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Catholic schools fear ‘death by a thousand cuts’

From Bishop Anthony Fisher OP
Chairman, Catholic Education Commission of New South Wales

The funding cuts to Catholic schools outlined by the NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli, this week appear to cut much deeper than was first thought, according to the Chairman of the Catholic Education Commission of NSW, Bishop Anthony Fisher OP.

On closer examination of the Government’s announcement on Tuesday, we are increasingly alarmed that the loss of revenue to non-government schools could be much greater than the $116 million announced by the Government. We don’t know how the Government’s figures were arrived at but we do know that two-thirds of those schools are Catholic schools, Bishop Fisher said.

It has now become apparent that:

- There will be no allowance in State grants for teacher salary increases or other inflation over the next four years so that the value of the grants in real terms will decline each year;
- There will be no allowance for increased enrolments: for fast-growing areas such as Western Sydney, where schools expect to grow from one to two or from two to three streams during the freeze period, this means a drastic cut in State aid those schools attract to the system per student; and
- Commonwealth grants, upon which the Catholic and independent schools are even more reliant, could fall further because they are presently linked to State grants.

It is still far from clear, but this could amount to a double whammy for us: no allowance for teacher salary increases or increased enrolments in State Government grants and a consequential threat to Commonwealth grants as well. We hope the Commonwealth can reassure us here, Bishop Fisher said.

The Federal Government’s current supplementation level is around 5%. These State cuts could drive that down to below 3%. While we are still trying to estimate how large that hit will be, it could be several times the numbers so far estimated by the State. We seek clarity from the State Government on the real cuts our schools will be facing as a result of its decision.

While we recognise the tough financial circumstances for the State Government, we are mystified that schools have become the Government’s priority area for cuts. We also wonder where the waste and mismanagement is that the State Government seems to think we can cut out of the school system.

The bottom line will be higher fee pressures on struggling families or staff and curriculum reductions or both. That spells real pain for families, for school communities and, ultimately, reduced opportunity for our children. Even after any freeze is over, it will take years to restore the financial health of Catholic schools.

We want world class education for all our kids. No one wants New South Wales – the dumb State – on our number plates.

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