

February 2024

## **ASPA submission to the Senate Cost of Living Inquiry**

### Terms of Reference

On 28 September 2022 the Senate established a select committee, to be known as the Select Committee on the Cost of Living, to inquire into and report on:

- a. the cost of living pressures facing Australians;
- b. the Government's fiscal policy response to the cost of living;
- c. ways to ease cost of living pressures through the tax and transfer system;
- d. measures to ease the cost of living through the provision of Government services; and
- e. any other related matter.

### Submission

The Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA) advocates on behalf of public secondary school leaders and the communities they lead across Australia.

The most obvious and immediate way our governments can ease financial pressures on families is for all our public schools to be fully funded to 100% of the School Resource Standard (at a minimum) as soon as possible. We don't care how you do it, just please get it done.

Approximately 65% of Australian children go to public schools. Public schools also educate the majority of our disadvantaged young people, but underfunding means we are often unable to target our resources where they are most needed. These issues hit public school students the hardest, and parents are forced to make choices that mean kids miss out on important learning experiences such as in the arts or sport.

With inflation and increasing grocery, energy, fuel and housing costs more and more families are struggling or unable to pay for the basic items required for school. Smith Family research shows a large increase since 2023 in the numbers of families who believe they won't be able to afford everything their children need for school in 2024.

The cost to equip a secondary student at the start of the school year can be well over \$1000. These establishment costs include stationery, textbooks, digital devices, uniforms and shoes. Ongoing costs over the school year include internet access, transport, costs for camps, excursions and other curriculum opportunities such as sport and learning a musical instrument. Recent research by the Futurity Investment Group suggests the average cost to families to educate a child in the public system from this year is more than \$7000. Imagine the burden if you have more than one child, and are a low-income family, or live in a remote community.

The reality is the public schools will often cover shortfalls in the cost for devices, second hand uniforms, excursions and camps, year 12 formal costs, even food, when families cannot. This comes at a cost for underfunded public schools, with funds directed away from expanded curriculum opportunities for students. Many of our schools ask for capped voluntary contributions from their communities to help cover costs, but these are not compulsory, and offer wildly variable returns usually commensurate with the socioeconomic standing of the community. The fact that public schools feel the need to ask for subsidies from their communities illustrates the shortfall in funding provision from governments. The disparity in access to educational provision across our country is obvious.

If public schools were funded in accordance with the Australian Education Act 2013 solutions to ease the cost of living might come through:

- Provision of breakfast programs and cheaper, healthy food options at school
- Supply of low cost devices to secondary students such as the ACT Government's Chromebook distribution
- Access to the internet at home through the provision of dongles, as was the case in many jurisdictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Explicit provision to supply uniforms, shoes and equipment for struggling families

Some state & territory governments offer vouchers or ad hoc programs for these, but often they'll come from state & territory education budgets - which means leave for schools to use to target.

- DGR Tax advantages for schools other than library or building funds
- increased capacity for schools to cover the costs of school camps, excursions and curriculum resources without imposing unreasonable costs on families
- Investment in the allied health and inclusion support services that many families cannot afford or access otherwise
- Stocks of stationery; texts; arts, IT, VET, design technology, and science supplies; sport and musical equipment and other learning materials that can be supplied by the school, ensuring every student has what they need to learn from day one.

We can learn from other countries. Following the example of top performing education systems such as Estonia, where they have prioritised investment in equity and a system that is completely free of charge for students, ASPA believes Australia can aim higher. By focusing efforts on transforming investment into school communities where it is needed most, Australia can address some of the financial burdens for families and improve outcomes for all students.

It's about ensuring every young person gets a fair go, no matter what their parents financial capacity is. The disparities in educational outcomes between our advantaged and disadvantaged students are getting worse, and increasing cost of living pressure will force more families to make choices that mean their kids miss out. We are deeply concerned by these widening gaps. Fully funding public schools is the cornerstone of offering each child every opportunity to succeed, and is in the best interest of our nation.