Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools, focusing on the impact on student learning

Submission from the Victorian Catholic Schools Parent Body (VCSPB)
14 February 2014

The Victorian Catholic Schools Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliament Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools, focusing on the impact on student learning.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards, or where none exist, through school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of the 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’s submission to the inquiry addresses some issues that are important to Catholic school parents and seeks to highlight parents’ perspectives on these. The VCSPB speaks from a perspective of parents who value education in the Catholic faith and tradition for their children, but also as interested citizens.

Throughout this document we have used the term “parent”; this term is used to include natural, adoptive or foster parents, guardians and caregivers of students.

In Victorian Catholic schools, homework is set by individual teachers in accordance with the school policy on homework. Homework policies will vary from school to school, but in Victorian Catholic schools, parents may influence that policy through direct consultation or surveys or through parent representation on school boards/advisory councils. This consultation with parents plays an important role not only in the development of the policy, but also in building relationships between parents, as the primary educator of their children, and the teaching staff in each school.

Children learn everywhere and ‘learning at home’ (homework) is a crucial overlap between school and home that supports learning and developing effective partnerships between parents and teachers. The education system in Victoria will work effectively with a solid commitment to parent/family engagement. Giving parents the ability to work with the school and with their children is one aspect of engaging parents.

Where parents are engaged in their child’s learning there is a positive impact on the academic outcomes for the child, but also on the child’s (and the parent’s) attitude to learning. Whilst there is a direct positive impact for the child and the family, there are benefits to society in having a successful education system. It can be difficult for schools to engage parents and families, but an effective homework policy is a useful avenue in this process.
Homework complements and reinforces learning at school, fosters good study habits and lifelong learning, and helps students take responsibility for their own learning other than at school. The VCSPB sees commitment to life-long learning as a vital life skill for everyone (not just children). With the steady growth in communication tools, information technology and a changing jobs environment, it is important that children understand that learning is an ongoing process throughout their lives and have the skills to embrace and undertake that learning. Homework is one way that students can learn self discipline to study and to invest in their own education. Homework can be an avenue for children (particularly secondary school students) to take responsibility for their learning and to use innovation and creativity in the way that they learn.

Whilst the VCSPB supports the use of technology in homework (and acknowledges that this is a vital life skill for students), it is also mindful of the fact that access to technology may be difficult for some families. A balance needs to be found between the need to develop technology skills and to ensure social inclusion.

Homework is not just doing work at home alone; it is also ‘learning together at home’ with interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community. It is a good opportunity for parents to ascertain what learning entails, where their children are with respect to their learning overall and to identify any areas that need to be discussed with teaching staff.

Parents should be supported by schools with targeted programs to better develop their child’s learning at home. In the Victorian Catholic sector, programs aimed at family engagement have supported parents through computer literacy classes and tips on how to help your child with homework. This has improved family engagement but also the outcomes for students and the school in general.

Support for parents should not be overlooked as a critical part of any homework policy. Many parents (for example those from backgrounds where English is a second language or with children in the secondary sector) feel that they cannot assist their children with homework. Whilst there will be aspects of homework that parents cannot assist with, the issue is about support and building relationships so that parents are empowered to support their child’s learning out of school hours, raise concerns with the school and enhance their children’s ability to problem solve and seek help when they are unclear.

Each parent and child needs to be provided each year/term with clear expectations on homework and the specific requirements as determined by the school in consultation with parents and students. The VCSPB supports homework policies that are clear on the expectations and where there is a process for assessment and feedback provided. Homework will only be beneficial where appropriate feedback about that homework is provided and the homework is relevant to the current area of study. To this end, the VCSPB considers that it is important that teachers and schools are given discretion as whether homework is necessary and appropriate at each stage of learning.

In terms of approaches to homework this will necessarily vary at each school. The VCSPB recognises that a differentiated approach is necessary to ensure that homework meets the needs of each child in each classroom. For example some teachers/schools use a homework matrix or home learning grids to allow choice of homework tasks over a period of time and allow for activities designed to build community and student learning. The VCSPB would not support a prescriptive
approach to the form of homework as a one size fits all approach which will not benefit the majority of children.

The VCSPB understands that the Catholic Education Commission Victoria Ltd. has also made a submission to the Inquiry and supports that submission to the extent it is in line with the comments of the VCSPB above.

The VCSPB acknowledges the importance of this Inquiry and is pleased to have the opportunity to canvass these issues amongst the Catholic school parent community and report through this submission.

Tracey O’Neill
CHAIR