
MINISTER'S ACTIONS DON'T MATCH RHETORIC ON SYSTEM AUTONOMY

Education Minister Simon Birmingham's comments supporting the autonomy of school systems don't quite mesh with some of his actions in relation to systemic Catholic, government and independent schools, National Catholic Education Commission acting executive director Danielle Cronin said today.

"On a number of occasions this week, Senator Birmingham has stated that he has 'respect' for the independence of Catholic school systems to allocate funding according to their needs-based models and that he supports the retention of system autonomy," Ms Cronin said.

"The Minister is indeed allowing systems to continue to distribute Commonwealth funding based on local assessments of their schools' needs, but the rollout of his new school funding policy has undermined this autonomy in other important ways."

Ms Cronin said Senator Birmingham took the highly unusual step of writing directly to school principals – across sectors – to explain how much funding he had allocated to their school, presumably in a bid to gain public support for his policy.

He then published those figures on a website, outlining how each school's funding would change between this year and next year, and over the next 10 years.

"Let's set aside for a moment the fact that some of the numbers published on the website are clearly misleading, if not false," Ms Cronin said.

"This unprecedented step of announcing how much Commonwealth funding will flow to individual systemic schools over the life of this policy ignores the crucial role played by approved school authorities – those charged with receiving, distributing and accounting for Commonwealth funding."

Ms Cronin said the website and the Minister's letter have confused principals and parents.

"Catholic school principals have received a letter suggesting their funding will increase next year, but based on the funding they are receiving this year and the funding Senator Birmingham intends to allocate to them in 2018, that is not true in hundreds of cases," she said.

"The Minister's letter encourages principals to share this information with their school communities, but the principals whose letters contradict their reality are not willing to pass this confused message on to their teachers, staff and school families."

Ms Cronin said the Minister's decision to bypass school systems was also a source of concern for government schools and the other non-government schools that are part of systems.

"New South Wales Department of Education secretary Mark Scott agrees that the numbers on the website and sent to school principals are not to be trusted," she said.

"Writing to principals in his state, Mr Scott said they should not 'rely on these figures for future planning or budgeting purposes'. The same message has been shared with Catholic school principals, but the Minister should never have misled them in this way in the first place."

The Minister has created an unfortunate situation in which school communities might turn on one another, Ms Cronin said.

"When the funding they receive from their Catholic school system or the government department differs from that published on the Minister's website, they will ask 'Why?'. There are always very legitimate reasons for the funding distributions in systemic Catholic, government and independent schools to differ from the Government's SES-based estimate. But that won't stop a sense of injustice being felt in many school communities," she explained.

"Senator Birmingham's ill-considered attempt to prosecute his case through schools risks creating division within school systems and shows a lack of respect for school system autonomy."