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Federal education minister gives assurance of ongoing consultation over new funding methodology

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) has welcomed the assurance of the federal Minister for Education, Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, that the independent schools sector will continue to be closely consulted as trialling and validation of a new schools funding methodology progresses.

Speaking today at the National Education Forum held jointly by AHISA and the Independent Schools Council of Australia, Senator Birmingham said the Turnbull Government had heard and understood the concerns of independent schools in relation to use of a direct measure of parental income to determine schools' funding eligibility.

At a meeting with the Minister prior to the Forum, AHISA's National Chair, Dr Mark Merry, had presented a range of issues raised by Heads of independent schools, including:

- Privacy issues in relation to use of parents' taxation data
- The use of gross rather than net or disposable income
- Possible adverse effects on schools serving families in cities where the cost of housing is high and on boarding schools serving rural populations
- Concern that families who choose to educate their children in non-government schools will be subject to a financial audit which will not apply to the general population
- Disruption to schools if a short timeframe for introducing a new methodology is adhered to, especially for independent schools already transitioning to new funding levels.

'The Minister assured the Forum that SES scores for 2019 will still be calculated on Census data and that reasonable transition periods will be factored in to any changes to funding arrangements,' said Dr Merry. 'These assurances are welcome. Schools must have operational stability if they are to have consistency in their educational provision. Families also need certainty in budgeting for any fee increases.'

Dr Merry said the independent sector also welcomed the Minister's assurance that there would be 'no side deals' in funding arrangements and that the Government was committed to introducing funding arrangements for non-government schools that were equitable, transparent and fairly applied.

'With a federal election approaching, today's Forum was a valuable opportunity to hear from federal parliamentarians about their vision for the future of Australia's school system,' said Dr Merry.

'The Hon Bill Shorten and the Hon Tanya Plibersek affirmed Labor's commitment to increasing the national investment in education,' said Dr Merry. 'Their recognition of the important part independent schools play in Australia's education system was also appreciated.'

Dr Merry said it was encouraging that political leaders were committed to supporting choice and diversity in school education.

‘Choice and diversity in education are good things if there are not winners and losers,’ Dr Merry told delegates in his speech to the Forum.

‘Tribalism in education has got to stop,’ said Dr Merry. ‘The cooperation we see “on the ground” between schools and teachers from government, Catholic and independent schools ought to be mirrored by those seeking to shape educational policy.’”Dr Merry said there is a place for school choice in diversity.

‘Some in our media patronise and denigrate parents and their educational choices, imputing to them every motive under the sun for choosing an independent school except the right one – what’s best for their children.’

Dr Merry said the Forum had been a fantastic opportunity for independent schools to engage in the national dialogue on education.

‘As well as hearing from politicians, Forum delegates heard AITSL CEO, Lisa Rodgers, on the national imperative for improving the educational outcomes of each student and the role of teachers and principals in leading that improvement,’ said Dr Merry.

‘The questions posed by delegates show that independent schools are contributing to Australia’s education system with a commitment to cooperation and collaboration and excellence in education for every child in Australia.’

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AHISA is a professional association of 440 Heads of independent schools. Its members lead schools that collectively account for over 11 per cent of total Australian school enrolments and 20 per cent of Year 12 enrolments.