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AEU Federal Conference 2007 Final Statement

The 2007 AEU Annual Federal Conference condemns the Howard Government for its sustained attacks on public education, its teachers, other education workers and its students.

The Howard Government's systematic attack on public education and its teachers is an attack on one of the great institutions of Australian democracy. It is through the public education system that every Australian child has the opportunity to access a high quality education regardless of their background.

In reducing the share of funding to public education, the Howard Government threatens the notion of a 'fair go' for all Australians.

It is time for a new deal for Australia's students...a New Deal for Australia's Future.

It is time for the Howard Government to go.

The AEU calls on all political parties to immediately commit to:

- an injection of at least \$2.9B recurrent funding to public schools across the nation;
- prioritise Indigenous education by working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and their communities to develop and fund appropriate policies and ensure that all Indigenous children have access to a high quality public education, regardless of where they live;
- properly fund TAFE to redress previous funding cuts, address future growth of at least 5%, and provide for new and emerging needs, including research and innovation;
- work with the States and Territories to fund a ten year national plan for early childhood education and care which ensures that all children have access to two years of free, high quality preschool education provided by qualified teachers.

The AEU will campaign every day until the next Federal Election to ensure the defeat of the Howard Government. The defeat of the Government is the only way to begin to build a fair industrial relations system and a properly resourced public education system for Australia's future.

In some marginal seats, AEU members alone can alter the election outcome by changing their voting intentions. The AEU campaign will target marginal seats which must change to defeat the Government, involving the organising of members who live in those seats, media advertising and direct mail information in conjunction with other unions.

Background

Schools

Under this Government the share of federal education funding to public schools has decreased from 42% of total schools funding in 1996 to 35% in 2006. This will reduce further to 32% by 2010 unless their funding policies are changed. This decline is equivalent to almost \$1 billion less for public schools this year.

While Australia has the third highest contribution of private spending on education, the latest OECD report ranks Australia 18th out of 30 OECD countries for government education expenditure as a proportion of GDP.

The alarming level of under-funding of public schools across the nation is further exposed by the MCEETYA Schools Resource Task Force (SRT) which identifies a minimum \$2.9B recurrent funding shortfall needed to meet the National Goals of Schooling.

Indigenous Education

The Howard Governments' funding policies have damaged Indigenous participation in educational decision-making. There has been increased hardship for many Indigenous students since the abolition of ATSIC and the mainstreaming of Indigenous programs. In spite of this Governments' rhetoric in making Indigenous education a priority, there are still many Indigenous children who cannot access schooling in their home communities.

TAFE

Despite a national skills shortage, the Howard Government continues to under-fund TAFE. ABS data shows that 34,200 people were unable to gain a place in TAFE in 2005. From 1997 the Howard Government has cut TAFE funding by 24% in real terms, with recent additional funding being directed to student vouchers and employer incentives, rather than to TAFE.

The AEU calls on all governments to commit to a publicly funded TAFE as the preferred provider of vocational education and training in Australia. This involves a commitment to an integrated TAFE system that facilitates access to TAFE courses and provides for both broad and general education and vocational education in a collaborative environment.

TAFE must remain affordable and accessible for all students, and to this end the AEU will host a national forum to discuss, with a range of stakeholders, 'Affordable TAFE'.

The AEU will build on the findings of the National TAFE Inquiry to highlight the impact of the under-funding on the public TAFE system generally, with devastating consequences for TAFE students. Continued growth in the TAFE system, of at least 5% over the next few years, must be funded along with governments committing to funding research, innovation and upskilling the TAFE profession.

Early Childhood Education

The Howard Government continues to refuse to accept responsibility for funding and supporting quality early childhood learning. Research shows that by the time children begin the “compulsory” years of schooling many of the factors contributing to future inequality are evident. Disparities in access to early childhood learning are further exacerbating those inequalities.

New Deal Needed

The Howard Government is playing an increasingly aggressive role in shaping education policy through a form of coercive federalism by making education funding conditional upon embracing its agenda.

The strategy of coercive federalism further exposes its ideologically and politically motivated attacks on public education and Australian teachers. Most recently, this has taken the form of attacking curriculum standards and teaching quality in an attempt to divert attention away from the critical issue of chronic under-funding of public education.

The AEU rejects this agenda as dishonest and cynical.

Despite continued under-investment and the sustained attacks on teachers, teachers maintain high levels of professionalism and exercise their professional judgement to achieve the best possible outcomes for their students. This has been affirmed by international research which shows that Australian students are amongst the best achievers in international academic tests.

The AEU calls on political parties, in consultation with education stakeholders, to develop education policies which give priority to public education and recognise that the overwhelming majority of Australian children attend public schools. Australia needs political parties with policies that differentiate them from the teacher and public education bashing by the Howard Government and which deliver the best education for all Australians.

Further these policies should address the ongoing issue of teacher supply to ensure the future needs of public education. Appropriate recognition and reward for teachers is essential.

The ALP policy on “Recognising and Rewarding Quality teaching in Public Schools” announced in October which built on the MCEETYA work on Teaching Standards represents an opportunity to provide overdue recognition of quality teaching skills and practice within the framework of industrial agreements. It would provide significant additional funds to the public sector. It stands in contrast to the Howard Government’s announcements on performance pay which are nothing more than the pursuit of individual contracts as part of its attempt to ram its IR laws into public schools.

The recently reported comments by the new ALP Shadow Minister for Education, Stephen Smith, that teachers should be “marked on their performance” and “accept more assessment” were ill-informed and inflammatory. Smith’s reported statements continue to perpetuate the Howard Government’s myth that teachers in public schools are not accountable for their professional practice and ongoing professional growth. Nothing could be further from the reality in our schools: teaching is already one of the most regulated and accountable professions.

Industrial Relations

The Howard Government’s new industrial relations laws represent the greatest legislative attack on the rights of working people ever seen in Australia. The laws threaten living standards and democratic rights and aim to destroy collective bargaining and union organisation.

Educators are particularly concerned about the impact of these laws on our young people. We note with deep concern that there are already cases of children under 15 years of age being pushed on to AWAs. Under these laws, Australia will become a more unequal and divided nation: this is not the legacy we want for our students. We want a better and fairer Australia.

Further the AEU condemns the Howard/Bishop agenda to impose their IR policies onto teachers through placing conditions on future funding of public education.