

VICTORIAN INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION

**SUBMISSION
TO**

**ENROLMENT POLICY REVIEW
OF THE
CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE,
ARCHDIOCESE OF MELBOURNE**

**Authorised Tony Keenan
General Secretary
Victorian Independent Education Union
29/4/05**

1. This submission to the Enrolment Policy Review of the Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Melbourne is made by the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU). VIEU is the professional and industrial organisation representing teachers, principals and school officers across Victoria's 500 Catholic schools, as well as other non-government schools and educational institutions. VIEU has 14,500 members with the majority in Catholic schools. The Committee of Management of VIEU has given careful consideration to the issues raised in the Consultation Paper, and the union is pleased to make this contribution to the Review.
2. VIEU recognises that the Archdiocese and Catholic Education Office will establish enrolment policy within the context of the Catholic Church's understanding of its mission in education generally and the principles which support the schooling system the Church conducts. At the same time, the Catholic schooling system operates within the framework of publicly provided and funded education in Victoria and makes a significant contribution to Victorian society and culture, and to the life chances of young people, through being the largest non-government schooling system. VIEU understands that Catholic schools are, simultaneously, integral to the life of the Catholic community of Victorian and major contributors to the fabric of Victorian society and culture. The observation in the Consultation Paper that 'the Catholic education sector is a community provider of a public service' is strongly endorsed by VIEU and in our judgment is a significant perspective to bring to bear on enrolment policy issues.
3. VIEU welcomes the current review and especially endorses the desire to ensure a high level of consistency and transparency in enrolment policies and procedures. VIEU considers it vital that Catholic schools be models of good practice in complying with the various State and Commonwealth legislation relating to equal opportunity and prohibition on age, sex and disability discrimination. This is so not only because of the desirability of avoiding litigation which is harmful to the school and stressful for those involved, but importantly because principles of justice and equity, and a genuine commitment to the dignity of persons covered by such legislation should characterise the values of Catholic schools.
4. The review takes place within a context of Victorian government reviews of the Education Act and governance arrangements in state schools, still inadequate levels of state funding to Victorian Catholic schools (although an imminent funding improvement should be noted), a general decline in government school enrolments share over time and public controversy around federal funding regimes.

VIEU is supportive of strong and principled relationships between Catholic and public schools – together these systems educate some 87% of Victorian students drawn from all socio-economic groups and geographical areas. Consistent and fair enrolment policies contribute to school stability, and stability of inter-school and inter-sector relationships. VIEU notes the emergence of staff redundancies of some significance in recent years in a number of Catholic schools and considers that the provision of a full and rich curriculum for students and the retention of valued and experienced staff in Catholic schools are strongly assisted by an open and inclusive enrolment policy that is not subject to fluctuations. On the assumption that all students attending a Catholic school (Catholic, other Christian denominations, non-Christians) are invited to respect the Catholic ethos of the Catholic school, promote its values and participate in its life, then there is considerable value in enrolment policies ensuring that the schools are full (in accord with class-size policies). The entitlement of all students in Catholic schools to access a well resourced and rich curriculum is strongly assisted by such an approach, as is the right of staff to pursue stable and rewarding careers within Catholic education, contributing to its strength and vitality.

5. Meaning of ‘Catholic’ for enrolment purposes

VIEU supports the current Archdiocesan policy (section 1.2, pp14-15 of Consultation Paper) that avoids the use of external measures gauging parental faith commitment as criteria for enrolment purposes. The recognition in the policy of the practical difficulties and dubious validity in employing such measures is supported. The focus on the school working with students and parents, within the context of the Catholic ethos of the school and the school’s pastoral program, to strengthen family, parish, community and school relationships is preferable to the application of crude external measures.

VIEU notes advice received from interstate, where in one case parental attendance at mass at the parish deemed to be relevant to the family, was assessed at the end of year 10 to determine the right to ongoing enrolment. In this case, very considerable stress on senior staff, school instability, regrettable instances of flawed conclusions, with no discernible benefits to school life resulted. The policy has since lapsed. Such an approach would be unfortunate. VIEU supports the current policy, which is in accord with widespread Catholic practice in other states.

6. Enrolment caps

Accordingly, VIEU does not support the imposition of an artificial cap on

non-Catholic enrolments, be it 7%, 15% or any other figure. VIEU agrees with the argument that there is no convincing rationale for any such figure, believes there are other more credible ways to ensure the centrality of the specifically Catholic ethos of the schools, and considers that principals and senior staff get put into unfortunate positions when having to adhere to such artificial caps. Nor is such an approach sensitive to the differing and changing demographic circumstances of various Catholic schools. To the extent permitted by overall financial viability, VIEU supports Catholic education having a consistent presence across Victoria, catering for all socio-economic groups and communities. The viability of schools should not be jeopardised by restrictive enrolment policies, which when intersecting with demographic change in an area, could lead to short-sighted decisions to close schools. Schools once closed are difficult to reopen when circumstances change. The right of Catholic children to receive a full Catholic education is supported by the presence of other students whose families are happy to respect the ethos of the Catholic school. Equally the right of the Church to maintain its schools in the face of poor funding regimes is important.

Broadly VIEU supports enrolment arrangements governed by the application of general principles rather than artificial caps.

7. Catholic schools have important public purposes as well as personal and religious ones, and the connectedness of Catholic educational practice with the best values of the wider culture is an important dimension that should not be lost; ecumenical, inter-faith, common values of justice, the Good Samaritan principle etc are all important ingredients in Catholic schools providing a deep and sophisticated foundation to life that should not be undercut by rigid enrolment policies that effectively have exclusion as their goal, or consequence.

8. Ongoing commitment to students

VIEU considers that students, once enrolled in Catholic schools, should attract the ongoing support of the system to their continued enrolment for a full comprehensive education, P-12, where possible.

The general order of preference set out on pp 6-9 has an acceptable logic to it at the point of first enrolment, especially where places are limited. Thereafter, however, non Catholic students should not have their place jeopardised by further application of policy, certainly not within the span of primary education, or secondary education, and preferably not in moving from primary to secondary education either. Such a policy of ongoing commitment to a student, and family, once they have been accepted would also be a gentle encouragement to Catholic families to commence Catholic schooling at primary school rather than secondary school level.

As previously mentioned, VIEU has seen a significant number of staff redundancies in Melbourne primary schools over recent years. These have occurred as a result in a decline in enrolments in catholic primary schools. An enrolment policy that provided for an ongoing commitment to a P to 12 education in Catholic schools for students and families may help in reversing this enrolment decline.

9. VIEU is inclined to support the concept of school catchment area, rather than designated parishes, and school of origin rather than parish of origin in going from primary to secondary.
10. Given the importance of full compliance with relevant legislation, and the intrinsic demands of justice, VIEU considers that Principals should be enabled to advise the central authority and request appropriate resources when accepting students with disabilities. While this would no doubt occur within a general resource and funding framework, there should be appropriate avenues to access reasonable resources to underpin the enrolment of such students.
11. VIEU would support appropriate pilot programs which explored more formal links or forms of co-operation between adjacent Catholic and public schools to enhance community cohesion and mutual understanding. The specific ethos of the differing schools can be preserved while appropriate resource/program sharing can enrich each school and contribute to stability of enrolments and community cohesion.
12. VIEU notes that some Catholic dioceses include a provision in their enrolment policies which provides that children of non Catholic staff employed in Catholic schools are assured a place in Catholic education. As employees in Catholic education, staff are required to demonstrate commitment and support of the Catholic ethos of their school and as such these families would be able to demonstrate the necessary support and respect referred to in paragraph four of our submission. We strongly urge that the Melbourne Archdiocese consider such a provision.