

The Minister for Special Deals is in no position to lecture

Complaints by Education Minister Simon Birmingham this morning about Catholic schools and “special deals” should be treated with derision, according to Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (CECV) Executive Director Stephen Elder.

‘The truth is that Senator Birmingham has established himself as the Minister for Special Deals,’ Mr Elder said, ‘special deals for wealthy independent schools.

‘Senator Birmingham gave the independent school sector special treatment in the development of his Gonski 2.0 funding arrangements, consulting extensively with them while excluding Catholic systems and the states and territories.

‘Not surprisingly Senator Birmingham then announced a new funding policy that Catholic education authorities, the state and territory governments, education unions and public school advocates all agree is the best special deal private schools have ever had.

‘The Turnbull/Birmingham funding arrangements increase the importance of a measure of school needs – school SES scores – that CECV research has shown is biased in favour of elite independent schools, overfunding them by at least \$200 million each year. The Government has not rebutted this research.

‘The Prime Minister and Senator Birmingham removed the option of system-weighted average SES scores for school systems – the measure that enable systems such as Catholic education to meet the unique needs of individual schools while keeping fees affordable across the system.

‘In doing so they acted directly contrary to the recommendations of the Gonski final report – presumably because independent schools didn’t like them.

‘Senator Birmingham also decided to use a new dataset on students with disability that is being widely rorted by elite schools. Under this, independent schools in Victoria have claimed that more than a quarter of their students have a disability.

‘Many wealthy independent schools are set to receive large funding because of this other Birmingham special deal, yet at the same time the Minister and his Department are refusing to release any details of the disability data submitted by elite independent schools as presumably this would destroy the credibility of his model.

‘Not only does this run counter to all claims by Senator Birmingham that he has developed a transparent funding system.

Media Release



CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION OF VICTORIA LTD

‘It leads to fears he is deliberately hiding data that is an embarrassment to his school funding models from parliamentary and public scrutiny.’

Mr Elder said Senator Birmingham had doubled down on seeking funding arrangements that give special deals to wealthy independent schools in recent months.

‘The Minister appears to have rigged the terms of reference for his review of SES scores – a review that was fiercely resisted by independent schools and only came about at the insistence of the Senate crossbench – with a Sir Humphrey-style set of terms of reference that lead to a forgone conclusion.

‘Senator Birmingham appears to have deliberately excluded the notion of “capacity to contribute” from the review to try to ensure that the wealthiest schools in the country do not have their abundant private income taken into account in determining their government funding.

‘Senator Birmingham seems to believe that providing \$750 million each year to wealthy schools that already reach their student resource standard using private income – as opposed to supporting low-income schools – somehow constitutes “needs based funding.”

‘Other than the Minister, the only people who support this proposition are the wealthiest independent schools.

‘In excluding the notion of “capacity to contribute” from the SES review, Senator Birmingham ignored all stakeholder feedback on the draft terms of reference – making the consultation process a sham – and also ignored the advice of independent consultants Victoria University.

‘Senator Birmingham appears to be trying the same trick with his forthcoming review of disability data.

‘His draft terms of reference attempt to focus the review on the loading amounts received by students, rather than the accuracy, consistency and integrity of the data, including the anomalous data submitted by wealthy independent schools.

‘Once again, Senator Birmingham’s main focus appears to be to avoid scrutiny of his own special deals.

‘No wonder he’s so keen to accuse others of his own practice.’

The backgrounder Catholic Education funding from Menzies to Gonski 2.0 and beyond is attached

Further information: Christian Kerr, 0402 977 352

Media Release



CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION OF VICTORIA LTD

Backgrounder: Catholic Education funding from Menzies to Gonski 2.0 and beyond

Federal funding for Catholic schools has been bipartisan policy in this nation for half a century.

Malcolm Turnbull and Simon Birmingham have undermined this bipartisanship – and trashed one of their party's founder, Sir Robert Menzies', greatest legacies.

Catholic schools operate from a sense of mission, not to make a profit, and seek to provide a quality, low-fee, open and inclusive values based education to all who want one.

The federal Coalition's funding policies threaten this mission to provide low cost, inclusive non-government schools – undermining another fundamental Liberal Party principal, parental choice in education.

Their new arrangements have already cut the amount of funding attracted by over 600 Catholic schools nationally and some 180 here in Victoria between this year and 2017 and threatened to make low-fee, inclusive, non-government schools unviable in many parts of Australia.

To rub further salt in the wounds, the Turnbull/Birmingham plan overtly discriminates Catholic schools that have had their funding cut. These schools only receive six years to adjust while independent schools are given a decade. This discrimination, which was teased out by Catholic education, rather than revealed the government, and only after the Gonski legislation was passed – will cost Catholic systems over \$1 billion between now and 2027.

Secret Education Department modelling leaked during the Gonski legislation debate last year showed the Turnbull/Birmingham package will leave Catholic schools \$4.6 billion worse off over a decade.

In contrast, with his letter this week Bill Shorten has re-committed to ensuring the type of education parents chose for their children is supported by government and acknowledged the importance of the future survival of low-fee, inclusive non-government school systems in Australia.

Labor has recognised that Catholic education has legitimate concerns over the fairness of current funding arrangements with Mr Shorten's statements that his party is 'concerned about the impact of the existing SES score methodology on Catholic parish primary schools' and that Labor supports 'the Catholic education sector in advocating for alternative arrangements to better support these schools.'

The Opposition Leader's further remark 'in government, we will implement changes to the role of "capacity to contribute" in school funding, including the SES scoring methodology' – along with his pledge to work with Catholic education 'to respond to the findings of the SES review currently underway' – again acknowledges our deep concerns about both the policy and process followed by Mr Turnbull and Senator Birmingham.