The SES scores of non-government schools will be used to determine the amount parents are expected to contribute. **Photo: Michele Mossop**

**Joanna Mather**

Catholic schools in the ACT have won a special funding deal critics claim threatens to undermine the core principles of the government’s Gonski reforms and spread to other jurisdictions.

The agreement means all ACT Catholic schools will be treated as though they have a socioeconomic status (SES) score of the average, 101, affording them greater gains than private schools.

By 2019, when the new school funding model becomes fully operational, students in Catholic systemic schools will be receiving $2790 more those attending other non-government schools, the Independent Schools Council of Australia claims.

It has written to federal School Education Minister Peter Garrett demanding an explanation for an apparent departure from a commitment to ensure all students are treated equally regardless of the type of school they attend.

The letter, a copy of which has been obtained by *The Australian Financial Review,* also notes an offer by federal Education Department secretary Lisa Paul of an extra $12 million for the “distinctive circumstances” that apply in the ACT, as well as the prospect independent schools would be treated in the same way as Catholic schools if they agreed to form a “system”.

“The decision to discount the SES of Catholic systemic schools . . . to SES 101, while ignoring independent schools, is being seen as more based on sectarian and political interests rather than on methodology emerging from the new funding model,” the letter says.

“The so-called broken funding model which the new funding arrangements purport to fix is now set to continue in perpetuity in the ACT for Catholic systemic schools – in a more extreme form than previously.”

The SES scores of non-government schools will be used to determine the amount parents are expected to contribute.
contribute to the cost of their education. They range from 65 to over 130, and the average is 101. The higher the score, the less government support.

The ACT, NSW and South Australia are the only jurisdictions to have signed up to the National Plan for School Improvement even though Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s offer to states and territories expires on Sunday.

The federal government needs to get legislation for the new funding arrangements through the Senate this week if there is any hope of securing change before the September 14 election, when a Labor defeat is widely expected.

The review panel headed by businessman David Gonski recommended a nationally consistent funding system based on individual need.

The panel was critical of the inequities built into the system by deals done by Catholic and independent schools with previous governments to ensure they were not disadvantaged when they joined new arrangements.

As the Gonski review noted, these guarantees totalled $615 million in 2010, of which almost $492 million was paid to Catholic systems and $123 million to independent schools.

Although the final Gonski report did briefly mention the possibility of an average SES score for school systems, the government has not been vocal in promoting this as an option.

Andrew Wrigley, the executive director of the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT, said school populations were unusually homogenous in the ACT. Systemic Catholic schools would be given a uniform SES score of 101, when in fact the average was closer to 116, he said.

The average for the remaining non-government schools is 120, but each will be treated on their individual score unless they accept the government’s offer to form a system.

In NSW, the Parramatta Catholic Diocese says if all schools are given an SES of 101, its system will only be about $2 million worse off.

But without the assurance, the loss will be $21 million.

“The indication is . . . that we could be treated at 101,” Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta executive director of schools Greg Whitby said.

A spokeswoman for Mr Garrett confirmed there would be a “weighted average approach” for NSW systemic Catholic schools. “The approach reflects the sector’s desire to manage the capacity to contribute across all schools.”

The Australian Financial Review

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