

**Submission
No 203**

INQUIRY INTO THE STATE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN VICTORIA

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RE: Request for submission - Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

To whom it may concern,

As a senior researcher in education, and a Fulbright Scholar, I have been invited to respond to the inquiry into the state education system in Victoria. My area of research is comparative education funding, policies and school choice. In my response to the inquiry, I will focus specifically on the Victorian education system though many of my points will also be relevant to the education departments in other Australian states and territories. I am available to give evidence in a public hearing.

I have recently developed and distributed a survey for public school principals pertaining to the types of additional sources of funding that these leaders draw on to meet the infrastructural and pedagogical needs of their school communities. As a part of this survey process, a number of principals also chose to opt-in to a face-to-face interview to further elaborate their thoughts around school funding in government systems. Overwhelmingly, most principals working in Victorian government schools believe that public schools are substantially underfunded. This is possibly not a surprise; the funding wars between public and private schooling systems in Australia have been media fodder for years. What is surprising, and highly concerning, is that public school principals are being forced to *compete* for additional funding with other public schools. This incurs unnecessary time-labour for school principals, in completing frequently long, time consuming applications, with no guarantee of acceptance.

To be very clear, the funding that these principals are seeking is not for outlandish purposes or surplus to their schools' needs. Principals are submitting detailed applications for competitive department grants to fund school projects that many would consider *basic* and *necessary*. Applications for capital works grants to update school facilities, including roofing improvements, heater replacements, the replacement of very old toilet facilities and unsafe sliding windows should *not* be something that principals have to spend their time campaigning for. There is a basic occupational health and safety obligation for appropriate public education facilities, for students but also for staff working in these schools. This an entirely inefficient use of leadership time and energy competing for a very small number of grants among a surplus of 1500 Victorian public schools. Fair school funding should not be treated as a competition.

Of similar concern are the issues with the substantial level of government funding for private schools. Comparatively with other OECD countries, Australia directs an unusually high

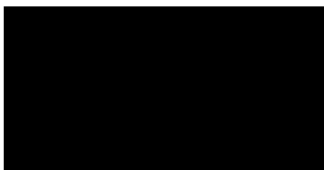
amount of government funding to private schools. We need to see far greater regulation of funding for private schools to decrease the rising inequities within the Australian education system. If private schools choose to accept public funding, then they should also adhere to public oversight and equity principles. This means that student selection should be prohibited, and a higher proportion of fee-free places available. Tuition fees need to be capped. It means insisting on reasonable tuition fees that are in proportion with average family median income, as well as prohibiting student selection on the basis of receipt of public funding. Each of these policies are practiced in OECD countries.

We also need to see private schools adhering to the same payroll tax conditions as public schools, to, at the very least, level the playing field. Ideally, private schools should be paying *more* taxes than public schools given their private organisational status, and the fact they educate the most advantaged students in our communities. While there are some exceptions to this (for example, Catholic schools in low-SES areas), for the majority of private schools, they are educating more advantaged students. When Victoria proposed that the payroll tax exemption for high-fee private schools should be removed earlier this year, the private school lobby launched a misinformation attack. This process highlighted to the public their excessive influence on politics, and this led to the government's proposal completely watered down. I firmly believe that the Victorian public largely supports equity in schooling, and this can only happen when the systemic conditions are in place to promote equitable funding within our system.

Given that Victoria insists on being known as 'The Education State', if we wish to bolster the notion that schooling systems are really a mechanism for societal change, then much more needs to be done to address the funding in public education.

I would welcome the opportunity for further discussion to elaborate on any of these points in greater detail.

Yours sincerely,



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