
Schools are essential, not-for-profit services - A business approach to COVID-19 won't work

Catholic education has welcomed the Australia Government's JobKeeper wage subsidies to support families facing job losses and stand downs. However, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is concerned the support does not work for essential services such as low fee schools.

NCEC Executive Director Jacinta Collins said under the current arrangement high fee private schools will access federal wage subsidies to retain crucial staff, but low fee non-government schools will be left out.

"A business approach to schools simply won't work," said Ms Collins. "High fee Independent schools will be assessed as losing more income because they are starting from a much higher base."

"In low fee schools, staff salaries make up the majority of school expenditure, so a loss of even 15 or 20 per cent of fee income – well below the required 30 per cent threshold – will have an enormous impact on our staffing provision at a time when schools are being asked to deliver both onsite and remote learning.

"JobKeeper doesn't solve the challenges low fees schools are experiencing; we need a solution that works for the whole sector.

"We are ready to work collaboratively with the government, and the rest of the sector, to come up with something effective and fair," she said.

"Schools are essential services and are being called on by the government to stay open and operational, Catholic schools are already experiencing strain on our resources as demand increases for fee relief and schools respond to the challenges of delivering remote learning and teaching.

"To respond effectively to this global crisis we cannot afford to lose teachers or staff, particularly in disadvantaged communities, which are likely to be the hardest hit by higher unemployment and stand downs.

"Catholic schools are already in discussions with government about the significant impacts experienced in regional and indigenous boarding schools. These communities need greater support," she said.

Ms Collins commended school communities on their response to the pandemic.

"Our schools and families are to be commended on how they have managed significant impacts in school operations in the period leading up to the end of Term 1," she said. "We are grateful for the support of Catholic parishes and services in a range of areas including pastoral care, counselling, social welfare, outreach and support for the homeless."

The Catholic education sector is the largest non-government school provider in Australia, educating more than 764,000 students – or one in five Australian students - in 1,746 schools, the vast majority of which are low-fee schools.