



Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT

Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission Inquiry ***Religious Educational Institutions and Anti-Discrimination Laws***

24 February 2023

Preamble

This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) representing the parents and carers of more than 275,000 students in approximately 630 Catholic schools in NSW/ACT.

CCSP thanks the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) for the opportunity to make a submission into the Inquiry ***Religious Educational Institutions and Anti-Discrimination Laws***.

This submission is made on behalf of the more than 150,000 families who choose to send one or more of their children to a Catholic school in NSW or the ACT. Catholic education is highly valued and respected in Australia and is responsible for the education of millions of students over 200 years.

CCSP is the body officially recognised by the Bishops of NSW and the ACT representing the interests of parents and carers of children and young people in NSW and ACT Catholic schools. The work of the Council is guided by the principles of parental choice, equity, and social justice. CCSP provides leadership, advocacy and support to the parents and carers of children and young people in all Diocesan and Congregational Catholic schools in NSW and the ACT.

The term 'Parents,' as used in this submission, is intended to cover both biological and adoptive parents and other carers who are the primary carers of children and young people, including grandparents and recognised kinship carers.

This submission is in response to the ALRC's published Consultation Paper and Terms of Reference. In particular, it addresses the four general propositions A-D.

Feedback

Parents are the first educators of their children.¹ A parent's right to choose a school that reflects and supports their values and beliefs must be protected and respected. The rights of the school to engage staff who support, respect and witness those values and beliefs must also be protected if the very core of the system parents have chosen and continue to choose with growing demand is to be sustainable.

CCSP acknowledges that schools must follow the relevant curriculum, however; schools must have the capacity to engage staff who are able to deliver content according to the Catholic ethos. This means having teachers and staff who respect, uphold and give witness to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Catholic Schools are more than an educational institution that exists on the school campus. They are communities including past, present and future students, families, local residents, parishioners, religious and clergy.

Catholic school communities support students and families in their spiritual and moral development. More Christian and Catholic school graduates believe their school has prepared them for finding a sense of meaning, purpose and direction in life than government school graduates. (74% Christian, 59% Catholic 51% Government).²

This is supported by many Australian parents who prioritize their child's socio-emotional development over academic success. A high proportion of Australian parents use wellbeing as a key indicator of success of a school.³

It is widely accepted that early intervention for wellbeing issues can have a better long-term outcome for individuals. The wellbeing support offered by Catholic schools to community members when they are undergoing devastating incidents such as natural disasters and personal tragedies supports positive mental health and wellbeing.

Faith formation in Catholic School communities develops children and young people who have responded to the numerous disasters that have occurred in NSW and ACT. These student led activities are supported by staff who exemplify the ethos of the Catholic faith by their actions.

- Spelling bees to raise funds for families in Lismore
- Aboriginal students from Diocese of Wagga Wagga supporting students in Wilcannia following outbreak of COVID-19.
- Students in a primary school in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle who connected with older members of their community by writing letters of support, comfort and hope during the Covid-19 pandemic lock down period.
- Students from a secondary school in the Archdiocese of Sydney who provide outreach support to students and the broader community in disadvantaged areas of NSW through the provision of mentoring and food support.
- Student led initiatives that involve the collection and distribution of sanitary products for disadvantaged women.

Parents and carers, as primary educators of their children, want to exercise their right to select an education setting for their child that upholds their values and beliefs. Any reform to the anti - discrimination laws needs to be balanced by the rights of parents and carers to choose an education for their child in a religious institution that reinforces the values they seek to instill in their children.

Catholic school communities are welcoming and inclusive. The ***Life and Dignity of the Human Person*** is a key principle of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Catholic schools welcome students and families of all faith traditions or none at all. All students, regardless of their background, gender identity or faith are welcome in Catholic schools. In recruiting staff, who have a privileged role in supporting and shaping young people into contributing, respectful, community minded citizens, it is vital that schools retain their right to select staff who not only support Catholic Social Teaching but bear witness to this through the expression and upholding of the mission, vision and values of the Catholic school.

Parents have chosen to send their children to Catholic schools so they can be educated in the Catholic Faith. It is important to preserve and respect their freedom of choice.

Conclusion

As the officially recognised body representing the interests of parents and carers of children and young people in NSW and ACT Catholic schools, CCSP requests that the ALRC Inquiry amend the General Proposition C proposition to ensure that:

- Catholic schools should be free to be Catholic and operate and teach according to their ethos.
- The ability of faith-based schools to operate, employ and teach according to their faith needs to be consistent in every state and territory to meet the needs of all Australian students.
- Changes to current anti-discrimination laws must go hand-in-hand with the introduction of laws to protect religious freedom and the rights of parents and carers to choose education that supports their values and beliefs.

ⁱ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 2223.

² https://carduseducationsurvey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Cardus_Australian-schools-and-the-common-good-summary-report_Final.pdf

3. Brookings Institute Family School Engagement Playbook Final

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Family_School_Engagement_Playbook_FINAL.pdf