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VALUES AND OTHER ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

A STUDY AMONG PARENTS WITH CHILDREN AT NON-
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

QUALITATIVE INTERIM REPORT

PREPARED FOR

THE AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL
AND
THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SEPTEMBER 2007

CONTENTS

Introduction		3
Methodology		5
Main findings		8
Theme 1: Choice of school	9	
Theme 2: The important values	12	
Theme 3: Partnerships	16	
Theme 4: Funding issues	18	
Detailed presentation of evidence		21
Theme 1: Choice of school	21	
Theme 2: The important values	29	
Theme 3: Partnerships	40	
Theme 4: Funding issues	44	
Hypotheses		50
Appendix I Discussion outline		
Appendix II Nine Values for Australian Schooling		

INTRODUCTION

This study was commissioned by the Australian Parents Council in February 2007, with funding by the Department of Education, Science and Training as part of the Australian Government's values education program.

The objective was to explore attitudes to a range of issues among parents with children in non-government schools across Australia. The main focus of the study was to be on their perspectives on values education, the values parents wished to see inculcated in their children, and the role they expected school to play in that process. In addition to this, the study explored parents' attitudes to choice of school, the concept of family-school partnerships, and school funding.

The study has two phases, qualitative and quantitative. This interim report is from the qualitative phase. It is based on 21 focus group discussions conducted among parents with children in Catholic and Independent schools in all States and Territories of Australia.

In this report we:

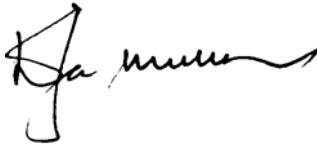
- describe the methodology used;
- present the main findings;
- present a detailed discussion of the qualitative evidence, and
- develop hypotheses to be tested in the quantitative survey.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to conduct this study. We would like to thank the Australian Parents Council for inviting us to undertake it, and in particular the Executive Director, Ian Dalton, and the Office Manager, Leonie Mitchell, for their invaluable advice and support.

We would also like to thank the executive officers, staff and volunteers in all the APC State and Territory affiliates for the excellent work they did in recruiting the focus group participants, arranging venues and providing refreshments. Also in the States of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia the affiliates organised moderators to conduct the groups. In all other States and Territories the groups were moderated by Denis Muller.

Finally we would like to thank the parents who attended the groups. They gave generously of their time and of themselves. They were thoughtful, insightful, and unfailingly pleasant to work with. We trust our report has done them justice.

We would be happy to discuss the contents of this report at any mutually convenient time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Denis Muller", is positioned to the left of a vertical red line.

Dr DENIS MULLER

Principal

METHODOLOGY

The population of interest for this study was parents with children at non-government schools in all States and Territories of Australia. Focus group participants were drawn from this population by the affiliate organisations of the Australian Parents Council in each State and Territory, according to specifications drawn up by the researchers and approved by the APC.

These specifications were as follows:

- Group size: Eight.
- Gender balance: Not more than five nor fewer than three of the one gender.
- Sector: In some jurisdictions combined Catholic and Independent groups were recruited; in others, separate groups from these sectors were recruited according to the convenience of the affiliate. This was not considered to be an important variable. Moreover, many participants had, or had had, children in a government school or a special school, so the sectoral spread was wide.
- School level: Participants were drawn from primary and secondary schools. Again this was left to the discretion of the affiliate, and in the event virtually all groups had parents with children in both primary and secondary schools.

Age was not included in the specifications, it being considered irrelevant to this study.

Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds participated in the study, although special efforts to recruit them were not made.

Twenty-one groups were conducted, between May and September 2007. Their locations and characteristics are shown in Table 1 overleaf. It will be seen that there were 13 Catholic groups, 7 Independent groups and 1 combined Catholic and Independent group.

The discussion outline used is included as Appendix I.

All groups were audio-taped on the basis that the tapes would be used only for the purposes of this research and would be erased afterwards. Nothing said would be attributed to an identifiable individual or school.

TABLE 1: LOCATION AND COMPOSITION OF GROUPS

STATE	SCHOOL LEVEL	SCHOOL SECTOR	LOCATION
New South Wales	Primary and secondary	Independent	Sydney
New South Wales	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Sydney
New South Wales	Primary and secondary	Independent and Catholic	Tamworth
Victoria	Secondary	Independent	Melbourne
Victoria	Primary	Independent	Melbourne
Victoria	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Melbourne
Queensland	Secondary	Independent	Brisbane
Queensland	Primary	Independent	Brisbane
Queensland	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Brisbane
South Australia	Primary	Catholic	Adelaide
South Australia	Secondary	Catholic	Adelaide
South Australia	Primary	Catholic	Riverland
Western Australia	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Perth
Western Australia	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Perth
Western Australia	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Perth
Tasmania	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Hobart
Tasmania	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Hobart
Tasmania	Primary and secondary	Independent	Launceston
Australian Capital Territory	Primary and secondary	Independent	Canberra
Australian Capital Territory	Primary and secondary	Catholic	Canberra
Northern Territory	Primary	Catholic	Alice Springs

A note about our respondents

Many of the parents we spoke to were, or had been, involved in school-related activities either as volunteers in the classroom, workers in the canteen, assistants in sporting or artistic fields, or as active members of the parents' and friends' organisation.

They were able to be actively involved for a variety of reasons:

- some enjoyed economic circumstances that gave them choices about how to spend their time;
- some placed such a high priority on their children's education that they were prepared to forgo other interests or activities to be involved;
- some were volunteers by nature, people who tended to get involved generally in community affairs.

However, we also spoke to many parents who were not involved in school-related activities.

What all our respondents shared was a commitment to the education of their children. They also shared in common many views about the issues we raised with them. It was not as if those who were actively involved necessarily had a different set of values or outlook on life or priorities from those who were not actively involved.

There was a high degree of consensus around many of the issues discussed: choice of school; values; roles of families and schools in the development of young people; partnerships in education and, to a lesser extent, on funding issues.

For these reasons, we believe that although a substantial proportion of our respondents were atypical of the parent population as a whole because of their level of involvement in school-related activities, the views expressed in these focus groups are likely to be shared by parents generally.

This hypothesis will be tested in the quantitative phase.

MAIN FINDINGS

Parents with children in non-government schools consciously regard the education of their children as a high priority. Indeed, some see it as the one gift they can make to their children which will outlive themselves. In this sense, some place it almost on the same level as providing life itself and the means to sustain life. Others, who may not accord it quite that status, nonetheless see the education of their children as of great importance for which they are prepared to make material sacrifices. Virtually all the respondents in this study would comfortably fit this latter description.

Parents with children in non-government schools also place a high value on the concepts of choice and personal autonomy. They feel it is right that they should be able to choose their children's school, and they express the wish that every parent had that choice – in government and non-government schooling alike. This is underpinned by a lot more than mere consumer power. Among many of our respondents it is underpinned by a deeply held belief in the primacy of the individual and in the right of every child to a decent education.

Our respondents recognised -- and often explicitly stated -- that they were privileged to have been able to make a choice about their children's schooling. Many thought it a serious deficiency in Australia's approach to school education that this choice was not available to everyone. Their position was not that of a neo-conservative or economic-rationalist; quite the reverse. It was expressed in terms of social equity and social justice: every child was an individual with particular needs and, in a just and equitable society, every child would have those needs met by a responsive and high-quality education system.

On this as on other issues, we heard the voice of what we will call "moral liberalism". By this we mean a world view based on commitment to the conventional moral code of a Western society coupled with recognition of the primacy of the individual. This world view is above politics, but of course it has political implications, and our respondents expressed political judgments based on this "moral liberal" view of the world. These judgments were about many things other than education, and flowed naturally from the discussion about values which lay at the heart of this research. We will come to them in detail presently.

For now it is enough to say that this world view suffused the responses we heard from the great majority of our parents on matters concerning the four big themes of this study:

- choice of school;
- the values they wished to see inculcated in their children;
- the concept of partnership between home and school, and
- the funding of school education.

Theme 1: Choice of school

Parents with children in non-government schools celebrated the opportunity to choose a school for their children and, as noted above, wished every parent had the same opportunity. A few had been in a position at some stage where choice had not been available to them because of circumstance: they had been posted to another country or to a remote part of Australia and they had had to make do. For the most part, however, they had been able to exercise choice for both primary and secondary schooling.

The big factors in their choice were:

School and class size. Many parents wanted a small school with small class sizes, certainly when their children were in primary school. They feared that otherwise their children would get “lost in the system”, that their individual needs would not be recognised, or that they might not prosper in the hurly-burly of a large school.

The individual needs of each child. Parents saw their children as individuals and wanted this individuality recognised by the school. Many parents had their children at more than one school because their children were different from one another and therefore had different needs. In some cases this influenced whether the child went to a single-sex or co-educational school. Where the child had special needs arising from disability, illness or developmental problems, the child’s individual needs were a big, often decisive, consideration.

“Feel” of the school. Parents were concerned to see their children were happy, and they thought the best chance of achieving this was to send them to a school where the

“feeling” was warm, the principal knew each child, the teachers seemed motivated, and there was an atmosphere of caring.

Balance between academic and other qualities. Most parents wanted their children to come out of school well-rounded, with a social conscience, the capacity to be decent citizens, and take their place as productive members of society. Academic standards were important but personal development was at least as important, if not more so.

A sense of partnership. Virtually all the parents we spoke to wanted the school to reinforce the values of the home and to be willing to work with them in the development of their children.

Religious or cultural affiliation. Parents who wanted their children to attend a school for religious or cultural reasons placed this very high – in many cases at the top – of their criteria for choosing a school.

Curriculum offerings. In secondary school especially, the needs of the child for particular subjects was commonly a large factor.

Closeness to home. This tended to be of considerable importance to parents when choosing a primary school, but not so important for secondary.

Gender. For the parents of girls in particular, there was a quite widespread view that girls did better in single-sex schools mainly for academic reasons but also because of what they saw as a healthier social atmosphere. However, this was one area where the individuality of the child played an important part in parents’ decision-making: what might be good for one child might not necessarily be good for another.

While these were the big factors in choosing a school, there were others, not so common but for the parents involved they were influential:

“People like us”. These parents wanted their children to go to school with other children from similar socio-economic backgrounds, with whom they might forge lifelong friendships.

Family history. For some parents, the fact that they had been students at the school – and sometimes so had their own parents and other relatives – meant that the choice had almost been made for them.

Educational philosophy. Some parents wanted their children taught according to particular education philosophies such as those of Rudolf Steiner, Montessori or Reggio Emilia.

Exposure to difference. The opposite of those who took the “people like us” approach, these parents wanted their children to grow up amidst the religious, cultural and social diversity of contemporary Australian society.

Discipline. Some parents placed a high value on clear boundaries enforced with strong, though humane, discipline.

Fees were not permitted to be a decisive factor in the choice of school, except in one or two cases where the fees at the preferred school were simply out of reach.

A few of the parents we spoke to were affluent and able to afford the fees without difficulty.

Most were not affluent but said they were able to afford the fees by making some sacrifices: the mother returning to work when she would have preferred to remain at home; forgoing holidays or renovations to the house; living simply; not going out much.

Many of these parents also depended to some extent on scholarships, or on discounts given by the school for younger siblings.

A few were doing it tough financially but were determined to persevere because they considered a good education to be the biggest gift they could give their children. These people often used the phrase, “Whatever it takes”.

Theme 2: The important values

Parents were asked to list the values they wanted to see their children imbued with. This, in approximate rank order of mentions, is what they said:

- Respect for self and others
- Honesty/integrity/decency
- Compassion
- Love for one another
- Sense of justice/equality
- Acceptance of others/Understanding
- Self-reliance/resilience/perseverance
- Responsibility/independence
- Service to others/Sense of duty

They were then shown the *Nine Values for Australian Schooling* drafted as part of the National Goals for Schooling in Australia in the Twenty-first Century. The nine, as listed on the official document, are:

- Care and Compassion
- Doing Your Best
- Fair Go
- Freedom
- Honesty and Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

It is clear that there was considerable overlap:

- Compassion
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility

It is also clear that there were considerable differences.

“Doing your best”, “Fair go” and “Freedom” were three concepts that the parents in this study commonly questioned. Many did not accept that these were values in the same sense as “respect” or honesty” were values; rather, they were what happened when people adhered to the real values.

The discussions about these concepts were rich and subtle.

“Doing your best” was seen as a reflection of the effort put in by someone who displayed the values of self-respect, responsibility and perseverance.

“Fair go” was seen as Australian idiom. It described what happened when people displayed the values of respect for others, compassion, a sense of justice, and acceptance of others. It was also widely seen as having been hijacked for political purposes in recent years, and for that reason alone was dismissed by many parents as having no status as a value.

“Freedom” was seen as a right, not a value, and its existence depended on people displaying the values of respect for others, a sense of justice, acceptance of others, inclusiveness and tolerance.

The term “tolerance” also raised interesting discussions, with many parents seeing it as negative. Someone tolerated was not necessarily someone accepted, whereas these parents wished their children to learn acceptance rather than mere tolerance.

More broadly, while parents found the *Nine Values* acceptable, many said there was something lacking, some gel or marrow or animating spirit. They struggled to give it a name. And then

someone did: Love for one another. As one group after another launched themselves spontaneously into this self-same debate, it was always resolved by the inclusion of this idea. This was as true of the secular participants as it was of those with a religious affiliation.

All the values discussed were seen generally as universal and not just Australian in nature. “Fair go” might have been an Australian way of expressing it, but the idea of equal opportunity – which was how most parents interpreted it – was seen as universal even if in some countries, such as England or India, the class or caste systems were seen as negating it.

While parents were clear about the ideal values they wished to see their children grow up with, they saw many ways in which contemporary Australian society failed to display those values. To some extent they felt they could shield their children from these malign influences – mainly by controlling their viewing of television or their use of the internet – but they realized that beyond these limited controls there was little they could do except give a good example. They expected this too from the school.

Parents saw contemporary Australian society as displaying too much selfishness, materialism, injustice and intolerance.

They saw selfishness expressed in many ways: refusing to accept the so-called boat people; defiling the environment to make money; self-absorbed behaviour summed up in the phrase of several respondents as “I, myself and me”.

They saw materialism in terms of “keeping up with the Joneses”, of instant gratification, of having the big car, the big house, the glamorous job.

They saw injustice in the treatment of minorities, particularly Middle Eastern minorities and Muslims.

They saw intolerance in different ways: prejudice against homosexuality; difficulty in accepting cultures different from one’s own; restraints on people’s freedom to speak out on issues such as euthanasia or multiculturalism or on other matters that seemed to require “political correctness”.

A further recurring theme was that in today's Australia there was too much emphasis on rights and not enough on responsibilities.

Whether Australia was a "fair go" society was a moot point. Some parents – especially those who had come here from other countries – thought it was. Most thought it was less of a "fair go" society now than in the past because:

- the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" had widened;
- the culture of individualism had grown at the expense of a sense of community, and
- the national morale had been sapped by long exposure to prosperity, resulting in a loss of the big-heartedness that they saw as having been forged by those who had lived through the hardships of the Depression and world wars.

As a result, while Australians aspired to a "fair go" society, the treatment of disabled people, the poor, racial and cultural minorities – especially Muslims and people from the Middle East -- Aborigines, asylum-seekers, single mothers and other vulnerable groups was seen as evidence that we were falling short of the aspiration.

Several respondents said that Australia was a "fair go" society if you were white, middle class and of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity – and made a point of including themselves.

Other reasons advanced for our falling short included rapacious commercial behaviour and the payment of "immoral" salaries to some corporate executives.

While this was by far the most widely held view of contemporary Australian society, it was not the unanimous view.

Some respondents – especially those who had immigrated – saw Australia as a wonderful land of opportunity where people could get ahead if they were prepared to work hard.

These respondents also drew attention to the existence in Australia of the basic freedoms – speech, movement, association, religion – and said they were evidence of the fact that people did get a fair go.

Some respondents also considered that there was less class-stratification in Australia than there had been in the past, and a greater readiness to accept people of other cultures. This last proposition was seldom left unchallenged by other participants.

On one question, however, there was unanimity: It was primarily the responsibility of parents to instill values in their children, aided and supported by the school. Where the school failed in this, parents were prepared to pull their children out. Some had done so.

Theme 3: Partnerships between family and school

The extent to which a partnership was seen by parents to exist between them and the school depended to a large extent on three factors:

1. The culture of the school, as determined by the principal.
2. In the absence of any whole-of-school culture, it depended on individual classroom teachers.
3. How the parents themselves defined “partnership”.

Where the principal established a culture of partnership, this tended to flourish at all levels. The converse was also true.

Where the principal had not taken a position, it came down to the classroom teacher’s attitude. These attitudes varied from open-arms welcoming to a deep unease at the presence of parents in the classroom.

Some respondents defined “partnership” as meaning the parents were encouraged by the school to become involved as members of the school council and the P&F, in fund-raising and working bees. Where the school drew the line at this, parents tended to be philosophical and still feel they were being treated as partners in their children’s education.

For others, partnership meant being consulted by the school – and in particular the classroom teacher – on what was right for their child, and to be part of finding the solution to any issues concerning the child.

For others again, it meant having reliable communications in the form of newsletters, emails, assemblies, and parent-teacher nights.

For a few it meant full engagement in the school's decision-making processes, including curriculum decisions. These respondents tended to come from parent-controlled schools. For the most part parents did not expect to be involved in matters such as curriculum, which they considered the preserve of the professional educators.

There was a fairly clear line, for most parents, between the preserve of the professional educators and the other parts of school life where they felt parents could legitimately be involved.

For many parents, the sense of partnership, or lack of it, really turned on whether the school and the teachers recognised them as the primary educators of their children, and treated them accordingly.

They judged this by:

- the quality of interactions they had with the school;
- the ease with which they could gain access to teachers and principals if they wished to;
- the responsiveness of the school to their wishes or concerns, and
- the extent to which they received early notice of any issues arising about their child.

Parents who felt well treated in these matters said they did feel as if they were partners. Conversely, parents who did not feel well treated in these matters did not feel as if they were partners.

At the other extreme, some parents had had the experience of being told by the school that so long as the child was in the school grounds, he or she was the school's responsibility and that the parents would be notified of any matter should the school regard it as necessary.

Others said they were involved only at the school's request, and on the school's terms.

Parents tended to be philosophical about this: it had not caused them to change schools; they involved themselves where they could.

What really upset them was if the school had not told them of problems until they had become big, or until some occasion such as a parent-teacher night provided a convenient time to do so.

Overall, most of the parents in this study did feel as if the school treated them as partners, but a substantial number said they did not feel so treated. The picture was very mixed and it is possible that the parents' understanding of what constitutes a partnership influenced their perceptions about whether they were treated as partners by their school.

Generally, the sense of partnership was stronger in primary schools than in secondary schools, but otherwise it was impossible to discern a pattern. It was very much a school-by-school proposition.

Theme 4: Funding issues

Hardly any of these parents knew anything about how their school was funded. Even among those who were on school councils or P&Fs, knowledge was scant and uncertain.

They knew, of course, that fees and fund-raising played a part. Many were fairly sure that some money came from government, but whether from Commonwealth or State/Territory they mostly did not know. Nor did they know whether the money was for capital expenditure or operational costs, or how it was calculated.

A handful – perhaps half a dozen at most – knew there was a formula based on the socio-economic status of the school community. People who knew this much also knew that most of the government money for non-government schools came from the Commonwealth and not the States/Territories.

There was an equivalent lack of knowledge about how money was allocated between government and non-government schools.

In addition to these questions about knowledge of the current funding situation, respondents were asked two questions of principle:

1. Should all non-government schools receive the same amount of government money per pupil, or should some get more than others?
2. Should government money for school education mainly reflect the needs of the school or mainly reflect the individual needs of the particular family or student?

Parents struggled mightily with these questions. The more they discussed them, the more they began to see the complexities involved.

There was a wide range of responses, but the two agreed points of principle can be distilled:

1. Every Australian child has the right to a standard basic grant of government money for his or her education. This applied to children in government and non-government schools alike, and should be the same for both.
2. In addition to the basic grant, extra government funding should be given on the basis of need.

Need was defined in three ways:

1. The needs of the child, arising from factors such as disability, socio-economic disadvantage, or isolation.
2. The needs of the community served by the school, arising from factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or isolation.
3. The needs of the school, arising from factors such as its asset base, access to private money, whether it was a new or long-established school.

For some respondents, the needs of the community were indistinguishable from the needs of the school, but this was by no means a unanimous view. Many saw the two as separate.

In summary, parents were generally of the view that each child should receive the same basic grant for his or her education, topped up by a needs-based payment.

On the second question of principle, on whether government money should reflect mainly the needs of the student or of the school, there was no consensus. There was instinctual support for

basing it on the needs of the student, but when it came to the practicalities respondents could not see a way to do this.

Finally on the subject of funding, not many parents had a sense that the Government was supporting them financially in their choice of school. As a matter of objective reality, of course, they were being supported, but given their lack of knowledge about funding, it is hardly surprising that they had no sense of being supported.

DETAILED PRESENTATION OF EVIDENCE

In this section we set out in detail the evidence on which the findings of this qualitative phase of the study are based.

The material is arranged into the four main themes of the study:

1. Choice of school
2. Values
3. The partnerships concept
4. Funding

There were also two sub-themes.

As an adjunct to the theme of choice, parents were asked about their current perceptions of the schools attended by their children, and how they formed those perceptions.

As an adjunct to the theme of partnerships, parents were asked about their children's schools' performance in conflict resolution.

KEY

Summaries and questions by the researchers are given in 11pt Georgia Roman. Quotations from the respondents are given in *11pt Georgia italics*. Where there is an exchange between respondents, this is separated from other quotations by a box.

THEME 1: CHOICE OF SCHOOL

School and class size. School size was a critical factor for many parents in choosing a school, particularly a primary school. They did not want their children "lost in the system"; they wanted a safe, nurturing environment.

Smaller numbers mean our boy doesn't feel lost or just a number.

A small school, a Catholic school. Not lost in the system, especially for a child who was six to eight months younger.

We did send her for a year to a public school and it was a complete disaster. She went from being one of 126 kindergarten children with a megaphone – "Right, you lot!" – to one of 18 in a very small nurturing family cluster.

A better grip on discipline, better at teaching respect for each other.

I looked for something that would be very secure, and I equated that with small. The pastoral care aspect was very important.

The safety factor. The difference between a private school and a public school is that you have more measures taken to protect the child. There is more supervision than in a public school.

The individual needs of each child. Parents also wanted their children's individuality to be recognised and their needs met. This was even more important where the child had special needs arising from disability, illness, or developmental difficulties.

My eldest is diabetic, and we were going to lose her, literally, at school. They just didn't want to care for her. And we found a school where the principal said, "Absolutely, darling, she will be fine", and we never looked back.

You get more one-on-one. They were looked at as a person.

He has ADHD and he needed to be somewhere that was well-structured. He can get bored and off-track very quickly.

Our boy needs to be noticed so we are sending him to a boys' school where the class sizes will be smaller. He said to me the other night, "Mum, I've put my hand up for ten things at school, from Kinder to Year 6, and I haven't ever got one of them".

I wanted to make sure my children had the opportunity to be themselves and to have their individual needs catered for.

"Feel" of the school. Parents were concerned to see their children were happy, and they thought the best chance of achieving this was to send them to a school where the "feeling" was warm, the principal knew each child, the teachers seemed motivated, and there was an atmosphere of caring.

It has to feel right. I have to feel comfortable with the principal, someone who gives the impression they are looking after the teachers, because if the teachers are happy the children will be happy.

I used to watch the children going into the school and coming out to see if they were happy. At the first school my son went to, you could hear a pin drop and they were not happy children.

The pastoral side was very important. It wasn't just the academic. I wanted my child to be able to enjoy school, feel valued.

I had a good feeling when I walked into the school: a feeling of warmth and community.

It doesn't matter where the children fit in terms of academic ability, as long as they are being extended and they're happy.

The feel of the place. I'd been to a lot of other schools and didn't feel welcome.

Balance between academic and other qualities. Most parents wanted their children to come out of school well-rounded, with a social conscience, the capacity to be decent citizens, and take their place as productive members of society. Academic standards were important but personal development was at least as important, if not more so.

We went to an outstanding private school with an incredible reputation but the leadership sent ripples all the way down and the teacher quality was sub-standard. So I then moved away from just looking at the academic criteria, and what became important was a more nurturing, inclusive culture.

We wanted somewhere where his manners and his morals would be as important as his education. I wanted him to get a good education and options to play sport, but I was looking for a school that would make him and my daughter well-rounded people.

Academic issues were important – that the children were going to be stretched academically -- but in a caring environment.

My husband had been to Grammar and he was keen for our son to go to Grammar as well. But we were worried about it being so academic, so we put his name down for [a different school], more rounded.

I want my son to go to a high school where the interactions with other kids are important: how he treats other people. He's academically bright but he's been a bit arrogant, which is a bit of a worry. How he carries himself when he grows up: comfortable with other people, respects other people, doesn't think ill of anybody because of who they are or where they're from, that he has a completely egalitarian way.

I believed that academic achievement was important. But we finished up in a school which provided exceptional pastoral care.

Reinforcing values, and a sense of partnership. Virtually all the parents we spoke to wanted the school to reinforce the values of the home and to be willing to work with parents in the development of their children. The values in some cases were cultural, in others religious and in others of a more secular nature.

The values that the school espoused and whether they put those values into practice. And those values had to match the values that existed within my family unit.

The values the school has about social issues, environmental issues, economic ideas. It sits very well with our family. Promotes the same world view.

That the school is supporting the things we are teaching our children at home. Things like values and morals, holding the same standards as we have at home.

That the values we were bringing into our house were reinforced by the school, not countered by the school.

Religious or cultural affiliation. Parents who wanted their children to attend a school for religious or cultural reasons placed this very high – in many cases at the top – of their criteria for choosing a school.

The cultural values in a Jewish school.

I wanted my children to have a Catholic education. Catholic values are not something you can open up for a lesson and close the book. I wanted them to have those values as part of the person that they were.

I went to a Catholic boarding school, my wife teaches at a Catholic high school and went to a Catholic high school we got our moral compass from our Catholic schooling. Call it indoctrination! I go to Mass occasionally, but certainly it was the number one priority.

It is a Christian parent-controlled school. And the teachers are all Christians and that is important because they bring through Jesus without shame from the Bible.

Curriculum offerings. In secondary school especially, the needs of the child for particular subjects was commonly a large factor.

When it came to Year 11 and 12, they told us where they wanted to go. We shopped around and we found better resources for what my boy wanted to do, in the State system.

When it comes to Years 11 and 12, it's very important what your child's interest is.

Closeness to home. This tended to be of considerable importance to parents when choosing a primary school, but not so important for secondary.

Gender. For the parents of girls in particular, there was a quite widespread view that girls did better in single-sex schools for academic reasons mainly, but also because of what they saw as a healthier social atmosphere. However, this was one area where the individuality of the child played an important part in parents' decision-making: what might be good for one child might not necessarily be good for another.

It depends on the child. We wanted an all-girls school for our elder daughter because she thought she looked "different", although you can't see that she's sick (diabetic child). But I think our younger one needs a co-ed high school.

We sent our elder boy to a single-sex school but for the next two we decided on co-ed because they were more outgoing and wanted to stay together.

The girl issue. If my kids were round the other way, they'd go straight to the Catholic high school. The younger one is more sensible; the older one could be led astray!

Q: If you sent one to the girls' school, will you necessarily send the other there too?

No. They are two totally different personalities.

I wanted to send my girls to a girls' school because they say girls tend to do better in a girls' school, but my son goes to a co-ed school.

Q: Do they do better?

I'm going to wait and see.

I believe in all-girls, absolutely.

[Mother whose sons are at a boys' school]: *I'm very happy with that because they don't have to have the girls. I just have a feeling that a boys' school seems to cater very well for boys. They are sporty but they are also into drama and choirs and no one seems to get teased about that.*

Q: Are you saying that in a co-ed school they might be inhibited because of how the girls might see them?

No, because of how the boys might see them.

You have to know your own children, and every one is going to be completely different.

For a few parents, their own school experience was the decisive factor:

And your own experience of school is a factor. I went to an all-boys school and that's what I want my boys to go to.

While these were the big factors in choosing a school, there were others, not so common but for the parents involved they were influential:

"People like us". These parents wanted their children to go to school with other children from similar socio-economic backgrounds, with whom they might forge lifelong friendships. To some parents, saying this out loud was somewhat confronting because of overtones of snobbery, as the following exchange shows:

I suppose we wouldn't be ashamed to say we're paying for peer group as well. We want our children to grow up in an environment in which they are surrounded by other kids who have a similar approach to learning, the same values that we want. Not so much affluence as a responsible moral code.

When you first said that, I was really confronted. But after I got over the initial surprise of you saying it, I went, "Yeah, actually". It did resonate with me. I had a daughter in a public school for a year and I found myself apologising for going on holidays if you were going skiing or anything.

However, most parents saw it in more pragmatic terms:

It's going to school with like people. So you know if your child is going to a party, then hopefully there'll be parents around.

I feel that in putting my children in boarding school, I am setting them up for life by giving them lifelong friends. I've seen it among the fathers and mothers of the children who went there.

You have a lifetime belonging to an old boys' association or an old girls', so there is a sense of family.

Family history. For some parents, the fact that they had been students at the school – and sometimes so had their own parents and other relatives – meant that the choice had almost been made for them.

We always thought we'd send our girls to [this school] because we had a family history. My mother, aunts, grandmother had gone there, and somebody else had help found the school.

My husband went to [school] and when our son was born he put his name down. He had been happy there and that was a huge factor.

I never considered public schooling because my family is very into private schooling.

Educational philosophy. Some parents wanted their children taught according to particular education philosophies such as those of Rudolf Steiner, Montessori or Reggio Emilia.

Exposure to difference. The opposite of the “people like us” approach, this was important to parents who wanted their children to grow up amidst the religious, cultural and social the diversity of contemporary Australian society.

A cross-section of the community. We don't like segregated communities.

This school, because of its position, has taught her about life. It's cosmopolitan. You have people from all over the city, from all family backgrounds, all socio-economic areas.

Discipline. Some parents placed a high value on clear boundaries enforced with strong though humane discipline. Sometimes this was associated with the idea that a single-sex school was likelier to provide a more disciplined setting than a co-ed school.

It was extremely important to me that I could get my son into a single-sex school because children mature at a different rate. And my child needs boundaries. In a good Catholic school the boundaries are consistent.

Discipline, not overdone. There seems to be a bit of leeway in government schools.

Fees

Fees were not permitted to be a decisive factor in the choice of school, except in one or two cases where the fees at the preferred school were simply out of reach.

A few of the parents we spoke to were affluent and able to afford the fees without difficulty.

Most were not affluent but said they were able to afford the fees by making some sacrifices: the mother returning to work when she would have preferred to remain at home; forgoing holidays or renovations to the house; living simply; not going out much.

Many of these parents also depended to some extent on scholarships or on discounts given by the school for younger siblings.

A few were doing it tough financially but were determined to persevere because they considered a good education to be the biggest gift they could give their children.

There were some fairly widespread negative impressions about government schools, particularly in relation to behaviour, and those who held these impressions were not prepared to take a chance on their children's welfare. This fed into their willingness to pay fees.

Absolutely they were an issue. We are sending our Year 6 girl to [a government] girls' high school. I would have liked a Catholic school but my husband did not feel that was an important aspect of education. We are in the zone for this high school and it has an excellent academic reputation. The Catholic school we were comparing it with had fees of \$14,000 a year for Year 12, and basically it came down to value for money.

I went to a public school and I was victimised, bullied, picked on by teachers who didn't like my ethnic background. And I vowed I would clean toilets if I had to, to have my children at a private school.

We're prepared to sacrifice holidays and house renovations and things to have our children at schools we have chosen.

I came from an all-boys public school and there were thugs and mugs and drugs. And I think it's much worse now.

We just didn't want our daughter to go to a state school and be lost in the system. I had to go back to work to be able to afford to send her to the school.

Your kids don't get two bites of the cherry. If they get in with the wrong peer group, it can be incredibly difficult to turn that around.

It's quite a financial burden for us, but no other school is able to cater for our needs.

We put away for their secondary education, all four of them, with Australian Scholarship Group.

As a non-Catholic and single parent, I have to look at the fee factor. Trying to find \$3000 for fees is just not on. When I got behind in my fees, they said we can offer you assistance.

We booked our first boy in when he was six months old and I went straight back to work and that was what I was working for. I didn't care about the television or going out.

We have a choice because we can afford it. But once you've made the decision that education is a priority, whether it's \$2000 or \$5000 is neither here nor there.

Education is the only thing we could give them that, when we're gone, they would still have.

At one stage we did add up the money we had spent on private schools, and when it got to an extreme amount of money, we decided not to think about it. We don't regret it. We just make other choices. We don't go on expensive holidays. We live quite simply.

It wouldn't have mattered how much it cost. If I had to take a loan to get that quality of education, I would have done it.

I went back to work to pay our school fees. I don't know how we're going to do it with our younger children, but we will.

Partly because of a general lack of knowledge about how schools are funded and partly because it appears the schools do not go out of their way to provide explicit information about how they are funded, few parents had the sense that they were being supported by government in the exercise of their choice over schooling.

I had no expectation the Government would support us.

Few people could go to these schools unless there was some government funding, but it is one of those invisible things.

Q: Did the school talk about govt funding?

No.

One school in the newsletter indicated that we parents were "helping out". That was the general tone of it.

There are some subsidies, but I don't know the size of that subsidy.

Most parents were very satisfied with the schools their children were attending. It was unusual to find parents who were not satisfied, and a small number had shifted their children until they found a school which suited them.

If the children are coming home as happy as they are going, that's what I look for.

Everyone knows everyone.

My eldest daughter has always been shy, and the primary school made her feel so special. They gave her responsibility and she blossomed.

I'm fairly happy with one school and I'm really happy with the other [attended by a boy with ADHD]. They've really gone out of their way to help him.

The school doesn't meet 100 per cent of our needs but it is meeting the needs of the kids that I can't. No matter what school you go to, parents have to fill in the gaps.

We've got more than what I would honestly have expected.

My daughter's natural disposition is to be a bit of a loner and a bit different. In Years 9 and 10 she wanted to leave the school and go to a very alternative school. But now she's really happy, and the reason is because the school has really accepted her difference. She's got a nose stud, only a tiny little one, and the teachers pretend not to notice, but no one else can get away with it. So they've really stretched the boundaries for her.

One of my boys basically lived in hospital for about three years and one of the things that really impressed me was the way the school went to a great deal of trouble to see he was still included.

It's exceeded my expectations.

This population of parents – most of them actively involved in school-related activities – picked up their perceptions of the school largely from first-hand observation and from direct contact with the teachers and other parents.

Because their active involvement makes them atypical of parents as a whole, it would not be safe to generalise about this. It is probable that in the broad, parents rely more on parent-teacher interviews, newsletters and other school-initiated forms of communication.

While these parents did talk to their children about school, they obtained little except what the child wished them to know. This was especially the case in secondary school.

THEME 2: THE IMPORTANT VALUES

Before being shown the Nine Values

Before being shown the document setting out the *Nine Values for Australian Schooling*, parents were asked to say what values they wanted instilled in their children.

Some participants prefaced their remarks about this with some general statements about acceptance of others and their beliefs, loving one's neighbour, being open-minded, being respectful, being considerate, and trying to avoid being prejudiced.

I try to say to my children, take people as you find them, but I do have a belief set. And some people find this very hard with what's going on in the world. We all pre-judge and we have to restrain ourselves.

Don't impose your belief set on someone else.

I'm a card-carrying Catholic but one of my son's godparents is gay.

You want your children to be open to the idea that other people have things to teach you.

If you don't hurt anyone else and you find love in your world, that is beautiful.

If they respect for themselves then they'll have respect for others.

Love for one another. You don't have to actually like a person, but to see people as individuals.

I'm part of something bigger. It's not just about me and my wants.

In some cases, the discussion turned to whether it was necessary to have a religious setting if good values were to be successfully instilled. While a few thought it was necessary, most thought it was not: that good values could certainly be learnt in a secular environment.

It may not be predominant in a non-religious school.

You don't need to go to a religious school to learn you don't go and punch somebody. You learn that at home.

There must be a moral framework, and the question is, how do you get that moral framework and push it on to the kids? I don't know the answer to that.

Parents were then asked to list the values they wanted to see their children imbued with. This, in approximate rank order of mentions, is what they said:

- Respect for self and others
- Honesty/integrity/decency
- Compassion
- Love for one another
- Sense of justice/equality
- Acceptance of others/Understanding
- Self-reliance/resilience/perseverance
- Responsibility/independence
- Service to others/Sense of duty

They were then shown the *Nine Values for Australian Schooling* drafted as part of the National Goals for Schooling in Australia in the Twenty-first Century. It is given in Appendix II. The nine, as listed on the official document, are:

- Care and Compassion
- Doing Your Best
- Fair Go
- Freedom
- Honesty and Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

Each of these terms carried an explanatory sentence, and parents took issue with some of these as well with the terms themselves. Even so, there was considerable overlap:

- Compassion
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility

It is also clear that there were considerable differences.

“Doing your best”, “Fair go” and “Freedom” were three concepts that the parents in this study commonly questioned. Many did not accept that these were values in the same sense as “respect” or honesty” were values; rather, they were what happened when people adhered to the real values.

The discussions about these concepts were rich and subtle.

“Doing your best” was seen as a reflection of the effort put in by someone who displayed the values of self-respect, responsibility and perseverance, although a few parents did mention qualities such as “having a work ethic” or “giving it your best shot” or in some general way learning that the world did not owe you a living.

I have tried to tell my children that if you work hard you will have more choices.

“**Fair go**” was seen as Australian idiom. It described what happened when people displayed the values of respect for others, compassion, a sense of justice, and acceptance of others. It was also widely seen as having been hijacked for political purposes in recent years, and for that reason alone was dismissed by many parents as having the status of a value.

How wishy-washy is “fair go”!

Sounds like John Howard to me.

“Fair go” is jargon.

It's an Australianism. It's like slang.

I'm a bit worried about the use of the term "a fair go". I know it's meant to be in the Australian vernacular, but I think it has been shanghaied by politicians, so these days I'm not sure I'd want to use that. John Howard uses it a lot and by politicians using it for their own ends, it gets tainted.

I'm looking at these and thinking of current affairs in the past twelve months. Protect the common good where all people are treated fairly for a just society, except if we're in Cronulla and you look Lebanese.

The meaning of the term was contested.

It almost gets into anti-discrimination, equal opportunity.

It's kind of designed to make people feel all patriotic.

I hate it. It is just Australiana. I'd rather have "fairness" or some other word.

Equity.

"Fair go" was the name of our local bus tickets.

I don't know what we mean by it. Maybe I'm missing something. You're not going to take undue advantage of someone? That can be under the heading of care and compassion.

It could be part of any of them. It doesn't have any meaning.

It's absolutely vital for everybody and you can apply it in all sorts of areas.

If you respect someone, you give them a fair go.

If you adopt these other values, you probably end up giving people a fair go.

However, a broad consensus emerged that it meant equality of opportunity to participate in society and to be heard.

I think of sportsmanship: how the children in a class should give the other children a fair go because not all children are equal at sport.

Everyone gets the same chances and opportunities.

Everyone has a chance to be heard.

It means an opportunity to participate.

To some, this definition had overtones of socialism, even communism.

Things like equality of opportunity have a way of being turned on their head, as in Animal Farm, where some are born more equal than others.

Fair go means everything should be equalised and it's not.

It has two meanings. One is that everybody gets the same. The other is that everybody gets what they need.

The world can't always work where everything is there for everybody, where everyone gets exactly the same. That's communism and that didn't work anywhere else.

And it was interpreted by a few people as encouraging licentiousness.

"Fair go" to me means you do whatever you want. I allow you to do whatever you want. The more freedom and less limits you put on anybody, the wilder they go.

"Freedom" was seen as a right, not a value, and its existence depended on people displaying the values of respect for others, a sense of justice, acceptance of others, inclusiveness and tolerance.

I wouldn't call freedom a value, but standing up for the rights of others, is a value.

Freedom to me means there are less restrictions, you have choices within certain boundaries. But it's not a value. It's an attribute.

Freedom as a value I don't quite understand.

It's a right, not a value.

Freedom's very important to me because my parents came from a society that is not free. It is a basic human right. But it doesn't seem to be a natural fit to talk about freedom when we're talking about values. It's one of the underlying tenets that's part of this great nation.

The whole notion of "unnecessary interference or control" is a really loaded statement which doesn't resonate for me. It is subtracting from the notion of freedom.

Freedom is born out of the other values: respect for other people, acceptance of other people.

The term "tolerance" also raised interesting discussions, with many parents seeing it as negative. Someone tolerated was not necessarily someone accepted, whereas these parents wished their children to learn acceptance rather than mere tolerance.

The following exchange was between two men. The second respondent was a man who had presented as a person of strong Christian religious principle:

Tolerance isn't going far enough. Acceptance.

Depends how far it goes. I certainly support tolerance and everyone's right to their own belief system, but I don't see that I have to accept it.

No. I meant acceptance in the sense that they may be just as right as I am.

I don't accept that either. I would accept that they have a right to a view that is different from mine, but that doesn't mean I have to accept they are as right as me.

Tolerance for me is fairly negative. I'm prepared to . . .

I don't think anyone should be required to accept something they believe is wrong. I believe in absolutes. While I don't want to force my absolutes on someone else, I don't want to see the notion of absolutes done away with. Values sit on belief systems. Otherwise they're not so strong. There are true truths.

I am more of a relativist than an absolutist. Situational ethics is what I go for. You can't have absolute truths.

We heard discussions about the apparent ambiguity of the term “tolerance” in several places.

Tolerance implies you are disapproving but you'll just put up with it. Acceptance means you don't have to shift where you are, but it means opening yourself up to the fact that maybe you've got something to learn from someone else.

There was an article in The Age today referring to a speech by Menzies in 1942 and he doesn't like the concept of tolerance. He was much more the acceptance kind of thing.

Tolerance does have that negative connotation.

Tolerance is – I was going to say trendy – a common usage. You need to be more explicit about the meaning of the word. I think acceptance is much better.

I think you can get two meanings out of it. A parent tolerates a child, but if you are known for your tolerance, it is a good thing.

But many also interpreted “tolerance” positively.

Everybody's different. No one's wrong. What I try to teach my children that.

You have to formulate your idea of right and wrong, but still care for people.

It doesn't specifically say anywhere that you are to accord respect to other people's religious beliefs. It talks about moral and ethical.

Yes, that's important, when you think that so much conflict today is to do with the struggle between competing religions, values systems and social orders that are underpinned by religious beliefs, you actually have to say that.

It needs to be taught that you have this particular belief. That's fine. Someone else is entitled to their belief. If it clashes with yours, you can agree to disagree.

The word tolerance implies accepting everything, regardless of religion or way of life.

More broadly, while parents found the *Nine Values* acceptable, many said there was something lacking, some gel or marrow or animating spirit. They struggled to give it a name. And then someone did: Love for one another. As one group after another launched themselves spontaneously into this self-same debate, it was always resolved by the inclusion of this idea. This was as true of the secular participants as it was of those with a religious affiliation.

There's something missing from this list. Some gel, some soul.

It doesn't mention spirituality at all.

I'm still feeling really uneasy that I haven't captured the core values that reflects the reason why I send my kids to the school that I do. There's something more than all this but I can find the word.

It's very clinical. It's probably got all that I would look for, but seeing it printed in this very crisp manner, it sounds so clinical.

Are you talking about love?

Maybe it is, yes.

Not in a wishy-washy way.

Love that binds you, where the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

All the values discussed were seen generally as universal and not just Australian in nature. "Fair go" might have been an Australian way of expressing it, but the idea of equal opportunity – which was how most parents interpreted it – was seen as universal even if in some countries, such as England or India, the class or caste systems were seen as negating it.

While parents were clear about the ideal values they wished to see their children grow up with, they saw many ways in which contemporary Australian society failed to display those values. To some extent they felt they could shield their children from these malign influences – mainly by controlling their viewing of television or their use of the internet – but they realized that beyond these limited controls there was little they could do except give a good example. They expected this too from the school.

Parents saw contemporary Australian society as displaying too much selfishness, materialism, injustice and intolerance.

They saw selfishness expressed in many ways: refusing to accept the so-called boat people; defiling the environment to make money; self-absorbed behaviour summed up in the phrase of several respondents as, “I, myself and me”.

They saw materialism in terms of “keeping up with the Joneses”, of instant gratification, of having the big car, the big house, the glamorous job.

They saw injustice in the treatment of minorities, particularly Middle Eastern minorities and Muslims.

They saw intolerance in different ways: prejudice against homosexuality; difficulty in accepting cultures different from one’s own; restraints on people’s freedom to speak out on issues such as euthanasia or multiculturalism or on matters that required “political correctness”.

A further recurring theme was that in today’s Australia there was too much emphasis on rights and not enough on responsibilities.

Whether Australia was a “fair go” society was a moot point. Some parents – especially those who had come here from other countries – thought it was. Most thought it was less of a “fair go” society now than in the past because:

- the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” had widened;
- the culture of individualism had grown at the expense of a sense of community, and
- the national morale had been sapped by long exposure to prosperity, resulting in a loss of the big-heartedness that they saw as having been forged by those who had lived through the hardships of the Depression and world wars.

As a result, while Australians aspired to a “fair go” society, the treatment of disabled people, the poor, racial and cultural minorities – especially Muslims and people from the Middle East -- Aborigines, asylum-seekers, single mothers and other vulnerable groups was seen as evidence that we were falling short of the aspiration.

Several respondents said that Australia was a “fair go” society if you were white, middle class and of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity – and made a point of including themselves.

Other reasons advanced for our falling short included rapacious commercial behaviour and the payment of “immoral” salaries to some corporate executives.

Q: Are we a “fair go” society?

We used to be. But our trend now is that we are a more selfish “us” society. And it’s fed by the example and directions set by politicians. The so-called boat people is a classic example of a very selfish society.

No. As a single mum I’m looked down on by a lot who don’t understand the circumstances. It’s “you’ve committed a sin, you’re divorced, you’ve got kids, how could you”.

No. We label disabled people and treat them according to that label.

Underlying I think we still are but I agree we've lost a lot of it. We've become almost like a society of one, and so the pressure is there to achieve whatever material and lifestyle that says you're "there", so to speak, the new car, the bigger house. That encourages people to be selfish.

No, because too many minorities are excluded, to be honest.

We are becoming less so in the age of terrorism. Becoming suspicious of people. So we're fearful and we are suspicious of people who look Middle Eastern or Muslim. And I feel for that guy in jail [Dr Muhamed Haneef]. Difficult to know whether he's innocent. We're not treating him as if he's innocent.

I think we no longer are. I think we're moving backwards in terms of social values. We are less tolerant. The boat people – we can't allow them in. The children – throw them overboard. The Haneef case. "Of course he's guilty" – from Day 1. No suggestion of being innocent until proved guilty. It's run on scare campaigns and they relate purely to politics.

I was rather shocked to see that the legislation for the Indigenous communities was only released to the Opposition this morning. There won't be an opportunity for proper review of that.

Politically there is so much going on at the moment. "Fair go" is for a select group of Australians: white, Anglo, middle class. And I'm in that!

I think we're living in a post-Christian society and trading off the hard work of previous generations in building up a fund of care and compassion, moral capital. So might is right.

We're living through a time of unbelievable wealth, extreme. You've got company directors getting \$2 million as bonus. Immoral amounts of money. Yet we've got such poverty and disconnectedness in so many areas. We've got people who are lonely because we don't have a community that looks out for them any more.

There is a direct correlation between the current political regime and the erosion of the fair go. Billions have been raised through the GST but we don't see it being put back into society. Instead it is being eked out to rescue a hospital here or a few local government areas up there.

While this was by far the most widely held view of contemporary Australian society, it was not the unanimous view. People who had immigrated to Australia revealed an appreciation of what they saw as the "fair go" ethic of Australian society. They saw Australia as a wonderful land of opportunity where people could get ahead if they were prepared to work hard.

We pride ourselves on having a sense of the fair go. Australians are known around the world for being good honest people who do the right thing.

In varying degrees. You have to look at some of our leaders and some of them subscribe to these values better than others.

I'd say yes. I'm originally from overseas and it is a wonderful country. It is not perfect but it does give a fair go.

In comparison with the country we came from, we have been given a fair go.

These respondents also drew attention to the existence in Australia of the basic freedoms – speech, movement, association, religion – and said they were evidence of the fact that people did get a fair go.

They also considered that there was less class-stratification in Australia than there had been in the past, and a greater readiness to accept people of other cultures. This last proposition was seldom left unchallenged by other participants.

Dominant values in today's Australia

Many respondents had misgivings about the values they saw as dominant in today's Australia.

They saw society as having become more materialistic, more selfish, less caring. Many expressed the view that somehow Australian society had lost some of the bigness of heart that they believed came with hardship of the kind experienced by earlier generations who had lived through the Depression and two world wars. Many theorized that a long period of prosperity had sapped this spirit.

Many saw a lack of moral leadership at a national level. Others saw a lack of spirituality as leading society into a materialistic dead-end.

What makes it difficult for parents and the school is society's overarching attitudes that only pay lip service to these values. In the last ten years I don't think the federal Government has provided leadership as far as values goes. It's been opportunistic and taken advantage of situations like the Tampa for its own political mean-spirited ends.

But mate, they're politicians.

That sets a tone for society. The leadership of society has a big role to play.

We have less mutuality than we used to.

When times are tough, that brings people together a lot more. At the present time we are all going along fairly well and that's when you tend to stray away and not worry about the core values quite so much.

We've had two generations who have known no hardship.

Society has become a bit more materialistic. Keeping up with the Joneses to the extreme. And I don't agree with that.

You've got to have it; you've got to have it now.

I think they are different from the ideal ones. It is more about living in the big house and driving the fast car, and what sort of job you have.

The number of people who don't espouse care and compassion is growing. Our political leadership has been lacking in this area very substantially in the last few years or so.

There's a lack of spirituality, not religion, but spirituality, and people try to fill that void through consumerism: let's have everything now. And they're still not satisfied because there is nothing underpinning it or driving them along.

It's quite a selfish society where everyone looks after themselves. It's I, myself and me.

Mind thyself; stuff you, mate.

I just disagree with that. Everyone sees dickheads but I bet for every on dickhead there are a hundred people who display every one of those things [ideal values]..

Bad influences also arose from what was portrayed by the media, and what was imposed by what some saw as a more demanding work environment.

I worry about the amount of TV and the Americanisation. The kids are learning their values from the TV and the computer these days. Reality shows, those sorts of things.

It's also a very competitive society, and that causes us to lose sight of our values sometimes. Trying to get into the workforce, we push aside values sometimes for the dollar.

There was often an element of self-consciousness in this part of the discussion as parents recognised that they sometimes found themselves giving the wrong example.

In a previous generation, we would have said to the kids you have to choose two things to do. Now if they want to be involved in six we say yes, and then we run around and try to afford it for them.

We are making them selfish in some ways.

If we don't have a sense of community and we become too self-centred, we are really not of any value to the rest of society because we're not contributing. We're busy because we want to give our children every opportunity.

There was also some concern among some respondents about what they called "political correctness".

One of the reasons I didn't choose a state school was because I'm not sure how much values [figure] in state education these days because it is so politically correct. You can't mention a lot of things because you might offend someone.

We need to almost tolerate and never disagree. We have such a mix of cultures we have to tolerate each other rather than learn to like and learn to work out who we all are. Can you define what you think is right and wrong? You have to be politically correct.

You have to be so careful you don't offend anyone.

This was not a widely held view but it was held with some conviction.

On one question, however, there was unanimity: It was primarily the responsibility of parents to instill values in their children, aided and supported by the school. Where the school failed in this, parents were prepared to pull their children out. Some had done so.

THEME 3: PARTNERSHIPS

Overall, most of the parents in this study did feel as if the school treated them as partners, but many said they did not feel so treated. The picture was very mixed.

The extent to which a partnership is seen by parents to exist in a school depended to a large extent on three factors:

1. The culture of the school, as determined by the principal.
2. In the absence of any whole-of-school culture, it depended on individual classroom teachers.
3. How the parents themselves defined "partnership".

Where the principal established a culture of partnership, this tended to flourish at all levels. The converse was also true.

Where the principal had not taken a position, it came down to the classroom teacher's attitude. These attitudes varied from open-arms welcoming to a deep unease at the presence of parents in the classroom.

The principal sets the tone and that is picked up by the staff. Some are really good and some, for whatever reason – and it could be intimidation or they've got too much on their plate – don't want to do it.

The school certainly aspires to a partnership. A lot of it hinges on individual teachers. Some are very communicative, engaging, others are less so.

Some respondents defined "partnership" as meaning the parents were encouraged by the school to become involved as members of the school council and the P&F, in fund-raising and working bees. Here, the school drew the line, which the parents accepted and still felt they were being treated as partners in their children's education.

For others, partnership meant being consulted by the school – and in particular the classroom teacher – on what was right for their child, and to be part of finding the solution to any issues concerning the child.

For others again, it meant having reliable communications in the form of newsletters, emails, assemblies, and parent-teacher nights.

For a few it meant full engagement in the school's decision-making processes, including curriculum decisions. These respondents tended to come from parent-controlled schools, and for the most part parents did not expect to be involved in matters such as curriculum, which they considered the preserve of the professional educators.

There was a fairly clear line, for most parents, between the preserve of the professional educators and the other parts of school life where they felt parents could legitimately be involved.

For many parents, the sense of partnership, or lack of it, really turned on whether the school and the teachers recognised them as the primary educators of their children, and treated them accordingly.

They judged this by:

- the quality of interactions they had with the school;
- the ease with which they could gain access to teachers and principals if they wished to;
- the responsiveness of the school to their wishes or concerns, and
- the extent to which they received early notice of any issues arising about their child.

Parents who felt well treated in these matters said they did feel as if they were partners.

I can email my daughter's teacher.

My son had a poor test result and the teacher rang on my mobile to let me know this result was coming home and not to stress: he was obviously having a bad day. I thought that was fantastic.

I make it a point to meet the class teacher and say the last thing I want is to hear about issues at the parent-teacher interviews. I expect to hear about it long before then.

Conversely, parents who did not feel well treated in these matters did not feel as if they were partners.

At the other extreme, some parents had had the experience of being told by the school that so long as the child was in the school grounds, he or she was the school's responsibility and that the parents would be notified of any matter should the school regard it as necessary.

Others said they were involved only at the school's request, and on the school's terms.

Parents tended to be philosophical about this: it had not caused them to change schools; they involved themselves where they could.

What really upset them was if the school had not told them of problems until they had become big, or until some occasion such as a parent-teacher night provided a convenient time to do so.

For some, the sense of partnership was strong, based on the living out of an ideal.

The partnership between the school, the church and the home is like a trinity.

Hugely so, from day one. Very active effort on the part of the school to involve the parents in all the decisions that are made.

It's always been made really clear that the school wants a strong partnership between the home and school.

For others, the sense of partnership was based on the degree and quality of communication and on how the school dealt with problems involving the child.

There is more consultation, and you can approach them if you have any problems and know you're going to be listened to.

If you've got an issue, they encourage you to spend more time at the school. They have an afternoon tea every Wednesday for parents. You're greeted as if they like you.

Some parents asserted their partnership status by being involved with the school.

I'm a fairly pro-active parent, and I have been pretty happy with that.

The Christian school is parent-controlled so it has a board and a parents' association who elect the board and it has various committees, including an education committee, and you can be involved in looking at curriculum and all that sort of stuff.

We have always held the view that we are the primary educators of our children. If a school didn't consider us to be the primary educators, we stood up to point that out.

On curriculum, with maths and sex education we had parents step up and make a difference to what the school was doing. But it took parents to be quite forceful.

It was common to hear that where a child had special needs, the sense of partnership was strong.

My daughter has Asberger's, and the teacher is constantly back and forth saying we are going to try this, what do you think? So yes, I feel in partnership.

Generally, the sense of partnership was stronger in primary schools than in secondary schools. There were a number of reasons for this:

- parents of younger children having more energy for the task and in some cases more time;
- the comparative ease of developing and maintaining a relationship with a single teacher, and
- the attitude of the children to the parents' being involved.

Particularly in primary school. Secondary school not as much, but that may be about the children's level of keenness and our own ability with time and things like that.

Not so much in the high school. They take the view that if there's a problem they'll let you know.

No. Not when you're in high school.

Otherwise it was impossible to discern a pattern. It was very much a school-by-school proposition, and quite a number of respondents felt no sense of partnership at all.

At [school] it's absolutely hands off. As parents you will keep your hands off.

We have no power or influence at all.

They'll do their bit and send you off home, and they take over. There's very much a boundary there.

Last year we heard about this kid turning up to school and doing all these bad things and it turned out to be our kid. So we had a lot of disconnect last year. I didn't feel as if we were partners at all. I felt it was them and us.

One school said, you need to drop her off at the gate and she's ours. So while they talked about partnership, they didn't live it.

At my daughter's school they don't even allow reading groups. Parents are not allowed to set foot inside the door.

Conflict resolution

Again, parents' responses to questions about their schools' performance in the area of conflict-resolution produced a very mixed picture. It was common to hear specific accounts of where there had been failures, but there were also some success stories.

Most conflicts had arisen over child-to-child problems such as bullying, although there were quite a number involving parents and teachers.

As a broad generalization, where parents felt they were partners, conflicts tended to be resolved more quickly and satisfactorily than otherwise.

It was common to hear that the school had closed ranks against the parents or that the school had swept problems such as bullying under the rug.

They see it from their point of view and they don't want to listen to you. They are not interested in your opinions or values or anything. You're wrong. You don't know any better. We're better at it.

Conflict among children, they tend to push it aside.

With our first child in primary school we had a conflict with the principal and we didn't get any satisfaction except I out-shouted the principal.

I had trouble with a teacher. She wouldn't meet. I tried to get an appointment with the principal, but he was busy. Wrote him a letter, got no reply, wrote to the school board and got no reply. The issue carried on into the next year, and the teacher carried it on with my son. Finally we had a very lengthy discussion with the teacher and the grade co-ordinator and things were resolved.

My son was being really badly bullied to the point where he was being whipped across the back with cricket stumps. I had three attempts with the teacher and nothing was resolved, and in the end I went to [the teacher's] office in tears and he told me it was about perceptions and imaginative play. So I found it was fairly lacking until [the principal] got involved and then all hell broke loose.

At [school] it depended on which family it was and if they were old girls and what car they drove. So they had no resolution schools.

By contrast, some teachers and schools were swift and fair in dealing with these matters.

My son clashed [with another boy] in the junior school which they found it very difficult to sort, but the Grade 7 teacher sorted it in five minutes on the second day this year. She just said, "I'm not having that", and the whole problem of several years has just disappeared.

My son was getting picked on and the school handled it very well. The other bloke was obviously not that well. I was quite impressed with the way they handled it.

Our school moves very quickly whether it's physical conflict, verbal conflict, they always involve the parents, on the phone straightaway. That works very well.

We had a bullying problem with my boy a few months ago, and I spoke to the principal and he told me to just write it out in a letter, totally confidential, and it was attended to immediately. So some of the schools have got it right.

My son had words with one of his teachers, and we were called in and the house master got us together, and my son and the teacher had a say, and they resolved it with a shake of the hand and I was incredibly impressed.

My son gets bullied quite a lot because of his condition, but they handle it so much better at this school. They have a policy that does not even permit a finger touch. It is an instant suspension.

THEME 4: FUNDING ISSUES

Hardly any of these parents knew anything about how their school was funded. Even among those who were on school councils or P&Fs, knowledge was scant and uncertain.

They knew, of course, that fees and fund-raising played a part. Many were fairly sure that some money came from government, but whether from Commonwealth or State/Territory they

mostly did not know. Nor did they know whether the money was for capital expenditure or operational costs, or how it was calculated.

Nor did they have much idea how government money was allocated between government and non-government schools, although one or two had an idea that the States provided most of the government school funding and the Commonwealth most of the non-government school funding.

Without labouring the point, the following selection of quotations accurately depicts the level of knowledge on these matters.

It's funded per capita, I think. It depends how many students. I'm not totally au fait with it.

I had a friend who was a principal and she told me once that they got one-and-a-half thousand dollars per child from the Government. Whether that was state or federal, I'm not sure.

I know we put in fees and it does get some money from the Government. I don't know how it's calculated.

I think we get 46% or something from the Federal Government, there's another funding source but I don't know what, and then about 14% comes from parent contributions.

Oh God, I don't know. They obviously get a grant because they just got one for a library. Primarily it's fees.

A handful – perhaps half a dozen at most – knew there was a formula based on the socio-economic status of the school community. People who knew this much also knew that most of the government money for non-government schools came from the Commonwealth and not the States/Territories.

They send out these surveys and you have to say where you live, so it must have something to do with the socio-economic background of the school population as well.

All I know is the Government funds a certain percentage, depending on where you live.

I believe the way it works is based on the socio-economic status of a particular area. If your school is in a wealthy area, you are not going to get as much money.

In addition to these questions of knowledge about the current funding situation, respondents were asked two questions of principle:

1. Should all non-government schools receive the same amount of government money per pupil, or should some get more than others?
2. Should government money for school education mainly reflect the needs of the school or mainly reflect the individual needs of the particular family or student?

Parents struggled mightily with these. The more they discussed them, the more they began to see the complexities involved.

Should all non-government schools receive the same amount of government money per pupil, or should some get more than others?

Many parents said there needed to be some needs-based factor in the calculation.

If you had a Catholic school in a low socio-economic area that had major drug problems, where the children have no family, it is every child's fundamental right to have some support for their education. So if the Government had available extra funding to provide pastoral care for those children, I'd be the first one voting for it.

I think needs-based, and if people can afford to pay a bit more, they can pay a bit more.

I think based on need, some are going to need more funding per child than others.

Based on the need of the children attending the school, I think some should get more.

The question then arose, how should “needs” be defined? This tended to be resolved by reference to the right of every child to some government money for their education, with parents or schools then providing top-up where they chose to do so. However, in expressing their views on this, many parents talked interchangeably about the needs of the student and the needs of the school.

It depends what you mean by “needs”. We've all chosen schools that don't need to offer all the things they do, but needs extra money because it provides this and this and this. That's our choice and I don't think the Government should be funding that – the differential that made it attractive to us in the first place.

Government should fund the needs; parents should fund the wants.

In principle, each child should have a fixed allocation. But in an Islamic school starting from scratch in a disadvantaged area? That's a difficult one.

I have to come down on every child being entitled to a fixed per capita grant, and cases of special needs to be considered on top of that.

There should be a basic amount per child, but I recognise there is a huge variation from the wealthy non-government to the poor non-government school. Those in disadvantaged areas are entitled to more.

I reckon they should get the same amount per pupil but the school that's been established for 100 years it doesn't need the funding that a school starting up would. So I favour an increase in funding going to a school that is starting up.

All children, irrespective of government or non-government – we're all taxpayers – should get the same slice of the cake. What you do after that, if you decide to top it up, is your business.

The baseline should be set and then topped up on the basis of need.

It is a fundamental right to have to same opportunity to be educated to a minimum. If you then decide to improve that by topping that up, that's your choice.

There should be certain basic funding per child. My children deserve as much government funding as the next child.

Some thought that every child should get the same regardless, although this was not a widely held view. This view tended to be grounded in the principle of equal treatment, although a respondent who was an economist by training said differential treatment introduced economic distortions.

It should be the same, because if it's different it distorts the choice people make, and enables schools to differentiate their fees.

I believe everyone should get the same.

They should all have equal funding.

Private schools save the government enormous amounts of money. So each child should have whatever it is equally as a base amount.

A few parents said there should be no distinction between government and non-government schools.

Government money should be available to every child equally regardless of what school you go to. Most people work for a living. They pay their taxes and therefore it shouldn't matter if the school they go to is a private school or state school.

They need to put aside this idea of government and non-government, and fund children.

A few also said that very well-established schools already got too much government funding.

I choose to send my kids to a wealthy school. I don't think they should get an obscene amount of money, and I think they get an obscene amount of money, when other non-government schools in outer areas are not wealthy.

We have access to amazing amounts of money, so why should we get the same amount as a school like Caroline Chisholm that don't have access to family and school community money?

And there was another view – expressed by only a handful – that independent schools should not get any government money.

These propositions were always contested by others who argued that because everyone paid taxes, everyone was entitled to some assistance with their children's education, and every child had the right o some government assistance for their education.

The issue of funding for children with special needs was particularly salient for parents whose children had special needs. People who knew about the current funding arrangements, in which

children with special needs in government schools were funded much more generously than those in non-government schools, were outraged by what they saw as a gross inequity.

My child has a disability that was not being addressed by a non-government school because of funding, and I then had to send that child to a government school and lose the opportunity to choose a school of small class sizes, of community, that had the set of values I was looking for.

For my child to get an aide, how much funding they were able to give each child depended on how many children with special needs they had in the school.

As can be seen from this extensive debate, there was a wide range of responses, but two agreed points of principle can be distilled:

- Every Australian child has the right to a standard basic grant of government money for his or her education. This applies to children in government and non-government schools alike, and should be the same for both.
- In addition to the basic grant, extra government funding should be given on the basis of need.

Need was defined in three ways:

1. The needs of the child, arising from factors such as disability, socio-economic disadvantage, or isolation.
2. The needs of the community served by the school, arising from factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or isolation.
3. The needs of the school, arising from factors such as its asset base, access to private money, whether it was a new or long-established school.

Should government money for school education mainly reflect the needs of the school or mainly reflect the individual needs of the particular family or student?

Many respondents instinctively wanted the funding to reflect the needs of the family or student, but could not see how this could be made to work.

I'm inclined to go family.

I'm tending towards the family.

I don't know how you'd make that work, though.

Bit of both.

I'm sitting on the fence.

It's going to have to be both somehow.

I don't think schools should get one zac. The students should get the money. It should go to the school but it should be based on the needs of the child.

If you don't fund the kid, the kid can't afford the education that it deserves.

Many other respondents wanted the funding to go to the school, partly because this would generally reflect the needs of the families indirectly and partly for feasibility reasons.

I think it should be based on the needs of the school, because there are few things other than the students that need funding: libraries, services that the school provides. The GPS schools have built up over a hundred years, and if you've got a student coming through who's just funded for the transient six-year period, I don't know how you'd build that up.

That is hard. I would say school because if the families within that school had needs, that would address them.

I just can't see it working with the family. I like the idea of the family. I just can't see how it would work, so I have to go with the school, probably.

One or two parents said that funding should be determined by the needs of the school community.

I think it should depend partly on the community on which the school is based. The socio-economic status of the community.

For some respondents, the needs of the community were indistinguishable from the needs of the school, but this was by no means a unanimous view. Many saw the two as separate.

In summary

In summary, on the first question of principle, parents were generally of the view that each child should receive the same basic grant for his or her education, topped up by a needs-based payment.

On the second question of principle, on whether government money should reflect mainly the needs of the student or of the school, there was no consensus. There was instinctual support for basing it on the needs of the student, but when it came to the practicalities parents could not see a way to do this. For pragmatic reasons, then, there was a tendency towards basing government money for education on the needs of the school.

Finally on the subject of funding, not many parents had a sense that the Government was supporting them financially in their choice of school. As a matter of objective reality, of course, they were being supported, but given their lack of knowledge about funding, it is hardly surprising that they had no sense of being supported.

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses that arise from the qualitative phase of this study, and which may be tested quantitatively, are that parents with children in non-government schools:

Choice issues

Place a very high priority on their children's education.

In many cases make material sacrifices to send them to non-government schools.

Place a high value on the concepts of choice and personal autonomy.

Regard one or more of the following as key criteria for selecting a school:

- Smallness of school and class

- Suits the individual needs of the child

- The "feel" of the school

- The offering of a balance between academic standards and personal development

- Commitment to a partnership with the home

- Religious or cultural affiliation

- Curriculum offerings

- Closeness to home (for primary)

- Gender issues

Fees will not generally be a determinant.

There is a preparedness to "do whatever it takes" to meet the fees.

Values issues

The Nine Values document generally represents the values parents want to see instilled in their children, but:

- It lacks an element of spirituality or binding concept such as "love of neighbour"

- "Fair Go", "Freedom" and "Doing Your Best" are not values in themselves but derive from values-driven behaviour.

The concept of the "Fair Go" is not lived out in Australian society these days as much as it used to be.

The reasons are lack of generosity towards minorities, refugees, Aborigines and other disadvantaged groups.

Nonetheless Australia remains a land of opportunity, on the whole, for people who are able and willing to work hard.

Partnerships issues

The living out of the partnerships ideal is very uneven.

The quality of partnership is judged by a number of factors, including:

- The quality of the interactions between parents and school

- The ease with which parents can gain access to teachers and the principal

- The responsiveness of the school to their concerns

- The extent to which they receive early notice of issues concerning their child

- There is an inverse correlation between what parents understand a partnership to be and whether they think they are treated as partners.

Funding issues

There is little knowledge about how schools are funded.

There is widespread acceptance of the principle that every Australian child has the right to a basic grant of government money for his or her education.

Beyond that, extra government funding should be based on need.

Needs should be calculated primarily on the circumstances of the child, the family or the school community.

There is little sense among parents with children at non-government schools that the government supports them in their choice of school.

APPENDIX I

DISCUSSION OUTLINE

Australian Parents Council

Values Education Project 2007

Qualitative phase: Focus Group Discussion Outline

Theme 1: Choice of school

1. Think back to when you first started to consider choosing a [primary/secondary] school for your children. What were the critical factors for you in choosing a school? (Probe: Close to home; conformed with our religious beliefs; seemed to promote values consistent with those we hold at home; had a good principal; had a good atmosphere; had the curriculum or programs we wanted.)
2. How significant a factor was the question of school fees in making your decision? (Probe: Did the school talk to you about the level of government funding of the school? Did you have a sense that the Government was supporting you in making a choice about schooling?)

Theme 2: Perception of current school

1. What would you say are the really essential qualities of a good school?
2. To what extent would you say that the schools your children attend have those essential qualities?
3. Where do you get your perceptions about the school? (Probe: Other parents; your children; the school's own materials; being involved with the school; other sources.)
4. Do you talk much with your children about school? (Probe: What sort of things do you talk about?)
5. What sorts of things might cause you to move your children to another school?

Theme 3: Values in education

1. There has been a fair bit of discussion in recent years about the values young people should learn when they are growing up. What do you think are the important values young people should learn?

Hand out Nine Values for Australian Schooling.

2. Let me take you through them and see what you think about them. (Note that participants may have already mentioned some of them. Probe on any not mentioned.)
3. Is Australia a "fair go" society?

4. There has also been some talk in recent years about what have been called “Australian” values. Do you think there is anything particularly “Australian” about the values we have been talking about?
5. What sort of values do you think are dominant in Australian society nowadays?
6. Whose responsibility is it to see that young people learn the values we regard as important? (Probe: Is it mainly the responsibility of the school or mainly the responsibility of the home or should it be shared?)
7. Among the things that schools are expected to do – teach knowledge and skills, help the child develop into a fully rounded person, and so on – how important is the teaching of values compared with other things schools are expected to do? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
8. How well would you say your children’s school lives out the values that you regard as important? (Probe: Why do you say that?)

Theme 4: The partnership concept

1. Do the schools your children attend treat you as partners in the education of your children or not?
2. To what extent are you personally involved in school activities?
3. Are you made to feel welcome by the school? (Probe: Why do you say that?)
4. What sort of activities does the school encourage parents to become involved in?
5. What, if anything, does the school not encourage parents to become involved in?
6. Are the views of parents taken into account by the school when it makes decisions? (Probe: On what sorts of issues?)
7. How well does the school communicate with you? (Probe: Are there ways it could be done better?)
8. Does the school ask for feedback from parents? (Probe: How? On what kind of things?)
9. What are the main things that prevent parents becoming involved with the school, do you think?

Theme 5: Conflict Resolution

1. How does your children’s school handle conflict situations? (Probe: between children (bullying), between parents and teachers, parents and the school.)

2. What values do you think drive the school's conflict resolution processes?
3. How might the school handle conflict resolution more effectively?

Theme 6: Funding issues

3. What if anything can you tell me about the way your children's school is funded? (Probe: Does it receive any money from the Government? If so, do you know how it is calculated?)
4. Should all non-government schools receive the same amount of government money per pupil, or should some get more than others? (Probe: Why? What should be the basis for determining different levels of funding?)
5. What, if anything, can you tell me about how government money is allocated to government and non-government schools? (Probe: Is that a fair system? Are there changes you think should be made to it?)
6. Should government money for school education mainly reflect the needs of the school or mainly reflect the individual needs of the particular family or student?

NINE VALUES FOR AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING

Nine Values for Australian Schooling

These values emerged from Australian school communities and from the National Goals for Schooling in Australia in the 21st century.

Care and Compassion

Care for self and others

Doing Your Best

Seek to accomplish something worthy and admirable, try hard, pursue excellence

Fair Go

Pursue and protect the common good where all people are treated fairly for a just society

Freedom

Enjoy all the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control, and stand up for the rights of others

Honesty and Trustworthiness

Be honest, sincere and seek the truth

Integrity

Act in accordance with principles of moral and ethical conduct, ensure consistency between words and deeds

Respect

Treat others with consideration and regard, respect another person's point of view

Responsibility

Be accountable for one's own actions, resolve differences in constructive, non-violent and peaceful ways, contribute to society and to civic life, take care of the environment

Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

Be aware of others and their cultures, accept diversity within a democratic society, being included and including others