



Presbyterian Church of Australia

in the State of New South Wales

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**Submission on the ALRC Consultation Paper on Religious Educational Institutions
and Discrimination Laws
submitted by the Presbyterian Christian Schools Board
on behalf of
Casino Christian School,
Nambucca Valley Christian Community School and
St Andrew's Christian School, Clarenza, Grafton**

1. Who we are?

While separate submissions are being made to the ALRC by the Presbyterian Church of Australia, this submission is specifically being made on behalf of the Church's three Low-Fee Christian schools that currently educate 956 students across the communities of Casino, Grafton and Nambucca Valley in northern New South Wales.

These three schools are governed by the one School Board. They have been growing in student enrolments over the past 10 years, with the three schools reporting significant increases in enrolments this year in response to community demand.

All three schools are genuine communities of faith, with all teachers and staff active members in their local churches.

We are truly distressed to read that the ALRC Consultation Paper suggests reversing the current position in Commonwealth Law through introducing limits that will mean that as religious educational institutions, our schools will not be able to preference, in good faith, persons of the same faith as the Presbyterian Church.

2. Our parents?

While we have parents and students coming from a broad range of economic backgrounds, many of our parents and families come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. All are seeking our schools to provide safe school environments, high educational standards, and values that can help their children to grow into future faithful leaders and parents in their own families and communities.

Many of our parents come from Christian backgrounds and specifically choose to enrol their children at one of our Christian schools because all our staff are Christian and they are seeking to educate their children in a community of Christian faith.

Equally, many of our parents come with no faith, but are keen to ensure their children learn in a community of faith, in which their children are taught how to demonstrate grace, justice and mercy provided through the teaching and modelling of Jesus Christ.

3. Our students?

The proposed changes outlined in the Consultation Paper seek to ensure that students will not be refused enrolment on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital or relationships status, or pregnancy. Our Christian schools do not do this.

Our students love to come to school to learn, and to enjoy their learning as part of a community of learners. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds, some from fractured families, some from indigenous communities, some who have struggled in their previous school and who are looking for a second, or third, chance.

Some are struggling with their own identities and sense of self. Some have gender dysphoria. Indeed, we have had two students in the past two years advise us, with their parents, of their decision to change their gender. We embraced both students and their families and we continue to respect and value them. Indeed, we embrace all students in their diversity, and work with them and their families in their search for learning and for meaning in their lives.

Consistent with providing caring and safe communities of faith and learning, our three Low-Fee Christian schools have developed and implement strategies to ensure every student feels valued, respected and connected within the school community. This includes the protection of the students' physical safety, social connectedness and inclusiveness as well as protection from bullying, regardless of its nature or basis.

As part of the mission of Christian education and in line with our statement of faith, we aim to help each student to know the reality of God's love for them, accept His role as Redeemer and Saviour; and assist them in fulfilling their God-given potential in all aspects of their person: academically, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually.

4. Our teachers and staff?

All our teachers and staff are essential in their Christ-centred belief and practice in supporting their students. All are practicing Christians who are actively participating in their local churches. All love Christ and seek to educate their students to the highest educational standards within a community of prayer and support.

It is essential that our Christian schools maintain the right to preference people of Christian faith in the selection of staff.

The ALRC proposes in the Consultation Paper that a school can only preference on the basis of religious belief or activity if that is a 'genuine occupational requirement' of the teaching role. This means that our three Christian schools will never be able to preference in 'general' teaching roles – comprising most of our teaching roles – because religious belief or activity is not a formal requirement of these roles.

For example, it is essential to the ethos and practice of our three Christian schools that each school is free to choose a maths teacher whose behaviour and values are demonstrably aligned with the Christian beliefs and tenants of the Presbyterian Church

over a maths teacher whose behaviour and values are not so aligned.

The teachers and staff in all three of our Low-Fee Christian Schools express a “Christ-centred world and life view” in their daily engagement with students, parents, and with one another. This is the value of a true community of faith.

5. Our schools as communities of faith?

It is a well settled legal principle that the advancement of religion is a charitable purpose because religion promotes the welfare of the community generally. Accordingly, the Church holds all its property, including the three Low-Fee Christian Schools, under a charitable trust for the advancement of religion in accordance with the tenets of the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales.

The purpose of our three Christian schools is not only to impart academic knowledge, but also to live in accordance with the Christ-centred values that are at the centre of our faith. In addition to teaching the prescribed curriculum, our schools provide religious activities that seek to demonstrate to students what a life lived in accordance with the tenets of the Presbyterian Church looks and feels like in practice.

Having teachers and other staff at the school who can participate in these activities as a faith community, whether these staff are engaged in religious teaching or not, helps to realise each school’s religious purpose. These activities help to promote understanding by students that faith is not merely an adjunct to the educational purpose of the school, but an integral part of the school. This is why many parents consciously decide to enrol their children in our schools.

In summary, the ALRC recommendations contained in the Consultation Paper will seriously impact the rights and the practices of our three Low-Fee Christian Schools in educating students in accordance with our doctrines, tenets and beliefs. We are deeply concerned that the proposal outlined in the paper will remove valid protections for our Christian schools, and will have serious impacts on the spiritual health and wellbeing of our students, their parents, and our staff.

We thank the ALRC for the opportunity to make this submission.

Mr Jeffrey R Falls
Chairman
Presbyterian Low-Fee Christian Schools Board

24 February 2023