

VIEU SUBMISSION

CECV DRAFT POLICY – LENGTH OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

VIEU welcomes the opportunity to have input into the CECV draft policy on Length of the School Year.

1. Summary of VIEU’s position

- 1.1 VIEU believes that there should be consistency generally between the non-government sector and the government sector. Equally, there should be recognition of the particular nature of Catholic schools and respect for long established patterns at the local school level which recognise the extraordinary commitment and work of staff. The language of the policy should be recommendatory in nature rather than prescriptive.
- 1.2 VIEU does not support the arbitrary quantum of 194 school days proposed in the draft policy. The Education and Training Reform Act 2006 is silent on the number of school days in a year. A long-standing RSB policy permits a 10% tolerance in respect to non-government schools and the number of student instruction days. There is no legislative change that necessitates a change to custom and practice in non-government schools.
- 1.3 The high levels of work intensification experienced over the last few decades in teaching should be addressed by greater rather than lesser latitude in respect to the times available to teachers that are student free. Such days are utilised for either collegial planning, professional development, report writing, moderation, or parent teacher interviews.
- 1.4 VIEU acknowledges the need for parents to be advised well in advance about their school’s calendar of activities, including student free days and term commencement and end dates. It does not believe that it is appropriate however for a decision that does not breach custom and practice or general industrial or legislative provisions to have to then be submitted again to the Diocesan Director or the Catholic Education Office. These bodies are not the actual employer.
- 1.5 Similarly, whilst VIEU acknowledges that half day closures pose particular problems for working parents, it does not support the total ban on them proposed in the policy. Like full day closures, the rationale for them is always educational and always in pursuit of achieving better outcomes for the school community. VIEU does not support the requirement for schools to have to submit detailed applications should they have reached agreement with their own employer and community about either a half day or whole day closure that exceeds those “approved”.

- 1.6 The choice of a Catholic school by parents is an endorsement of what they believe a Catholic education is able to provide for their child. The “whole” education that staff deliver in Catholic schools exceeds any form of face to face scheduled hours. The additional “religious” dimension is a factor that is reflected in the total life of the school. The policy should reflect and respect the enormous contribution made by staff in Catholic schools.

2. Underpinning Principles

- 2.1 VIEU supports the underpinning principles outlined in the draft policy. VIEU agrees that the relationship between parents and schools is one of partnership and the needs of all stakeholders must be balanced. Students in Catholic schools should receive a quality education and communication should be timely and clear to parents. The principle of subsidiarity should inform decision-making in schools.
- 2.2 However, the conclusions arrived at in the draft policy are not necessarily congruent with these principles. The imposition of a minimum number of days of student instruction and limits on student free days, combined with the requirement to seek approval from a central authority in relation to any variation undermines the principle of subsidiarity. Further, the underlying assumption about such a high cap is that quality is synonymous with length. The cap ignores the comprehensive programs and experiences that Catholic schools provide both inside and outside scheduled class times.
- 2.3 With respect to balancing the needs of all stakeholders, the strong emphasis in the draft policy is on accommodation of the needs of students and parents at the expense of the needs of staff in providing a quality education.

3. Decision-making

The onus on schools to submit an application to either the canonical administrator or the Diocesan Director detailing how an additional student free day will “raise standards and/or will lead to improved student outcomes” is overly bureaucratic. Schools should not have to justify such additional days and decision-making processes at the local level that exist should be respected.

4. Parents Choose Catholic Schools

- 4.1 VIEU believes that when parents choose Catholic schools, they do so because they have an appreciation of the quality of the program that will be offered for their child and an understanding that such a program is not only defined in the formal hours of instruction. Such a holistic approach needs to be underpinned by flexibility at the local school level

in order to meet such goals. The success of Catholic education is for a large part delivered by the quality of the staff that is employed.

- 4.2 Whilst Catholic schools are common in religious foundation or beliefs, they are also valued by many for their individual ethos or culture. Their charters reflect the ethos of their foundation orders and they place different emphases on particular aspects of theology, social justice, and education that reflect their outlook and values. The emphasis on such values is reflected in the way that staff work and provide for students a particular education that is not only secular. It embraces a broad range of activities that extend beyond the core curriculum.
- 4.3 VIEU supports the principle of schools informing parents in a timely manner of their term dates and any school day or half day closure dates. This ensures parents know the days that they will have to make alternative arrangements for their children.

5. Quality Education

- 5.1 The prescriptive basis of the draft policy ignores the comprehensive range of quality educational activities that take place in Catholic schools on a regular basis that extend beyond the scheduled school hours, and are generally achieved through a compact of goodwill between staff and their employer. Examples of such programs are:
- School camps and excursions
 - International educational tours
 - Retreats
 - Religious events – sacramental days, special masses, parish functions
 - School fetes and fund-raising activities, working bees
 - Speech nights
 - School productions – eisteddfods, concerts, plays, orchestral activities
 - Sporting and co-curricular activities – inter school competitions, debating, athletics
- 5.2 Within the school program, students also receive a range of additional activities and programs that build upon their personal development. Examples are:
- Specialist VCE programs, work experience visits and monitoring
 - Lunch time programs – computers, sports, pastoral, tutoring
 - Mentoring and peer support programs
 - Individual counselling and support of students
- 5.3 The profession places high demands on accountability and reporting to parents. In addition to regularly scheduled parent teacher interviews and reports, staff regularly organise:

- Parent information tours and evening sessions
- Transition programs for Prep and Year 7
- Parent Open Days

- 5.4 The school year has its peaks and troughs, and there are times when even with the best of intentions the capacity to sustain educational quality is impacted upon, particularly in the middle to upper secondary years. The timing of exams, work placements, and vocational programs in the senior secondary years places high demands on staff at peak periods, and there is an inevitable departure of a large cohort of the school population either after exams are concluded or because jobs and training have been found. The yearly timetable set by schools recognises this ebb and flow.
- 5.5 VIEU acknowledges that local discretion is recognised in the draft policy in respect to attendance requirements for the transition year of preparatory schooling and students in the senior secondary years. The same discretion should be applied more generally to all schools in order to accommodate the continuous cycle of school programming and accountability processes.
- 5.6 It would be more appropriate for the policy to set a guideline of 6 student free days as the *minimum* number of school closure days.

6. Religious Dimension

The religious nature of Catholic schools requires staff to not only be conversant with mainstream curriculum, but to be well developed professionally in other areas that embody the religious dimension of their practice. Such a requirement logically necessitates more staff professional development rather than less in order to ensure a cohesive and well understood practice of the school's core values.

7. Work Intensification

- 7.1 Work intensification has increased significantly over the last few decades, and the goodwill demonstrated by staff in Catholic schools could be fairly described as reaching crisis point. Staff work tirelessly to achieve tremendous outcomes for their students. Arrangements reached at the local level that enable earlier finishing times, or additional closure days should be acknowledged and extended to a greater number of Catholic schools rather than diminished in any way. The proposed professional development activities that the Victorian Institute of Teaching will require of teachers renewing their registration will also place an additional burden.
- 7.2 A recent survey of Catholic secondary schools conducted by VIEU demonstrates that the majority of schools provide many more student-free days to meet their needs than the limits proposed in the draft

policy. Most also finish earlier than their counterparts in government schools. Neither of these two facts is a breach of any government regulation in respect to the number of days of student instruction.

- 7.3 78% of schools surveyed had 7 or more student free days, 46% had 10 or more student free days with 21% having 13 or more student free days. The uses for such days were common - professional development, report writing and parent teacher interviews. 86% of the schools reported regular commitments of staff on weekends, evenings, and in their own time. The comments from respondents were consistent in their expressions of concern about already high to excessive workloads, low morale, and more need for professional development rather than less. There were questions as to why staff would be prepared to stay in Catholic education should there be further diminution of their conditions and the need for a better understanding of the already extensive commitments they make as educators.
- 7.4 Practices such as early school closure or the provision of additional student free days that recognise (and unofficially seek to partially compensate) the professionalism and commitment of staff would be, VIEU imagines, opposed by both the staff and principals of these schools. There has been no public outcry or rationale for why such arrangements need to be altered. Schools manage these issues appropriately. Should current flexibility be unilaterally reduced, the level of “voluntary” behaviour that underpins so much of the schools’ total programs would also disappear. This would have more impact on the quality of education students achieve than an arbitrary setting of a cap.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

VIEU recommends that the draft policy be amended as follows:

1. The reference to 194 minimum student instruction days be deleted. A more reasonable guideline should be to maintain the 10% tolerance which already exists for Catholic and independent schools.
2. Student free days be set as a minimum of six days per year.
3. Decisions made at the local level should not have to be re-submitted for approval to the CECV.

To undermine the “compact” which currently exists between staff and schools with respect to the provision of education, extra and co-curricular activities, or seek to diminish the status quo by not recognising the extraordinary work of staff would be to the detriment of Catholic education. It would inevitably lead to erosion of the good will upon which so much of the qualitative experience of students in Catholic schools is based.