PREAMBLE

The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Review of Funding for Schooling.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards or school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of Victorian Catholic education authorities in advancing the interests of Catholic schools and their students, particularly in those areas where parent input can strengthen the quality of Catholic school provision.

The VCSPB speaks from a perspective of parents who value education in the Catholic faith and tradition for their children, but also as taxpayers and as interested citizens.

This statement deals with the VCSPB’s general views regarding funding for schooling and more specifically to matters raised in the Review’s Emerging Issues Paper (December 2010). The VCSPB’s submission to the Review addresses a number of issues that are important to Catholic school parents and seeks to highlight parents’ perspectives on these. These issues are based on the seven Key Themes in the Emerging Issues Paper (p.18ff), and the submission is structured according to these themes, where relevant.

CHOICE

As citizens, parents of children in all schools want to see achievement of quality outcomes for all children. The VCSPB believes that every Australian child, regardless of the school he or she attends or his or her personal circumstances, is entitled to the best education that our nation can provide. Governments are given the responsibility to allocate resources to achieve this aim.

At the same time it is widely accepted that a single education system for all is not appropriate in our pluralist democratic society. Any system of funding schools must also take into account the long history of provision of schooling by religious and other groups, most of which pre-date government-provided schools. Our society has always placed a high value on choice, and parents desire a choice of schooling for their children, often for religious and cultural reasons.
Catholic and other parents value the Catholic school system for reasons that include:

- Education in the Catholic faith and traditions for their children, including religious instruction and sacramental programs
- The values, ethos and culture of the Catholic school which gives vitality to the school community
- Pastoral care within the school and at the community level, such as compassion for parents and families in difficulty
- Acceptance of all Catholic families, and, where possible, other families who accept the values of Catholic education
- Greater autonomy of school management
- Support for Catholic families in need through waived or discounted fees.

Parents pay for this choice through fees and other costs. Fees are necessary because of the lower level of combined government funding. Private contributions to schooling comprise a significant proportion of education budgets.

As taxpayers, parents value efficiency and effectiveness of schools and school systems. Evidence from Australian Productivity Commission reports and recently released financial data from My School indicates that Catholic schools on average operate more efficiently compared to government schools not only because of lower per capita overall spending but more significantly because parents of Catholic school students contribute some 20% of this per capita cost.

1. EQUITY OF EDUCATION OUTCOMES

What does equity of educational outcomes actually mean? The Emerging Issues Paper states that

> a commitment to equity means that differences in educational outcomes should not be the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions; it is not meant to suggest that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes. (p. 19)

The Issues Paper highlights the different interpretations of the term depending on context, stakeholder interest and so on. The VCSPB suggests that this term needs to be explored further. From a parent perspective, it agrees that all students should have the opportunity and appropriate resources to achieve their potential. There is no guarantee however that every student will achieve to his or her full potential. There are many other factors both within and outside the control of a school that affect the quality of outcomes. These include:

- The quality of teachers, including training, experience and commitment
• Support from the home environment: parents’ influence on students’ motivation to learn and participate

• Leadership and empowerment: the capacity of school leaders to implement changes within a school, including management of students with particular needs.

How then can a funding model better support equity of educational outcomes? In the first place funding models need to support the learning needs of every child. The educational funding of a child in any sector needs to recognise appropriately each child’s unique needs through agreed formulas taking into account state government, Australian government, recurrent and capital funding.

In addition, assessment of need (of students and of schools) underpinning allocations to schools and systems must be transparent, comprehensive and supported by strong reliable data.

2. RECURRENT FUNDING

The VCSPB does not seek to propose particular funding models, as this will be done by the appropriate authorities. While no funding formula will be ideal, the VCSPB would be pleased to see the Review Panel investigate a range of different funding models, including those that specify a common base funding amount for all students, with additional support for students with greater educational needs. It would also seem sensible that funding models at least explore the consolidation of different sources of funding from the Australian Government and state and territory governments as it is the total resources available from all sources that determines the resource levels available to support student learning.

VCSPB believes that at a base level funding should be equal for all students. For students who need assistance for educational disadvantage or special learning needs, then additional funding should be targeted in the most efficient and effective way.

All schools and school systems should be appropriately accountable for the outcomes achieved. Parents will have an incentive to contribute to schooling where funding models support successful student outcomes and the culture and practices of effective schools. Catholic schools have recorded healthy growth in student populations in part because they are seen to offer very good value and parents are prepared to support that.

3. CAPITAL FUNDING

Parents of students in Catholic schools have for many years contributed to building or upgrading school facilities through building levies and fund-raising, often with little or no government assistance. While the Building the Education Revolution projects resulted in much welcome and overdue development, the need to build new schools in growth corridors and to maintain and renew school environments will continue to grow. It seems clear that opportunities should be taken for coordinated cross-sectoral planning for efficient provision of school buildings.
4. TARGETED AND NEEDS-BASED FUNDING

In the interests of fairness and equity of opportunity, any funding system must make generous provision for additional support for students, who through mere circumstance suffer educational disadvantage. These include:

- students with low English language skills
- indigenous students
- students in remote areas
- students with disabilities
- low SES background students.

See further comments under Section 5.

5. SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

While Catholic schools welcome students with disadvantaged backgrounds or special needs and are committed to providing them with maximum opportunities, it is regrettable that at present in some areas government funding for these students in the Catholic sector is much lower than for those in government schools. Catholic school parents are aware of inequities in support for disadvantaged or high needs students in current arrangements. There are examples from Catholic schools and communities where families decide that they have to send their child with a disability to the local government school because the level of funding received at the Catholic school is much less than what is received at the government school. No funding system should make parents choose between their religious beliefs and support for their child.

Parents of children in Catholic schools regard this issue as a blight on the current funding models. With adequate funding Catholic schools would be able to welcome more students with disabilities. The VCSPB believes there is a crucial need to develop fairer funding models that are comparable across sectors, to support the educational requirements of students with special needs and students with disabilities wherever they attend school.

6. GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Victorian Catholic school parents see the value of a Catholic systemic approach which strikes a balance between the efficiencies of a central funding and support body and the autonomy of the school community to make sure that local needs are met. On the one hand, the funding system allocates resources to each school according to a number of factors related to the needs of students and the capacity of families to contribute. On the other hand, local autonomy allows school communities to make best use of their resources in the context of each school environment. This arrangement devolves to the school significant responsibility for effective and efficient allocation of resources, with the support of effective leadership and governance arrangements.
Parents play an important role in providing advice to school leadership about local and individual educational needs, particularly through governance structures such as school boards.

The VCSPB believes that any funding model should allow each sector to maintain an appropriate balance between system and local school governance.

7. COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The VCSPB strongly supports the points made in this section of the Emerging Issues Paper about the importance of community engagement in achieving better educational outcomes for students.

We endorse the notion of encouraging community and family engagement and philanthropic giving. There are possible equity concerns where individual schools have access to higher levels of philanthropy than others, so governments and educational providers should seek opportunities to cooperate both in attracting philanthropic support and in ensuring that it is directed towards areas of relative need across a school system.

8. FINAL COMMENTS

Parents seek equity in funding for all students, regardless of the school they attend. The funding of Catholic education by Commonwealth and State governments is essential to keep Catholic schools viable and available to those who seek a Catholic education. With appropriate levels of government funding for Catholic schools, many more families of limited means could seek a Catholic education and would gain access.

Parents are keen to see greater stability and predictability of government funding of schools as well as annual indexation to match increases of expenditure in government schools. Any volatility and uncertainty of government funding can result in steep school fee increases which in some cases force parents to remove their children from Catholic schools. This disruption to the child's educational and social experience is of course unacceptable.