

BACKGROUND

In the lead up to the 2010 election we sought responses from Labor and the Coalition to a number of issues we regard as key to the interest of Christian schools.

The following pages show our original question, together with the responses received from the major parties.

Coalition responses were received from Christopher Pyne MP, and ALP responses by Simon Crean MP and have been inserted here verbatim

1. FUNDING FOR STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY**CSA: COMMITMENTS SOUGHT**

We are seeking a commitment to additional funding to address this funding injustice, commencing in the next term of Government.

- a) *Can you commit to the principle that for students with disabilities, it is the level of their need that should determine the funding available to them, not their choice of school?*
- b) *Will you commit to implementing policy based on this principle, so that Commonwealth funding (recurrent and targeted) provided for students with disabilities will be equitably distributed according to the need of the individual student and irrespective of sector or state?*
- c) *By what date would equitable funding commence?*
- d) *Will you commit that in Government your party will work, through COAG and Ministerial Council processes, to see the same principle applying to state funding for students with disabilities?*
- e) *We consider that the following framework for policy would go a long way to eliminating the injustices of the current arrangements. We would welcome your commitment to, or comment on, the following:*
 - i. *A nationally agreed set of definitions and classifications should be established as the basis of funding for students with disabilities across all jurisdictions and sectors.*
 - ii. *Nationally agreed levels of funding should be identified based on the support required to achieve beneficial outcomes for students in each classification.*
 - iii. *Students with disability should be assessed against the national criteria and funded accordingly.*
 - iv. *Funding to meet the particular needs of students with disability should be regarded as a basic entitlement for that child, and therefore portable.*
- f) *Additional funding should be provided to groups of clusters of schools enabling the establishment of locally-based support services to strengthen practice in the inclusion of students with disabilities through teacher development in targeted areas of need, such as the education of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.*

COALITION RESPONSE

The Coalition agrees that funding to meet the particular needs of students with disability should be regarded as a basic entitlement for that child, and therefore portable. A new Coalition Government will commit to the principle that for students with a disability, it is the level of their need that should determine funding available to them, not their choice of school.

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The Coalition will commit \$314 million over the forward estimates to commence portability of funding for students with a disability through an Education Card. The Education Card will be worth up to \$20,000 per year.

The entitlement attached to the Education Card will follow the student. It will be indexed and will be paid to educational institutions.

The Education Card will provide targeted assistance to specific areas of the schools population. The purpose of the card is to provide students with additional education needs with a financial opportunity to access the very best schooling options available.

The Coalition will commence the Education Card for students with disability from 1 January 2012, based on agreed nationally consistent definitions, providing portability of the entitlement between schools or school systems. This will provide real choice to parents and a guarantee of a better education for students.

Students most in need will get help first, with eligibility to be expanded to all students with a disability as the federal budgetary situation improves and Labor's debt is brought under control.

The Coalition will commit to working through the COAG and Ministerial Council processes; to encourage state and territory governments to also apply this same principle for students with a disability by 1 July 2010.

The Coalition agrees that students with a disability should be assessed against national criteria and funded accordingly. The Coalition will work at a Ministerial Council level, to reach agreement between jurisdictions on clear categories for funding students with a disability.

Where clusters of students attend localized schools, it may be possible for schools to pool education card funding, to provide resources amongst a community. We will further examine this option if elected.

ALP RESPONSE

Gillard Labor will provide new access to early intervention services to help give more children with disability a better start in life. The Better Start for Children with Disability initiative will ensure children with disabilities will have access to intensive early intervention therapies and treatments from expert health professionals.

Assistance for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder will be available through the \$190 million Helping Children with Autism Package. This can include professional development for teachers, school leaders and other school staff to build their skills in working with children with autism and workshops and information sessions for parents and carers to assist them to work with their child's teachers, school leaders and other staff.

Labor is already delivering assistance to students with disabilities through the Smarter Schools National Partnerships. The National Partnerships are focussed on improving teacher quality (\$550 million), boosting literacy and numeracy (\$540 million) and raising achievement in disadvantaged school communities (\$1.5 billion). This investment aims to generate better educational outcomes for all students, including those with special learning needs.

Targeted assistance is also being provided through the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program for students in non-government schools.

2. FAIR AND CERTAIN RECURRENT FUNDING

CSA: COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

We note that legislation for the next quadrennium was promised by Julia Gillard (in the speech referred to above) for 2011. Notwithstanding the review currently underway it is reasonable in the context of an election to ask for commitments to the policy to be pursued should the Government be re-elected.

Therefore we are asking for a commitment to the following:

- a) that funding policy will recognise and support the right of parents to choose an education for their children consistent with their beliefs and values;*
- b) funding for schools should be fair and equitable across all sectors, not determined by ideology, sector or governance;*
- c) in any future needs-based formula for non-government school funding, a nexus should remain between the basis of funding and the full costs of providing an education consistent with the full scope of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians;*
- d) funding will be indexed annually, with the basis of indexation being the same for all schools, and at a level which reflects the growth in education specific costs;*
- e) each child will be considered to have a basic minimum entitlement for government support;*
- f) the funding model adopted will be based on transparent distribution mechanisms and reliable, objective and independent data, open to scrutiny and subject to appeal; and that*
- g) schools will be provided with certainty in any funding model, in particular through legislated four year agreements.*

COALITION RESPONSE

The Coalition will continue to support choice in schooling, as we recognize that all children are different, and when it comes to schools, one size most certainly does not fit all.

The Coalition support's the right for families to choose to send their child to a faith based school or a school offering an alternative approach to curriculum, pedagogy or another format. Families should be supported in that decision.

We agree with Christian Schools Australia that the funding should be fair and equitable across all sectors, and not determined by ideology, sector or governance and that funding for non-government schools should be needs-based and consistent with the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

The Coalition supports the principle that general recurrent grants should be indexed annually to reflect rising costs and that every child should have a basic minimum entitlement for government support. Funding must be based on transparent distribution mechanisms and reliable, objective and independent data, open to scrutiny and subject to appeal.

To achieve this, a Coalition Government will provide schools with certainty, through legislated four year agreements.

ALP RESPONSE

For at least the lifetime of the next Parliament, until the end of 2013, funding will be at least indexed as currently for all schools. Post 2013 arrangements will include indexation for all schools and will be put forward well before the next election.

3. CAPITAL FUNDING FOR GROWTH

CSA: COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

We believe there is great scope for government policy to further encourage private investment in community-based education infrastructure.

- a) *Will you support measures to stimulate the further investment of private funds into capital school facilities?*
- b) *Will you support government tax incentives or other concessional arrangements to provide incentive for such investment?*
- c) *Will you support a national interest subsidy scheme to assist schools in raising funds from banks and other financial institutions in support of their building programmes?*

COALITION RESPONSE

The Coalition acknowledges the growing concerns about the growing inadequacies of existing government capital support mechanisms to the Independent schools sector.

The Coalition if elected would be willing to engage and consult with key stakeholders to investigate these options further when considering future planning of government funded infrastructure support.

ALP RESPONSE

Gillard Labor has budgeted for non-government school capital funding through til 2013-2014. This capital will be made available to no-government schools immediately if the Government is re-elected, with a focus on growing communities

4. ENSURING FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND EXPRESSION

CSA: COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- a) *Will you give an unequivocal commitment not to support amendments that would remove the current ability of religious schools to:*
 - i. *hire and retain staff on the basis that they are genuine adherents, in belief and practice, to the Christian or other faith basis of the school; and*
 - ii. *integrate a world view based on religious beliefs and values into curriculum and school practice including enrolment.*

COALITION RESPONSE

The Coalition would not support amendments that would remove the current ability of schools to hire and retain staff on the basis that they are genuine adherents, in belief and practice, to Christian or other faith basis of a school.

Similarly the Coalition would not support amendments their ability to integrate a world view based on religious beliefs and values into curriculum and school practice including enrolment.

ALP RESPONSE

If re-elected, a Gillard Labor Government will harmonise and consolidate anti discrimination laws. This will include looking at gaps at the federal level and reviewing the powers of the Australian Human Rights Commission and the adequacy of the complaint-handling process.

Federal Labor recognises that there are longstanding exemptions in anti discrimination laws, at both the federal and state level, for educational institutions established for religious purposes in relation to the employment of staff.

This project would be undertaken in consultation with stakeholders, including independent schools, on the proposed single anti discrimination laws.

5. SCHOOL CHAPLAINCY PROGRAMME

CSA: COMMITMENT SOUGHT

What commitment can you give to the continuation of funding of this programme?

COALITION RESPONSE

The Coalition has committed to ensuring that the National School Chaplaincy Programme continues operation until 2014.

Chaplains play a valuable role in schools, supporting students and school communities by offering pastoral care and guidance across religious denominations and beliefs.

The National School Chaplaincy Programme was introduced by the former Coalition Government and enabled schools to employ a part-time school chaplain, with the purpose of providing pastoral care and non-denominational spiritual guidance in schools.

Chaplains' beliefs are representative of the school communities the chaplains work in and do not hinder chaplains from working with those of other beliefs or none. The programme operates in 1,915 schools where the local community has sought to be involved with the programme, and enjoys strong support among principals, schools and in the community generally.

The chaplaincy programme has been particularly successful in helping students with behaviour management issues and those that may have difficulties in their social relationships. If the programme were to cease, this decision would most disadvantage those students that battle with loneliness or bullying at schools and students who have difficulties in their families.

Earlier in 2010, Tony Abbott announced that a Coalition Government committed to make it an ongoing programme.

The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, responded with only a temporary one year extension to the programme until the end of 2011, at a reduced funding rate, with a review of the programme being conducted by bureaucrats in the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations who would determine its future.

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The Coalition will boost funding for this programme by \$55 million ensuring that a total of \$220 million will be devoted to Chaplains until at least 2014. This additional money will see up to 1000 more schools be eligible to receive the services of a Chaplain.

Only after the election campaign was called did the Leader of the Labor Party, Julia Gillard, announce that Labor would continue the programme.

The Coalition is committed to continuing ongoing, meaningful support for the great work chaplains are doing in our schools through the National School Chaplaincy Programme.

ALP RESPONSE

The 2,700 schools already benefiting from the services of a chaplain or counsellor are also set to benefit from funding certainty for a further three years, until the end of 2014.

A re-elected Gillard Labor Government will ensure that up to 1,000 additional schools will benefit from pastoral care in schools, with an extension of the National School Chaplaincy Program