

What the Parties Say on Funding for Catholic Schools

The 2019 Federal Election will be held on Saturday 18 May 2019.

The major political parties have made a number of announcements on education in the lead-up to and during the election.

At a national level, Catholic education has been communicating directly with major political parties on their education policy positions, particularly in relation to fair and certain funding.

The National Catholic Education Commission received responses to the following questions from the three major parties:

1. As the Commonwealth is the predominant funder of non-government schools, how will your party ensure Catholic schools remain affordable for most Australian families?
2. What support will your party provide to help Catholic and other non-government schools upgrade learning facilities and keep pace with enrolment growth, given the rising costs of land, construction and classroom technology?
3. What is your party's position on the right of religious schools to retain faith-based exemptions from anti-discrimination legislation in relation to staffing, enrolment and policy matters?
4. Catholic schools are providing an increasing number of pre-school services for families that choose Catholic education. What will your party do to support this important stage of early childhood education?

The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd has prepared this handy guide to the parties' responses for your use.

Full copies of the parties' responses can be found at <http://www.cecv.catholic.edu.au/2019-Election>.

It is not unreasonable to expect that education will continue to feature as an important election issue and that the major parties may make further education policy announcements in the coming weeks. You may wish to visit the websites of the parties for any updates.

1. As the Commonwealth is the predominant funder of non-government schools, how will your party ensure Catholic schools remain affordable for most Australian families?

COALITION

Only the Morrison Government believes that parents should be able to choose the school that best meets the needs of their child. We are delivering on our commitment, by providing a record \$310 billion in recurrent funding to all schools over the coming decade. This is 62 per cent more funding per student, on average, and includes an extra \$37 billion in funding over the decade. In the 2019–20 Budget, the Morrison Government delivered a record \$21.4 billion for schools for the 2020 school year, an increase of \$8.5 billion since 2013.

Importantly, we are backing our commitment to parental choice, by providing a \$1.2 billion Choice and Affordability Fund over the next 10 years as schools transition to new funding arrangements. The Fund helps non-government schools and school systems to invest in their schools in ways that support parental choice, which can include keeping fees affordable, improving student wellbeing and support, lifting student performance, assisting schools in regional and remote areas and in drought affected areas, and providing assistance to help schools to transition to needs-based funding.

Importantly, in addition to providing record funding, we have legislated funding for schools that is truly needs-based, and enshrined in legislation the autonomy of systems, including Catholic Education Commissions, to determine how best to distribute that funding to your individual schools, because we understand that it is the systems which run the schools that best know the needs of your students and your schools.

LABOR

Labor is committed to funding all schools based on a proper assessment of need, while also supporting parental choice. Federal Government funding is essential to keeping a Catholic education accessible and affordable for all families who choose Catholic education for their children. Labor fought alongside Catholic school parents and teachers when their funding was slashed by the Liberals.

Labor strongly believes that low-fee Catholic schools make a valuable contribution to schooling in Australia, and that low and middle income families should be able to choose a faith based education in a way that doesn't put unacceptable pressure on the family budget. We understand that many Australian families are struggling under crippling cost of living increases while wages stagnate across the country. Labor will work with Catholic school systems to ensure that Commonwealth funding arrangements support reasonable fee arrangements in Catholic parish schools.

In addition to Labor's clear commitment to match the government's current funding arrangements, Catholic schools will benefit from a range of other initiatives:

- Labor will establish an Evidence Institute for Schools that will help improve schools and early childhood education centres by ensuring teachers and parents have high quality research at their fingertips.
- A Shorten Labor Government will invest an extra \$300 million to ensure students with disability get the support they need at school.
- A Shorten Labor Government will establish a new National Principals' Academy to give thousands of Australian principals advanced leadership training and support.
- Labor will work with universities, school systems and the teaching profession to improve the quality of teacher education.

GREENS

The Greens believe that federal funding to the school education system should be on the basis of need and equity to ensure that all Australian children have the opportunity to fulfil their best educational outcomes.

2. What support will your party provide to help Catholic and other non-government schools upgrade learning facilities and keep pace with enrolment growth, given the rising costs of land, construction and classroom technology?

COALITION

The Morrison Government is providing record school funding to state schools, to Catholic schools and to Independent schools. In addition, we are establishing the \$1.2 billion Choice and Affordability Fund to address specific challenges in the non-government school sector, such as supporting schools in drought affected areas, schools that need help to improve performance and to deliver choice in communities.

A Morrison Government will also continue to fund the Capital Grants Program to support non-government schools to invest in infrastructure to maintain and improve their school facilities. Since 2013, the Coalition has delivered more than \$1 billion in capital grants to help non-government schools, including Catholic system schools, to build new and upgraded facilities, including new science and technology classrooms, improvements to make schools more accessible for students with disabilities, sports facilities and libraries.

The Morrison Government has increased funding for the Capital Grants Program by 28 per cent over 2018 levels, resulting in an estimated \$890 million of capital funding to non-government schools over the next five years, with the majority of funding going to Catholic schools.

LABOR

Commonwealth funding for non-government school capital expenditure is provided through the Capital Grants Program (CGP). Capital grants are additional to funds provided by State and Territory Governments, non-government school authorities, and school communities, which are responsible for providing and maintaining non-government school facilities. We note that the investment in capital funding for non-government schools increased from 2017 to take account of student enrolment growth. Labor in government will maintain the commitment to capital funding through the CGP and ensure funding is targeted to population growth areas to ensure access and choice across the entire community.

GREENS

The Greens will increase the Capital Grants Program funding to \$400 million a year and expand it to include public schools so that all schools can build the teaching and learning facilities they need.

3. What is your party's position on the right of religious schools to retain faith-based exemptions from anti-discrimination legislation in relation to staffing, enrolment and policy matters?

COALITION

The Morrison Government's commitment to striking an appropriate balance is clear in our proposed amendments to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. We have sought to overturn exemptions introduced by Labor so we can make clear that discrimination against students is not acceptable, while at the same time ensuring religious educational institutions can teach and maintain rules consistent with their faith.

We recognised that parents need to be informed and empowered in a way that allows them to exercise their rights to make informed decisions regarding when it is appropriate to exclude their children from any particular teaching in a class that is specifically inconsistent with that family's morals or religious beliefs. It is also a feature of the Australian Federation that classroom attendance policies are primarily a matter for the States and Territories.

If re-elected, a Coalition Government will take a national leadership role by developing model Guidelines to form the basis of a national framework that regularises and makes clear parents' and guardians' rights to request the removal of a child from a class that contains instruction on religious or moral matters, to ensure their rights are consistently understood and applied in all Australian schools, regardless of jurisdiction.

LABOR

Labor respects the right of all Australians to practise their religion freely. In our platform we declare: "Labor supports the appropriate protection of the religious freedom of all people."

The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Tanya Plibersek, made our position on the rights of religious schools very clear in Parliament when she stated, "Schools are also entitled to have rules that ensure staff – and I'm quoting one of the organisations that wrote to me – don't 'deliberately and wilfully behave contrary to the values of the school.'" (Hansard, 16 October 2018, p.35).

Labor is not proposing to amend the indirect discrimination provisions of the *Sex Discrimination Act* that allow educational institutions to impose reasonable conditions, requirements or practices in accordance with the doctrines, tenets, beliefs or teachings of a particular religion or creed.

At the same time, Labor is committed to reducing discrimination in Australian society where it can be done in a responsible way that respects freedom of belief and conscience.

We do not believe that freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination are mutually exclusive.

To that end, Labor believes that students and teachers and other staff of religious schools should be protected from discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality and other attributes covered by the *Sex Discrimination Act*.

GREENS

The Greens support legislation to enshrine the protection of religious belief. However we also believe that actions (including teachings) must be limited when those actions interfere with the right of Australians to live free from discrimination, even when those actions are based on religious doctrines, tenets and beliefs. This would include actions in relation to the hiring and firing of staff and the enrolment or expulsion of students. We believe that there are sufficient safeguards already contained within our anti-discrimination laws to protect religious teachings, and we believe that where potential conflicts between religious beliefs and the right to be free from discrimination exist they should be considered under a comprehensive charter of rights.

4. Catholic schools are providing an increasing number of pre-school services for families that chose Catholic education. What will your party do to support this important stage of early childhood education?

COALITION

The Morrison Government will provide more than \$440 million to states and territories for preschool in 2019 and \$450 million in 2020, under the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education .

This also includes funding to develop and implement strategies to increase preschool attendance rates among disadvantaged and indigenous children.

The extension of the National Partnership will ensure almost 350,000 children in Australia have access to 15 hours of quality early learning a week, or 600 hours a year, in the year before school.

This extension takes our overall investment in preschool to \$2.8 billion since elected.

LABOR

Labor will establish a new \$1.75 billion National Pre-School and Kindy Program, which will guarantee every three and four year old will be able to access the early education they need for the best start to life.

Labor will work with all relevant stakeholders including the States and Territories and non-government sector to deliver the program. We are mindful that the implementation of the program will occur across a range of contexts that vary from State to State. We are committed to ensuring all children can access preschool in every setting in every State and Territory, and that parental choice is respected.

We are determined to ensure this policy benefits all three and four year olds in non-government as well as government and community run preschools and kindies, long day care centres and school site located early learning centres, which have become a feature of the Catholic school sector in recent years.

Labor believes parents and carers should be free to choose the setting that best suits their child's needs.

GREENS

The Greens will ensure universal early childhood education for 3 and 4-years-olds, and extend the available hours of preschool from 15 to 24 per week. Our commitment to extending the National Partnership Agreement for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education on an ongoing basis will genuinely ensure every child, everywhere in the country, has optional access to 24 hours a week of a quality early learning program.

In addition, the Greens' policy on child care will make it fee free for 80% – or four out of five – families in Australia. We will also abolish the activity test to access the childcare subsidy. To ensure access in areas of high First Nations populations and high levels of disadvantage, the Greens will allocate a proportion of the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) for quality community-controlled and culturally safe integrated early years' services. We will develop and implement a workforce strategy with the early learning sector and unions to achieve professional pay and better working conditions for educators and carers. The Greens will also provide grants worth \$200m for centres in areas of high need to reduce waiting lists.