



Bill Daniels

My School 2.0 and independent schools

Bill Daniels, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, assesses the impact of My School 2.0.

There has been no escaping the recent media coverage on the status of Australian schools, their finances and their comparative academic successes and failures as measured by NAPLAN. Many independent schools have come under media scrutiny and the sector itself has yet again been lambasted with claims of elitism and unfair levels of government funding.

Setting aside the apparent flaws, My School 2.0 clearly shows that the independent sector does not benefit unduly from federal government funding and that parental contribution is the key to the financial health of independent schools: almost 60 per cent of the sector's recurrent costs are sourced from parents. Governments would be hard pushed to find \$3.9 billion dollars each year to make up the short fall, if parents in the independent sector did not contribute to their children's education through fees and other contributions.

It appears, however, that the public disclosure of school finances has done little to cool critics of the independent sector and fed a demand for even more data.

The recent announcement by the federal Minister for Schools, Peter Garrett that

ACARA is to report the details of other sources of income such as trusts and assets, was a decision made without any consultation with the independent schools sector. This policy will be a difficult one to achieve and one that will be fraught with complex issues.

Financial data is high stakes material and the question that should now be raised is, 'What is this data going to be used for?' While we have had constant assurances from ACARA that the ICSEA data is not suitable to be used to determine funding levels, we have also heard from the Minister himself that the data will help to inform the federal Review of Funding for Schooling. The review will influence the way that schools across the nation are funded well into the next decade.

The independent schools sector's key objective for the review is to ensure that no independent school or student should receive less government funding in real terms and that any model for funding of non-government schools should be equitable, transparent, stable and based on valid and reliable data.

Projected growth

It is projected that by 2020 there will be an extra 711,890 students in Australian schools. It is predicted some 414,835 of these students will be enrolled in the government sector, the vast majority in government primary schools; there is predicted growth of 147,020 students in

the Catholic sector, equivalent to 352 new schools; and in the independent sector it is predicted there will be an additional 150,035 students, equivalent to 311 new schools.

The impact of projected enrolment growth is an essential consideration for all levels of government and for all school sectors. As well as impacting on recurrent costs, the critical need for capital infrastructure will be a significant burden on governments. While parents currently contribute 80 per cent of capital expenditure in the independent schools sector, the future enrolment-driven capital needs of independent schools mean that further government assistance is needed; parents will not be able to carry the capital costs alone.

Consideration of targeted needs-based funding is also crucial, to ensure that students with special needs are not disadvantaged because they are enrolled in an independent school. My School 2.0 data highlights that independent schools catering for disadvantaged students and students with disabilities are significantly underfunded compared to their government counterparts.

The My School 2.0 data shows there are huge variations in the type and financial status of schools across all sectors. Funding is complex and there is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution. Any discussion on the funding of independent schools cannot be made without careful consideration of all factors. ■