, philosophy and outlook are supported through the education system. In addition to enriching Australian society, school choice has been shown to have a beneficial effect on student achievement. One study commissioned by the OECD “found that schooling systems that provided choice between government and non-government schools resulted in notably improved academic outcomes across the system” (Woessmann et al. 2007)<sup>2</sup>.

2.7 Parents who choose Catholic education for their children should be able to rely on quality education in a Catholic school regardless of their location, metropolitan, regional or rural.

2.8 CCSP is committed to ensuring that Catholic education is available for all sectors of society to those from refugee, migrant, Aboriginal, low socio-economic backgrounds, single parent families and families with diverse needs i.e. mental health issues and addiction issues. Catholic education should be accessible to these families as well as all other families who wish it for their children. This promotes diversity of Australian society whereby students and families from all backgrounds, experiences, and walks of life have access to the schooling that is the right fit for their child.

## 3. Response to the Issues Paper

### 3.1. Capacity to contribute

3.1.1. Following the 2011 Report into Review of Funding for Schooling, it was agreed that the capacity of a school community to contribute to its resource base be taken into account to arrive at its overall funding allocation with the measure of socio-economic status the tool to determine a family’s capacity to contribute. It was highlighted in the report that such “a measure of need should preserve incentives for parents to invest in the education of their children where they choose to and are able to do so”<sup>3</sup>.

3.1.2 The way that the ‘capacity to contribute’ of parents is calculated is key because it is the measure used to determine the overall funding allocated to each school. If it is determined that parents have a high ‘capacity to contribute’ then the school is allocated less funding and is reliant on higher private income.

3.1.3 It is recognised that a more precise measure of the SES is desirable to better arrive at the capacity of a school’s community to contribute to the income of that school. However, it is critical that the design of such a measure retains a sensitivity to diverse family circumstances. To unpick the funding for systemic Catholic schools by focussing on individual SES scores for families in schools could be problematic and could unintentionally undermine the premise of school choice by eradicating real choice for low to middle-income

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<sup>2</sup> p 12, Review of Funding for Schooling, Final Report, December 2011

<sup>3</sup> ibid p. 177

families in some areas, particularly in high SES areas which by virtue of their socio-economic-status would require higher fees from parents (their capacity to contribute) ultimately reducing the choice for Catholic schooling only to those who can afford high-fee schools.

3.1.4 It is stated in the 2011 Final Report, that accurately measuring 'capacity to contribute' would incentivise parents in non-government schools to make a contribution to their child's education<sup>4</sup>. If, because of the threat of increased school fees, families were to drift from Catholic schools to either government or private schools, it would see the diminution of individual Catholic schools through the reduction of their parent base and financial base thereby eventually leading to school closures. To incentivise parents in non-government schools to contribute to their child's education, the level of public contribution (derived from measuring ses) should not force parents out of Catholic education if it results in fees that preclude access to Catholic education.

For example, parents report that where there are small pockets of population deemed to have high socio-economic-status (due to concentrated occupation and employment) but for which the community may not have the actual capacity, there is the real risk of school closures or staff and resource reductions. This would then have achieved exactly the opposite of the intended aim of 'incentivising parents to invest in their child's education'.

3.1.5 Local conditions and circumstances have an impact on the capacity of the family to contribute. Feedback from parents in our schools illustrates the variation of circumstances and effects, pointing to the inadequacy of a single formula as a 'magic bullet' to assess the required level of resourcing to each school. Moreover, any suggestion that measure of capacity (through collection of income data, ATO data, etc.) should be conducted in schools is unacceptable as this would be invasive and undermine the dignity of each family, and the private relationship with the school principal and bursar.

3.1.6 In spite of economic and geographical variations, it is the argument of CCSP that families who choose a Catholic education for their children should have the same access whether they are in the northern suburbs of Sydney or the far reaches of NSW.

3.1.7 Naturally, there is already some variation to school fees as determined by the diocesan education offices, to match the capacity and needs of their constituents with some dioceses already offering a differentiated fee structure. To illustrate this point, a year 6 tuition fee for Balgowlah in is \$4922 while in Dee Why year 6 tuition is \$3546. Both of these schools are in the same NSW diocese.

3.1.8 However, those decisions are made at the local level judging the elasticity of the parent population when it comes to fees. To have an external measure of a community's capacity to contribute in accordance with variables such as parent income, would strike at the essence of the Catholic school system. If this were to take effect, and we were to see fee variances from very low to very high levels, comparable to high-fee private schools, it would have the effect of splintering Catholic systemic education into an unpredictable,

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<sup>4</sup> p. 79, Review into School Funding, Final Report December 2011

location-dependent offering.

3.1.9 Independent Catholic schools offer education based on the charism of particular saints or religious orders and serve a sector of the population who seek specialised Catholic tuition for their children. These schools recognise the capacity of their parent populations to contribute to the overall funding and that for many, it is already a stretch for which they make great sacrifices. However, some of these schools are seeing significant reductions in their funding and are faced with the prospect of either raising fees even more and losing families or potentially reducing the quality of their educational offering by cutting costs. One of the great benefits that such schools contribute to Australian society is their sponsorship and support of disadvantaged students particularly from Aboriginal and refugee or migrant backgrounds who otherwise would not have the opportunity to achieve beyond their life circumstances, which would potentially be reduced through decreased public funding.

3.2.0 Since 2015, there has been a shift in enrolments from the non-government sector back to government schools. This sees a reversal in a 20-year trend toward non-government schooling<sup>5</sup>. This points to, among other things, families feeling the budgetary squeeze and affirms the argument that fee increases will lead to a reduction in non-government school enrolments. The sum effect of which is a disincentive for parents to choose Catholic education thereby undermining the mission of Catholic education to provide accessible Catholic education and the right of parents to choose their child's education which is enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights<sup>6</sup>. It also contravenes one of the aims of a fairer funding program<sup>7</sup> which is to incentivise parents to invest in their child's education.

## 3.2. Alternative Methodologies

3.2.1 The current review sets out only to examine the design, timeliness and accuracy of the SES score methodology but will not be revisiting the presupposition that families in non-government schools should have their 'capacity to contribute' to their child's education measured at all. CCSP continues to have reservations about this premise which effectively differentiates parents from sector to sector.

3.2.2 It is not the role of the Council of Catholic School Parents to design or determine alternative methodologies to resolve the funding allocation methodology. There has been extensive work undertaken by Catholic Schools NSW and the National Catholic Education Commission in this area.

## 3.3. Guiding Principles

3.3.1 While the intention of finding a more precise model of determining 'capacity to contribute' is worthy, there is the concern that in the pursuit of arriving at the perfect

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4221.0main+features22017>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

<sup>7</sup> p. 79, Review into School Funding, Final Report December 2011

methodology: the purpose of the SES score in ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students could be lost.

3.3.2 While we would agree that transparency and reliability are justifiable expectations of any statistical activity particularly one on which decisions about choice in education and children's futures depend, this must be balanced by preservation of parent privacy and dignity of individuals.

## 3.4. Recommendations

3.4.1 Low-fee Catholic schooling has been a mainstay of Australian society, offering quality education and this is something that parents who choose a Catholic education should be able to continue to rely on, regardless of their location.

- **That whatever formula is arrived at, the principle of sector-blind, low-fee, Catholic and independent education for all those who want it is preserved.**

3.4.2 Education and the way that it is funded is of the utmost importance to Australian students today and into the future. It is the hope of the Council of Catholic School Parents that as a result of this Review, school funding is removed from the political arena and placed within a more considered and objective framework that promotes equity for all students in Australian schools.

- **That further research and investigation into the accepted notion of 'capacity to contribute' be undertaken to endeavour to truly understand the profile of the myriad of families accessing Catholic education.**

3.4.3 It is the expectation of the Council of Catholic School Parents that this Review of the Socio-Economic-Status methodology will ensure that Catholic school parents across the cities and towns of Australia will continue to be free to exercise their right to choose Catholic education for their children and not be disadvantaged by their local circumstances.

- **That no child should be deprived of high-quality education as a result of the way that their capacity to contribute is measured.**

In conclusion, while this is a Review of the SES methodology, it must be cognisant that it is about quality of schooling for a significant proportion of Australian students. It cannot be ignored that in essence, this is about access to high-quality education for all students in Australia and should therefore seek to uncover and eradicate barriers to real choice in education for all students in Australia.