SCHOOL FEES

RATIONALE

The Catholic Church’s preferential option for the poor obligates Catholic schools to ensure that no baptised student is denied a Catholic education because of an inability to pay.

In recognition of the differential capacity of families to contribute to the costs of education, both the Australian and State governments incorporate a needs-based element into their recurrent funding of the Catholic school system. The Australian Government uses the Socio Economic Status (SES) index, which is intended to account for the financial position of families, while the State Government includes the SES and each school’s Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) enrolment level in its formula. Both formulas are designed to fund the system according to need.

The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) policy for allocating funding to Catholic schools also accounts for need in that, all other factors being equal, lower SES schools receive more funding than higher SES schools. In addition, schools are provided with additional financial assistance for each EMA student which enables them to offer fee remissions.

This Policy of the Bishop’s Diocesan Education Council (DEC) on School Fees recognises the significant contribution that individual schools make to the costs of education through the generation of private income that includes the payment of fees by families. In recognising the role of schools in this area, and in supporting the principle of accessibility of Catholic schools through its needs-based funding formula, the Diocesan Education Council encourages school communities to establish fee setting and fee collection practices that are consistent with access and equity priorities.

DEFINITIONS

School fees are what the school charges families for the education of their children.
Private income is that portion of a school’s income which is not derived from government recurrent and targeted grants.
Socio-economic status (SES) is a measure of an individual or group’s standing in the community and is based on variables including income, occupation, educational attainment and wealth.
The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is an allowance provided by the State government to assist low-income families to meet the educational needs of their children. The proportion of EMA recipient pupils enrolled at a school is therefore a measure of the schools ‘need’ or disadvantage.
School Levy is a specific purpose school charge that is in addition to the school fees.
PRINCIPLES

Responsibility: Each Catholic school is responsible for setting its own fees.
Accessibility: Catholic schools should be accessible to all Catholic families irrespective of capacity to pay.
Needs-based: As Governments and the CECV allocate funds on the basis of need, and given the principle of accessibility, Catholic schools must take into account the ability of parents to pay when setting and collecting fees.
Communication: In the interests of equity and accountability, processes for the granting of fee remissions or fee concessions need to be transparent and communicated appropriately.

PROCEDURES

1. Policy Development

School communities are required to develop and publish their own school fee policies within the DEC policy framework.

2. Fee Setting

Catholic schools are obliged to set fees according to criteria that represent a thorough and transparent assessment of the internal and external factors influencing costs and the ability of the clientele to pay. Fees and their payment should be discussed with parents at the time of enrolment. Relevant fee policies and guidelines should be made available at that time.

For example:

Families with more than one student
A Family Fee Structure could be devised to provide a substantial discount for the additional students at the school and other Catholic schools. This approach may include higher levels of discounts for families with more than two students at the school.

EMA recipients
All children in receipt of an EMA allowance should be eligible to apply for a discount in the school fee. The level of fee concession is determined at the school level.

3. Determining and Granting Fee Remissions / Concessions

Catholic schools are expected to provide fee remissions/concessions to families in need.

4. Fee Collection

Catholic schools are required to develop strategies for fee collection that are consistent with the DEC policy framework. Schools should make provision for parents to pay in a number of ways: e.g. direct debit, weekly, monthly, per term or yearly. A full statement of fees payable for the year should be provided to each parent at the start of the school year and periodic statements (e.g. per term) should follow.

5. Collection of Unpaid Fees

The case of parents who are able but unwilling to pay fees, can be problematic for schools. Such cases are likely to surface only after the child has commenced in the school and parents refuse to meet their financial commitments. Every effort must be made to help those parents understand their obligations. It becomes a matter of justice to other parents and students at the school that they should meet their commitments.
The recovery of unpaid fees, particularly if this involves legal action, must be approached compassionately and sensitively to protect the child as much as possible from the public embarrassment that could arise. At all times in the collection of unpaid fees the Canonical Administrator should be informed.

The judgment as to whether parents are unable to pay because of their financial situation must err on the side of leniency.

The steps to be taken in relation to the collection of unpaid fees are as follows:

1. For those who fail to keep up with their commitments it is essential the matter be brought to their attention promptly and responses sought.

2. Follow-up on a personal basis should follow no response. This follow-up should be conducted by an appropriate person(s) in a sensitive, discreet and confidential matter.

3. If this fails, a formal letter from the school should be used to remind parents of their obligation. This letter should include an invitation to discuss the matter with the school and a specified timeframe for a response. (Refer to Appendix 1: Sample Letter 1: Fee Collection – Overdue Fees – First Reminder).

4. If this course of action is not successful, the school authority may decide to send a letter seeking payment and outlining the possible actions, including legal action that could occur if payment is not received within the specified timeframe. (Refer to Appendix 2: Sample Letter 2: Fee Obligations – Overdue Fees - Second Reminder).

5. As a further step, the school may use the services of a debt collector or issue a letter through a solicitor. In pursuing this course of action, schools should be mindful of the expectations of their relevant diocese with respect to any relevant procedures, including the need to advise the Diocesan Director of their intentions.

6. As a final step, court proceedings may be initiated but prior approval of the Diocesan Director of Catholic Education must be gained (for Congregational Owned Schools the Congregational Leader). Under no circumstances can a child enrolled in a school be refused on-going enrolment because their parents have not paid fees.

6. **Communication with the school community**

Catholic schools should employ a number of strategies for communicating with the broader community, including Catholic parents of students enrolled in government and other non-government schools and kindergartens. In relation to communicating about their fee policies, schools should ensure that:

- Their fee policies are reviewed and updated on a regular basis.
- Fee policies and related documentation are accessible in a variety of ways and from a wide range of sources including the school website.
- The school’s communication/strategy plan makes provision for the development and review of strategies for the dissemination of information about its fee policies.

**EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

Catholic schools will develop a policy for the timely collection and remission of school fees in line with the Catholic Church’s preferential option for the poor.

Catholic Schools’ Fees Policies will detail procedures to be undertaken for the collection of fees and unpaid school fees.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Sample Letter 1: Fee Collection – Overdue Fees – First Reminder.

Dear

Our records show that your son’s/daughter’s/children’s fees are currently overdue and that the amount of $X is outstanding.

If our information is correct, it would be greatly appreciated if you could attend to this matter by settling the account as soon as possible. Should your family be experiencing financial difficulties, please make an appointment with ___ to discuss the situation.

A copy of the account is attached for your information and record.

It would be appreciated if we could receive your response within 14 days of the date of this letter.

If you have paid the account within the last few days, please disregard this letter.

Yours sincerely


Dear

We refer to our earlier correspondence dated ___ regarding your account for school fees and note we have failed to receive your response. We advise that the account is well overdue and your early attention to this matter is required.

Fee concessions may be granted in cases of financial hardship or where other special circumstances exist. If this is the case, please contact me/the Principal to arrange an interview to discuss this matter.

It would be appreciated if you could attend to this matter by ___, following which the School may refer this matter to solicitors/debt collectors.

If you have paid the account within the last few days, please disregard this letter.

Yours sincerely,