



Bill Daniels



Federal funding review

Bill Daniels, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia explains ISCA's approach to the Australian Government's impending review of funding for non-government schools.

Speculation over future funding arrangements for non-government schools continues to build as the sector waits for the Australian Government to release the terms of reference of its promised review of schools funding. At time of writing, the only points of certainty are that there will be a review and that supporters and critics of current funding arrangements for independent schools will use the review to highlight their concerns.

The independent sector however is in a relatively strong policy position, able to demonstrate its long term success and efficient and effective contribution to school communities and the broader public.

ISCA's positions

Schooling in Australia is a serious business with governments at federal and state levels and parents contributing over \$40 billion a year. It is also a highly complex business as the funding responsibilities between the Commonwealth and state governments are sometimes blurred by politicking and selective reporting. Clearly those involved in the pending funding review face significant challenges in establishing a sound basis on which

to recommend changes to the current needs based funding arrangements. ISCA intends to negotiate these challenges by promoting the following positions that are based on sound policy principles, supported by credible research and designed to ensure long term educational outcomes.

Examine funding arrangements for all schools

While the review will clearly encompass the funding arrangements for independent schools, it would be timely for the review to focus on public funding policies for all schools. If the 'public vs private' debate is to be put in the past, this review provides the federal government with an opportunity to shift the focus off the funding of one sector and demonstrate that it is serious about moving forward and leaving sector divides behind.

Individual choice of schooling

Community attitudes to education are changing rapidly and there is a demand by parents for choice in the provision of schooling. Enrolment trends over the past 30 years demonstrate that more and more parents are prepared to pay for their children to attend their school of choice. Choice of schooling is achieved through a diversity of schooling options, which encourages partnerships between parents, governments and schools.

Basic entitlement for all

It is a fundamental right for all children to have access to schooling in the compulsory years, and it is a core function of governments to provide

this access. Families increasingly expect government funding schemes to support the access of their children to education services rather than focus on institutional ownership. A recent survey conducted by UMR Research, commissioned by the Associations of Independent Schools of New South Wales and South Australia and Independent Schools Queensland, also demonstrated the strength of community support for governments providing a basic entitlement for all students. According to the survey almost 70 per cent of Australians agree that independent school students should receive government funding support for their education, up from 51 per cent in a similar survey conducted in 2001.

Committed partnerships between schools, parents and governments

Non-government schooling is supported and sustained through a partnership comprising the federal government, state and territory governments and parents. With one-third of Australian students now educated in non-government schools it is vital that this partnership is reliable, stable and sustainable if the overall quality of schooling in Australia is to be maintained. Research shows that the community believes that partnerships between governments and non-government schools are crucial in maintaining a high quality education system. An overwhelming majority (88 per cent) of respondents in the UMR survey agreed that governments should support an education system with a

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mixture of schools provided by both the government and non-government sectors.

Additional needs based support

The basic per student grant should be supplemented by a needs based approach, which recognises the relative educational disadvantage of students, including students with disability, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from rural and remote areas. Again there is strong public backing for additional needs based support. Some 75 per cent of respondents in the UMR survey agreed that students with a disability should be funded at the same level regardless of the type of school they attend – a fundamental part of ISCA’s policy platform.

Stability and predictability

Stability and predictability in funding is critical for quality school provision. The greatest certainty that the federal government can provide all school sectors is an undertaking that no school would be worse off as a result of the funding review. ISCA also strongly endorses the federal government’s established policy of providing legislated quadrennial funding for non-government schools, adjusted annually to meet cost increases. This facilitates long term financial planning and management within schools, enhancing their capacity to provide the best quality education with the resources available to them. Stable and predictable funding arrangements also support families in

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

In 2009 AIS NSW, AISSA and ISQ commissioned UMR Research to undertake a national survey of community attitudes to independent schools, including attitudes to funding of independent schools. A report on key findings, issued in February 2010, is published at www.isca.edu.au, www.aisnsw.edu.au and www.aisq.qld.edu.au.

Independent schools are well regarded by the general public, with 75 per cent of those surveyed expressing positive views, increasing to 94 per cent for those with children attending an independent school.

For those parents who have children at government schools, four out of every ten surveyed indicated they would prefer to send them to an independent school if fees were not an issue.

Most of those surveyed (88 per cent) agreed our education system should have a mix of schools provided by both the government and non-government sectors.

Three in five respondents believed, incorrectly, that each student in an independent school receives the same or more government funding than a student in a government school.

Almost 70 per cent of those surveyed rejected the notion that independent schools should not receive financial support from governments, up from 51 per cent in a 2001 survey asking a similar question.

Almost 60 per cent of respondents believed that independent school students should receive the same amount of government funding support as government school students.

Three in four respondents agreed that students with a disability should be funded at the same level regardless of the type of school they attend.

planning for the private funds that they commit to their children’s schooling.

Conclusion

The sustained enrolment growth of the independent sector strongly supports the case that independent schools provide value for money and meet the educational needs of their students. It is crucial that political and policy decision

makers are continually made aware that the independent schools sector makes a significant social, educational and ultimately economic contribution – and that it can only continue to do so through a sustained partnership with the Australian Government. ■

A full list of ISCA’s policy positions on funding and fact sheets about the funding of independent schools are available at www.isca.edu.au.

Figure 1. UMR Research: Key findings on community attitudes to independent schools

