

# Australian Education Union

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## **BAXTER: TEACHERS “FIRED UP” OVER CHILDREN’S RIGHTS**

The National Conference of the Australian Education Union will today (Thursday 16th January) urge governments to ensure that children being held in the Baxter Detention Centre near Port Augusta are allowed to start the school year alongside local children.

The conference will consider a motion calling on state and federal governments to work with educators and communities, and to commit funds to enable detainee children to receive education in regular schools.

The motion will further condemn the mandatory detention of asylum seekers by the Howard government and call for children and their families to be able to live in the community, provided they meet reasonable accountability, health and security checks.

AEU Federal President Denis Fitzgerald says it’s time to stop playing politics with innocent children.

“Every child should have access to free, quality education regardless of their cultural, social or economic circumstances.”

“The children in detention cannot be effectively educated in an environment which includes violence and trauma.”

“Not only is this a breach of international covenants on the rights of the child, but it’s morally reprehensible that this is happening for the sake of politics. Sadly, both the major parties are to blame” Mr Fitzgerald says.

“School resumes in South Australia in about 2 weeks. That’s 2 weeks to guarantee the care, resources and funding to meet the special needs of these children.”

“Furthermore, the AEU is keen to ensure that teachers and recreation officers employed to work in the Baxter Centre by East Gippsland TAFE under subcontract to the ACM management are part of a professional transition program for the enrolment of refugee children in local schools.”

AEU SA President John Gregory says he’s concerned that negotiations to enable detainee children to attend local schools could stall in the wake of the Baxter fires.

“It would be unfair and illogical to punish children for actions for which they’re not responsible – yet that’s what we fear could happen.”

“The AEU has been working with local schools and human rights groups to convince governments to allow detainee children to attend regular schools. We’ve also been working hard to encourage local communities to welcome them.”

“We’re very concerned that the federal government’s rhetoric of punishment and vilification may undo much of that hard work, and turn children into innocent victims by denying them the educational opportunities that should be available to every child.”

“Governments must work together to ensure funding, curricula, support and resources are in place from January 28. It’s not an impossible task, provided governments have the will” Mr Gregory says.

The conference will hear from 2 AEU members who have been closely involved in negotiations regarding the Baxter children.

AEU Port Augusta organiser Anne Bienke, and teacher Tracy Corstan say community consultation is vital to ensure a smooth transition.

Ms Bienke is urging parents to put themselves in a detainee’s position and consider what it would be like to see your own child denied proper education.

“These children are just that – children – whether they’re Australian, Afghani or whatever. I would like people to try to put themselves into the situation and see how they’d feel if it were their children in detention. Where is the great Australian tradition of giving everyone a fair go?”

“From the Port Augusta community’s point of view, it must be clearly said that the union isn’t expecting that the children will just be plonked in the school, and there’ll be no other resources put in place. We want proper resourcing, and it’s the job of government to guarantee that.”

“Some of the things we’ll be talking about with the State Education Minister on January 28 will be what resources will be provided in terms of ESL (English Second Language), counsellors and other needs” she says.

“We recognise there will be extra demands on resources and we don’t expect schools to wear that, but we would expect people to be compassionate enough to realise that these kids have the right to be educated in the normal way” Ms Bienke says.

The AEU federal conference will consider this issue on Thursday January 16. Media welcome to attend. Debate will begin at approx 10am. A media conference will be held at 12.30pm. 163 Greenhill Road, Parkside.

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