

Education (General Provisions) (Helping Families with School Costs) Amendment Bill 2023

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Education, Employment and Training Committee
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EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) (HELPING FAMILIES WITH SCHOOL COSTS) AMENDMENT BILL 2023

The Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASSP) welcomes the opportunity to submit our insights to the Parliamentary Committee examining the Education (General Provisions) (Helping Families with School Costs) Amendment Bill 2023.

QASSP stands as the premier professional association for state school leaders in Queensland, advocating for the interests of educational leaders across the state. Our membership exceeds 1300 school leaders and represents 337,500 primary school students, reflecting a commitment to representing the diverse nature of primary education in Queensland.

The QASSP membership is dedicated to promoting excellence in state schools. Our vision centres around ensuring that every child has access to quality education, and we believe that the proposed Education (General Provisions) (Helping Families with School Costs) Amendment Bill 2023 holds significant implications for achieving this goal.

As we engage with this important legislative initiative, QASSP emphasises the need for policies that alleviate financial burdens on families, foster inclusive educational environments, and enhance the overall quality of education in Queensland. Our submission will provide detailed insights, drawing from the collective expertise of our members, to contribute constructively to the ongoing dialogue surrounding this crucial legislation. We look forward to collaborating with the committee to advance the interests of Queensland's students, families, and educators.

Our submission is grounded in the professional perspectives and practical experiences of public education primary school leaders, informed by QASSP positions, reports, research and members' insights. QASSP is unwavering in its commitment to fostering a high-quality and equitable education system. We recognise that the next National School Reform Agreement (National Agreement) and bilateral funding are critical to the delivery of Equity and Excellence to every school community in Queensland. Our goal is to help shape an education system so it not only meets rigorous standards but also ensures equity across all public primary schools, cultivating an inclusive and conducive learning environment for every student.

QASSP believes that the current National Agreement has too much focus on "end results" such as Year 12 attainment. Too many students are not transitioning successfully to high school as they don't have the basic skills in literacy and numeracy, and they have disengaged from their learning. This is particularly apparent for our First Nations students and students with disabilities (approximately 80% of whom attend state primary schools). This is not to say that our primary schools are not doing a "good job", but rather underpins the lack of importance placed on the primary sector, especially in state schools and this is highlighted by these key resourcing factors:

- The Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) for primary school students is significantly lower than for secondary school students (over a \$3100 differential).

- Funding to state schools in Queensland is proposed in the current bilateral funding agreement to be limited to less than 95% of the SRS by 2032 (see Table 1).
- The current amount of state funding contributed towards SRS is 69.26% of the total.
- Queensland state primary school students are currently funded at only 88.86% of the SRS.
- Across Australia, one third of independent and Catholic schools currently receive more government funding than half our government primary schools.

The COVID pandemic has had significant impact on our primary school students and their educators, especially in lower socioeconomic areas where access to technology was limited. Ensuring continuity of learning was extremely challenging for primary school teachers and this further highlighted the funding gap between the primary and secondary sectors.

Primary school teaching is a highly specialised profession as teachers are required to have knowledge of all learning areas, whilst supporting the social and emotional development of each individual student. These are critical formative years and we would argue that more needs to be done to ensure that students, teachers, leaders and schools are properly equipped to do this important work and provide the early and sustained intervention that our higher needs students require. State primary schools are sometimes the only government department present in a town and are viewed as the bedrock of many Queensland communities. Issues associated with staffing, housing and isolation further impinge on the ability of school leaders and educators to provide the best education possible for the students of this state.

In this country we blame schools, in particular government schools for poor NAPLAN and PISA results. In the last ten years government primary schools have been underfunded by one whole year of funding based on the minimum funding recommended (SRS). As a nation we need to look beyond, teachers and school leaders to the state and federal governments for solutions. The productivity commission identified that the current National Agreement had failed to achieve any targets established. This is because the underpinning bilateral funding agreements enshrine underfunding of public primary schools.

Wellbeing at the school level is also adversely affected by the propensity of governments and bureaucracies to impose additional responsibilities on schools without considering what should be removed to make space for the added expectations or what additional resources are required to deliver new initiatives. QASSP suggests that before signing a new National School Reform Agreement and bilateral funding arrangements, we settle on a limited number of key reform areas and measures. This will allow the system and schools to focus on spending money on students. The aim is to enhance equity, so that every student is provided with opportunity to have a rich experiential education. Through providing students with these opportunities, student engagement will be enhanced, leading to increased attendance, school participation and school completion.

The impacts of properly funding government primary schools are far reaching:

Government primary schools could hire and retain experts and support staff to help all students, especially those with complex learning and health needs.

Research suggests students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds would *most* benefit from adequate and additional resources. This includes relevant professional support staff. Adequate resourcing as early as possible, would also grant school staff the time and resources to link children with support services that might be needed out of or in-conjunction with available school support.

Government primary schools could be adequately resourced in terms of teachers and educational resources (including in the areas of music, art, and sports).

Currently, Queensland state schools face greater teacher shortages, have far more teachers teaching out-of-field, have fewer educational materials and poorer quality infrastructure than do private schools. The ability to foster wellbeing for students needs to start in primary schools so that we adopt a proactive approach to student wellbeing and mental health. Early investment for this state makes economic sense rather than reactively trying to address mental health issues in teenagers and adults.

A recent Federal Parliamentary review into school refusals identified that at times in their schooling two in five students refuse to go to school. These students are not truanting, they are experiencing high levels of anxiety. Primary schools require additional trained staff who can help these students reengage in learning in a slow and deliberate manner, in a non-threatening environment for the student and so that parents are included in the process.

Government primary schools could invest in working with the community and parents/guardians to support students' engagement and learning.

Schools that can invest in fostering strong and positive relationships with children's parents/carers and community can develop these important relationships to enrich children's learning and wellbeing. This, in turn, can also foster greater wellbeing in families and schools. Resources are required to cultivate these vital connections.

If every Queensland state primary school was provided with 100% of SRS, students' families would not have to purchase basic learning materials such as books, pens, and electronic devices. Students from disadvantaged families would not have to go without or be forced into having to use second-hand books and devices. Schools would not have to spend countless hours organising payment plans for families of students trying to pay fees.

Government primary schools could improve student achievement and decrease the learning gaps between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students.

More money for socioeconomically disadvantaged students and schools is a way to improve overall student outcomes and to decrease learning gaps due to varying socioeconomic circumstance. Currently, students from disadvantaged communities and those who live in rural and remote areas may not be able to afford to participate in extra curricula activities including school camps, excursions, and sporting opportunities. Unfortunately, these are often the students who would benefit the most from their participation. Primary school leaders and teachers are constantly seeking to create wonderful and varied learning opportunities. If schools in this state are funded at 100% of SRS they might eliminate cost as a factor preventing students from disadvantaged backgrounds and rural and remote areas benefiting from the learning experiences we want every child to have.

Prioritising funding to government primary schools is a generational game-changer.

Research consistently shows that the highest rate of human, social and economic returns accrue when children are invested in as early as possible. A 2018 World Bank research paper found that "primary education continues to exhibit the highest social profitability in all world regions". Yet, while there is universal support to enhance funding to the early years, analysis shows that the most underfunded students

in Australia are those in public primary schools in Years 3 to 6. This is also the area where student disengagement intensifies, not in secondary school. To ensure the funds invested in the early years of schooling reap maximum benefit, it is necessary to sustain funding for the middle years of schooling. The state that is bold enough to change funding arrangements to deliver quality early and middle years programs, will lead the nation in educational outcomes for a generation.

Nobel Prize winner James Heckman proved with The Heckman Curve that the highest rate of economic returns comes from the earliest investments in children. That is, “the economic benefits of investing early and building skill upon skill to provide greater success to more children and greater productivity, leading to a reduction in social spending for society”. According to the OECD, “beyond a certain level of investment, enabling all students to succeed hinges on the ability to direct resources effectively to where they matter most”. The Millennium Development Goals formulated by the United Nations in 2015, set “Achieve universal primary education” as the second goal, stating that educating children with a primary education has proven to have the greatest impact on the economies of the world, eliminating poverty and providing equality for all.

State primary schools in Queensland are where children with the most additional and complex developmental and learning needs are educated. The sooner these schools are fully funded, the sooner they can adequately meet their students’ learning and developmental needs. This would halt educational inequities closer to where they begin.

In conclusion, if we want to provide a better and fairer start for all students in this state, we must prioritise adequate investment in state primary schools, especially those with higher concentrations of disadvantaged students. Students in this state should not feel inadequate because they don’t have books or can’t attend a camp or excursion due to cost. Students in Queensland state primary schools deserve to be funded at 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard, so their educational and physical resourcing needs can be met and they can be given the opportunity to live a life of choice, not of chance.

Kind regards,



Patrick Murphy

President

Queensland Association of State School Principals

Email: 

Table 1 | Bilateral Funding Agreements in 2022

	QLD	NSW	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	ACT
Federal Funding Catholic Schools	83.1%	81.8%	80.4%	80.4%	80.9%	82.8%	78.1%	86.2%
State Funding Catholic Schools	15.09%	23.04%	19.94%	20.3%	19.72%	20%	21.2%	21.68%
TOTAL	98.19%	104.84%	100.34%	100.7%	100.62%	102.8%	99.3%	107.88%
Federal Funding Independent Schools	82.3%	82.8%	82.9%	80.2%	81.3%	82.4%	83.8%	85.9%
State Funding Independent Schools	15.09%	23.04%	19.94%	20.3%	19.72%	20%	21.2%	21.84%
TOTAL	97.39%	105.84%	102.84%	100.5%	101.02%	102.4%	105%	107.74%
Federal Funding Government Schools	19.6%	19.5%	19.4%	19.9%	19.3%	19.1%	21.9%	19.4%
State Funding Government Schools	69.26%	71.8%	69.68%	73.85%	75%	75%	58.5%	80%
TOTAL	88.86%	91.3%	89.08%	93.75%	94.3%	94.1%	80.4%	99.4%
Proposed Year when 95% of SRS will be reached for Government Schools	2032	2027	2028	2027	2028	2032	2028	No Agreed timeframe