

MEDIA RELEASE

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‘Catholic schools should be free to be Catholic’ Catholic education chief to tell Joint Parliamentary Committee

National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) executive director Jacinta Collins will tell a Joint Parliamentary Committee Inquiry today that “Catholic schools should be free to be Catholic”.

Ms Collins will appear with NCEC deputy director Sally Egan at the Inquiry considering the long-awaited Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 and related bills.

“Parents should have the right to choose a school for their children that reflects their values and beliefs,” Ms Collins said. “And for Catholic schools this means being able to preference the enrolment or employment of students or staff who are Catholic, or who are willing to support and share in the ethos and mission of the school.”

“We know from a recent survey that 63% of the general population, 82% of Catholics and 79% of parents with children in Catholic schools believe religious schools should be ‘entitled to require employees to act in their roles that uphold the ethos and values of that faith and the school should be free to favour hiring employees who share these values’.” *

In a [submission to the Inquiry](#), Catholic education says part of the challenge for Catholic schools is to retain a ‘critical mass’ of Catholic students and staff.

“The Australian Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter, [200 Years Young](#), released in the bicentennial year, recognises the challenges for Catholic schools of a changing and ever-increasingly secularist society in maintaining a Catholic identity and mission,” the submission reads.

“Part of this challenge is for Catholic schools to retain a ‘critical mass’ of Catholic students and staff in our schools, even as we welcome those from other religious backgrounds or none.”

Ms Collins said in seeking the freedom to operate in accordance with their religious beliefs, Catholic schools do not discriminate, and are not seeking to discriminate, based on an individual’s personal attributes.

“This is not what the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 is legislating. It’s about protecting religious rights, not discriminating against people who don’t support the same religious view.

“Religious freedom deserves the same protection as other rights in Australia, ensuring a fair and reasonable balance with other protected rights,” she said. “The codification of the universal right of freedom of religion is needed to address this gap in Australian legislation.”

Ms Collins will also tell the Inquiry that the harmonisation of legislation for religious protection is needed to prevent over-reach of state legislation on faith-based schools.

“The recent introduction of amendments to the Victoria Equal Opportunity Act limit the ability of faith-based schools to continue to operate according to our ethos,” Ms Collins said.

Despite the Victorian Attorney General’s admission that religious providers don’t discriminate, the Victorian Labor Government has moved away from its own policy platform to push for legislation that it says is “symbolic” in nature.

“The introduction of proactive Commonwealth legislation is needed to ensure religious rights are protected in the same way as other rights in Australia.”

Background

The Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 and related bills are the subject of two inquiries before parliamentary debate resumes in February.

Catholic Education is responding to these inquiries through written submissions and appearances at the inquiries.

There are 1,755 Catholic schools in Australia, educating one in five or over 777,000 students and employing over 100,000 staff.

For more information visit www.ncec.catholic.edu.au

** Finding from a large community issues survey on a range of issues from school funding to religious freedom undertaken by a respected national pollster, John Utting Research (November 2021).*

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