Background

OneSchool is a unique organisation in education. It has a faith-based school network of more than 130 campuses in 20 countries, on nearly every continent. Our 9000 students from around the world are benefiting from the amazing results of global collaboration and cutting-edge educational methods.

With over 20 years of experience in delivering innovative and challenging education to students of all abilities, we are committed to achieving the highest levels of teaching from our professional staff, and academic potential from our students. OneSchool is a dynamic, global, high-achieving education provider which challenges learning norms and fosters a positive learning culture. The OneSchool culture values and nurtures a growth mindset which inspires continual innovation and facilitates the development of self-directed, life-long learners.

Oakwood Education Trust was established as a registered Scottish charity for the advancement of education in 1998. It currently runs 2 school campuses in Scotland with an aggregate total of 210 students; Caledonia North in Balmedie, Aberdeenshire and Caledonia South in Alloa, Clackmannanshire.

Oakwood Education Trust receives support from Focus Learning Trust, which is the UK-based umbrella organisation within the OneSchool Global network. There are currently 23 OneSchool campuses in the UK, all of which are non-selective and are registered as schools with a religious character, following the national curriculum.

In line with all other schools within the OneSchool network, Oakwood Education Trust’s 2 campuses are non-selective by ability and are highly respected facilities that demand high standards of behaviour and commitment. Our campuses are happy to be judged objectively against other schools on performance criteria, measured as the fulfilment of student potential and aligned to government standards.

Ethos

We are committed to a unique and distinctive culture where students are encouraged to develop their full potential and acquire the discipline of learning how to learn, while upholding Christian teachings and beliefs.

The truth and authority of the Holy Bible and strong family values underpin the commitment of our schools to provide quality in every facet of education – curriculum, teachers, facilities, management and discipline – in a safe and caring environment.

Values

In coming to their school each student, parent and staff member shall uphold the values of the school which include:

- **Integrity** - uprightness, honesty and decorous conduct, governed by the Holy Bible.
- **Care and Compassion** - kindness, consideration and generosity to all
• **Respect** - for all people, property, opinions and authority.
• **Responsibility** - for our actions, progress and the environment.
• **Commitment** - to self-discipline and the pursuit of excellence.

Our mission

Our mission is to ensure that our students develop the understanding, skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to fulfil their potential and contribute to their community and the community at large.

Our Vision

“A global education ecosystem that develops life-ready students who learn how to learn”

The essentiality of the faith-based religious ethos in our school

As outlined above, our school - at both campuses - provides a distinctly Christian ethos and upholds Christian values.

Our school is endorsed by the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church and is supported by children and young people from the Plymouth Brethren community. Our school provides the Christian ethos and culture that Christian parents from the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church desire for their children to be educated within, i.e. a culture where students are encouraged to develop to their full potential and acquire the discipline of learning how to learn, while upholding Christian teachings and beliefs. The truth and authority of the Holy Bible underpins the educational experience of the young people.

Although our school is predominantly providing for children from within the Plymouth Brethren community, our teaching staff are all qualified professionals from the wider community. Regardless of their faith, all our teachers acknowledge and respect the special Christian ethos of the school, which does not at all inhibit their ability to deliver a broad curriculum for our students.

Children from all socio-economic groups travel up to 120 miles per day from across Scotland to access this education at our faith-based school, with their parents paying fees that are a small fraction of the total educational cost per student, as low as £25 per month.

The Plymouth Brethren Community makes up the funding shortfall by both extensive fundraising and the personal sacrifice of its members; this sacrifice is very costly but is willingly made due to the essentiality to the Plymouth Brethren Christian Community of making these schools - with their unique Christian ethos and values – available to parents from within the community.

It is not possible for parents and children from the PBCC community to find a publicly-funded school in their area that will provide this faith-based Christian ethos; state schools understandably have to provide a secular ethos in order to accommodate children from all faiths and none i.e. atheists and agnostics.

A few quotes which underline the above (names available on request):
Parent from Kilmarnock: Despite our children having to travel over 60 miles to and from the campus each day, there is no alternative provision with the same standard of ethos.

Parent from Peterhead: We try to bring up our children by Christian principles that we believe in as a household. By sending our children to Caledonia Campus they get the right sort of companionship and they are taught in methods that are acceptable to us as parents. They are also encouraged to work to their full potential.

Parent from Edinburgh: We greatly value being able to send our children to an affordable school where Christian principles are upheld and valued, because we are assured that they are protected in a safe, secure environment.

Head Teacher: The school is a unique place to educate children where strong Christian values, such as integrity and compassion, are at the forefront of learning and at the heart of all that we do both in school and in the wider community. Bringing together students from various regions across Scotland and being able to create provision that promotes lifelong learners is invaluable.

Benefit to the wider community from our school

Whilst our school campuses serve the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church Community they are also firmly linked to the wider range of activities of the community. Given the wide geographical spread of the students who attend the schools, the consequent community links are extensive and far reaching.

The campuses have many links with their local communities which include; involving the members of the local community in school events, singing hymns and other popular songs at old people’s homes, working with the community on charity fundraising events for organisations such as RNLI, Guide Dogs for the Blind, and Macmillan Cancer. Our Caledonia South students also regularly visit nearby New Struan School - which caters for children across the autistic spectrum – working with and encouraging the students there.

We believe that the Christian values of our school are still of great profit within Scottish society; integrity, care and compassion, respect, responsibility and commitment are appreciated by all citizens and greatly benefit the wider community.

Our Key Points and Questions for the Committee regarding the Non-Domestic Rates Bill

We have been following with trepidation the release of the Barclay Review, the Scottish Government’s implementation plan and subsequent consultation, and now the newly launched Non-Domestic Rates Bill; in particular we are aware of the proposal within this Bill to remove non-domestic rates relief for independent schools in Scotland.

In its current format, we feel that the Bill is singularly unfair to us and would like to raise the following key points/questions with the Committee:

1) The Scottish Government has repeatedly made clear that there are a small number of schools which are not special schools but nonetheless have “exceptional circumstances”, and that these schools should continue to retain rates relief. These schools are to be distinguished from “mainstream” independent schools. However, in the proposed bill, “exceptional circumstances” has been restricted to “any independent school all the pupils of
which are selected on the basis of musical ability or potential, and follow a curriculum which includes classes aimed at developing musical excellence.” This is in spite of an acknowledgement in the Bill’s policy memorandum that “whilst children and young people should be educated in mainstream schools certain circumstances may exist which would prevent this.” May we suggest that independent schools that are “faith-based” in character and provide a particular ethos/culture from a specific faith which could not be replicated in a “mainstream” school, and which is specifically sought after by parents of that faith e.g. Christian, Jewish, Muslim etc, are also independent schools with “exceptional circumstances”? In this regard, we would like to draw the Committee’s attention to some notes of a meeting between OSCR and the Scottish Government regarding the impact of the proposed rates relief removal, held on the 3rd November 2017. OSCR’s notes of this meeting state that “there was a lot of positive discussion around how the changes might affect private schools that would not qualify for disability relief, but that did cater to specific marginalised groups and individuals. We all agreed that that would be a small number that could easily be found”. We would also like to highlight evidence provided by OSCR in April 2015 to the Public Petitions Committee regarding Charitable Status of independent schools. OSCR highlighted 4 categories of fee-charging school as being of note, as follows:

“For the most part the schools we reviewed were “mainstream” fee-charging schools, since these were of most interest in terms of the charity test. Even within that group the nature of the curriculum provided varied widely, and that is one of the characteristics and perhaps one of the benefits provided by the sector. Among the schools we reviewed were:

- 1 specialist music school
- 4 Steiner schools
- 1 international school
- 9 religious schools”

May we ask why the Scottish Government has currently only offered continued rates relief to one of the above special categories identified by OSCR? Certainly, as one of the “religious schools” mentioned above, this feels discriminatory to us; it seems to indicate that the Scottish Government is saying that music is good but religion isn’t! May we suggest that “exceptional circumstances” clearly cannot be so narrowly restricted to specialist music schools only, and can we recommend that further clarity around the meaning of “exceptional circumstances” is needed, enabling faith-based schools to be included also?

2) Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that should be given to their children”. Additionally, Part 2 of the First Protocol of the Human Rights Act 1998 Article 2 states; “No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”. Taking this into account, will the Scottish Government acknowledge that Oakwood Education Trust, without any state-provided funding, is providing education that enables parents with religious convictions to access education for their children that is in conformity with these convictions, and that cannot be accessed within the state (local authority) school system? Does it seem either fair, ethical or non-discriminatory for the
Scottish Government to be removing one of the few state benefits that this charitable institution currently enjoys?

3) We note with interest the statement within the Barclay Review suggesting that “independent (private) schools that are charities also benefit from reduced or zero rates bills, whereas council (state) schools do not qualify and generally will pay rates. This is unfair and that inequality should end by removing eligibility for charity relief from all independent schools.” Bearing in mind the important point outlined in 2) above, may we suggest that the only way to make this fair and equal for our school would be for the Scottish Government to provide a block funding grant to our school (e.g. a contribution per child) in the same way that a local authority school would receive? It is surely the local authority’s responsibility to ensure that the funding received by the local authority school is sufficient for the school to “pay rates” and still provide a good quality education for its students. Our school will not be able to pay rates and still provide a good quality education for its students; Oakwood Education Trust is entirely reliant on charitable giving - involving personal sacrifice - to raise funds, and these are obviously finite, meaning that the quality of education will be compromised.

Invitation to visit OneSchool Caledonia Campus

Our school has to be seen to be fully appreciated for its unique characteristics, and we would like to extend an invitation to visit our school campuses in Alloa or Balmedie, to any Committee Members who are interested in seeing for themselves. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for the work that they do, and for giving us this opportunity to submit evidence.