



Promoting parent participation in public preschools and schools

South Australian election 2018

SAASPC is a strong and committed supporter of public education and a voice for South Australian parents and community members.

It is the state body for parents from government preschools and schools

On 17 March 2018 South Australia is due to hold its state election. This provides an opportunity for the SA Association of School Parent Communities (SAASPC) and its affiliates to lobby political candidates and parties on the issues important to ensuring that all children and young people have access to an excellent public education system, no matter where they live or their background or their circumstances.

Following is SAASPC's position on the issues we have identified as important and which we want the next government of South Australia to address.

Funding of schools

It is the responsibility of governments to completely fund a free, universal and public system of education of the highest standard which will ensure that all students, irrespective of age, race, culture, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, intellectual capacity, physical ability and geographic location will reach their full potential. Access to the system should not be dependent on capacity or willingness to make a financial contribution. Nor should, as is increasingly occurring, schools be reliant on parent fundraising or teachers contributing classroom resources purchased from their own pockets. We note that South Australia is the only state that has a legislated school 'fee' or Materials and Services Charge.

SAASPC supports a student centred funding model that links school funding with student needs.

SAASPC's position

- Funding of education by government should be at a level that mitigates the need for parental fees, charges and contribution
- The legislated minimum Materials and Services Charge should be abolished so any fee that is charged is voluntary

Parental/family engagement in student learning and Parental involvement in preschool and schools

Parents are partners in schooling because of the role they play, from birth onwards, in their children's development and learning. Engagement with their children's learning contributes to better learning and wellbeing outcomes. Raising the awareness of the benefits of engagement of parents in their children's education – and providing principals, teachers and parents with the skills to do so – is a continuing major challenge. In addition parents can play a valuable role in the operation of preschools and schools through representation on an affiliated committee/parent group, governing council and management committee, helping with preschool and school classroom activities such as listening to reading, learning assistance program, social and fundraising events, canteen, camps, excursions and working bees.

Preschools and schools need to be supported in their interactions with parents. Too often governments and education departments appear to recognise the importance of parental engagement but take no real steps to put their rhetoric into practice by specifically funding training and resources to ensure those interactions have a positive effect on the learning of children and young people. Within the Department for Education and Child Development a unit for parental engagement and parental involvement in schools should be established with staff at a policy, research and advice level. Parent Liaison Officers should be funded to work within Partnerships throughout all South Australia to assist in the development and implementation of parental engagement strategies in preschools and schools.

SAASPC's position

- Funding should be provided to establish a Parental Engagement Unit within DECD
- Parent Liaison Officers be funded to work with preschool and school clusters/Partnerships
- SAASPC be funded to employ a Parental and Community Engagement Officer
- Schools should be encouraged to provide an appropriate space where parents can meet

Governance in school and preschools

A growing number of concerns have been raised with SAASPC about the service provided by DECD on governance — the training is basic and low quality, provided by DECD employees who have no personal experience of governing councils and who are seen as ‘from the government’ and not independent; not detailed enough; and, on occasion, incorrect or incomplete; telephone support is difficult to access, calls are rarely answered directly, information provided is often vague and conflicting, and messages either responded to after days or weeks, or on occasion, not at all. Governing council members urgently need an accessible helpline which provides reliable, timely advice. Resources on the DECD website are difficult to locate and are inadequate.

Many preschools and schools therefore seek advice from SAASPC on governance issues and while information can, and is, provided, this places a considerable burden on SAASPC as its funding provided by the Minister does not include the provision of such a service.

It should be noted that SAASPC is already funded to provide free three hour training sessions for governing council nominees on merit selection panels for principals and preschool directors – evaluation of these sessions shows they are considered to be extremely valuable, in particular because the sessions are delivered by parents who are independent, knowledgeable and experienced presenters.

In addition concerns have been expressed to SAASPC about the implementation of the recommendations in the Independent Governance Review undertaken for the State Government by the Hon Bronwyn Pike in 2014. Certainly the information on the DECD website does no more than acknowledge that each of the 14 recommendations has been endorsed in principle. Apart from the establishment of a very short term committee little appears to have been accomplished; certainly as the peak parent organisation in SA we have not been kept informed of the progress of implementation of the recommendations.

SAASPC's position

- SAASPC be funded to provide services on the governance of schools and preschools including a Training Officer, a helpline and the development of online resources for information and training
- That DECD review the implementation of the recommendations of the Independent Governance Review to ensure that all have been implemented to a satisfactory degree and that the information on its website be updated to indicate the steps taken in the implementation process

Support for students with special needs/disabilities

All students have the right to access the highest standards of education and to institutional understanding of and specific support for special needs, cultural practice, economic disadvantage, gender, aboriginality, academic ability and other recognition of individual diversity. Many public preschools and schools struggle to support students who have special needs. A lack of adequate and coordinated support places high levels of stress on staff, students and their families; dealing with a number of different agencies can create additional stresses for families.

SAASPC's position

- Funding should be available to ensure any student, wherever they live, has access to the best education and care that will ensure their needs are met and their potential is maximised
- Schools are properly equipped, and teachers are supported and resourced to develop all students across the full educational spectrum
- All public schools, including primary schools, should have access to school counsellors

New preschools and schools and Maintenance of preschools and schools

The government should ensure it systematically monitors changing demographics within the state. When residential development is proposed, the government should ensure that the first schools that are provided are *public schools*. Any non government school provided thereafter should only be considered when it meets registration requirements under the Education and Early Childhood Services (Registration and Standards) Act. It would make planning sense if schools could be converted to other public uses if in time they are not required but retaining possibility of reconversion to a school if required.

Attractive, safe, sanitary and energy efficient public preschool and school buildings, grounds, facilities and equipment which optimise student learning and contribute to occupational health and safety should be provided and maintained. Drop-off zones are necessary to ensure children can arrive and leave school safely, and to relieve traffic congestion around schools that were not designed to cater for inflated populations.

We welcome the announcement in May 2017 by the Department for Education and Child Development that utility bills for all public schools and preschools will now be fully funded.

SAASPC's position

- The government should ensure that developers of residential areas make space and funding provision for public preschools and schools of an appropriate size and type to serve the local community
- Funding should be available to preschools and schools to ensure that proper and timely maintenance of all buildings and grounds can be undertaken and new buildings provided and that the safety of children is taken into account

Information technology

Over the past decade there has been a significant increase in the use of technology in schools to assist teachers to ensure their students receive a high quality education. The rapid development of digital technologies has led to new initiatives in preschools and schools, such as the introduction of electronic whiteboards, tablet computers and an increasingly digital focused curriculum. In September 2016, the Federal Government announced the roll out of a Digital Literacy School Grants initiative; aimed at supporting schools to encourage and facilitate the implementation of the new Australian Curriculum: Digital Technologies. Students now, more often than not, turn to internet search engines instead of the indexes of books to conduct research for assignments. All students, but particularly those learning via distance education require reliable access to the internet in order to access an optimal education.

The Australian Curriculum has been developed in a way that is heavily technology focused. ICT, used as a tool throughout the curriculum, and Technology, as an isolated study area, is fast, interactive and diverse, requiring sufficient funding and resources to adequately deliver it.

In addition, the transition to online NAPLAN will not be easy for some schools as they struggle to provide suitable and sufficient hardware and reliable access to the internet.

SAASPC's position

- The development and communication of a strategy that details the Department for Education and Child Development's commitment to constantly upgrading and updating ICT in preschools and schools
- The replacement of hardware and devices and upgrade of bandwidth and network infrastructure regularly to ensure that preschools and schools are keeping pace with the technological requirements of students and staff
- The Government to ensure that all schools have adequate hardware and network infrastructure prior to the rollout of state-wide Online NAPLAN so that no student is at a disadvantage due to the testing medium

Bring Your Own Devices

It is widely acknowledged that technology plays a huge role in students' everyday lives and should, therefore, be an integral part of their learning. However, for most schools, it is financially impossible to provide every student with state of the art technology.

A number of schools have implemented Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) schemes. BYOD is considered an attractive, cost effective (for the school and DECD) method for establishing a 1:1 ratio; recognising that many students already own devices that are superior and more up to date than those available in schools. However, a BYOD policy places the onus on the family to provide an educational resource. This may disadvantage students from low income families who struggle or cannot afford to participate and who, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, will be less likely to have internet access at home. We recognise that many schools and principals work hard with parents and the school community to ensure that students without a BYOD are not disadvantaged and that appropriate and affordable purchasing schemes are put in place.

SAASPC is of the view that if ipads, laptops or other technology are required in order to deliver the curriculum then it is the responsibility of the school to provide what is needed – the cost should not be pushed onto parents.

SAASPC's position

- The Department for Education and Child Development to develop a general policy for all schools on BYODs
- The Department for Education and Child Development to ensure that when individual schools are considering BYODs that all parents are given the opportunity to be involved in the decision making processes of the school
- The Department for Education and Child to guarantee that no student will be forced to participate in a BYOD scheme at school whether they are financially unable to, if they conscientiously object to it, or for any other reason
- That no student be disadvantaged if they do not have their own personal device
- The government to ensure sufficient funding is available for schools to be able to deliver optimal technology based lessons, including supply of devices, hardware, software and network access

Consultation by the Department for Education and Child Development

SAASPC, and other key stakeholders, are growing increasingly concerned by the lack of consultation from within DECD; people tasked with developing policy, procedures and resources have in the past sought advice from those of us who are 'experts' in our fields. Unfortunately it seems that this advice is no longer valued and those of us outside of DECD who often have many years of experience and knowledge and access to those at the grassroots level of schools, are ignored. Too often this somewhat arrogant attitude, often coming from people with no, or little hands on educational experience, means that the work produced by DECD is nowhere as good as it could, or should, be.

The DECD website states 'Consultation involves a genuine opportunity for all relevant people or groups to actively contribute and provide feedback in the development of departmental policy

documents'. We believe that DECD needs to be more proactive in seeking feedback – putting a document on its website is simply not enough if appropriate groups have not been notified; and likewise 'consulting' with those located in the Head Office only is unlikely to result in a wide range of useful or meaningful feedback.

SAASPC's position

- The Department for Education and Child to develop and implement a policy of genuine and meaningful consultation with stakeholders particularly when developing or revising policy, procedures and resources

Ministerial public education advisory committee

In 2014 SAASPC called for the establishment of a high level public education advisory group reporting to the Minister to consist of representatives of SAASPC, principal associations, students, teachers and other staff, academics, employer groups and others. We envisaged that this group would provide expert and diverse advice on issues affecting public schools and be a forum for ideas by providing a grassroots link to the community. Its first task we said should be to establish a clear, compelling and realistic policy framework for public education in South Australia. We note that the PEAC was established and are pleased to see that the Statement of Public Education has been developed with some resources and a campaign to follow. We are however, extremely disappointed that our request for membership of this committee has been refused by the Minister. We are of the view that while all, or most, members of the committee may well be parents they are NOT representative of parents – that representation can only be done by a peak parent body.

SAASPC's position

- That a representative from SAASPC be invited to be a member of the Public education advisory committee