

Australian Education Union

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PUBLIC EDUCATION - SPENDING NOW MEANS SAVINGS LATER: NATIONAL CONFERENCE TOLD SMALL CLASS SIZES VITAL

Investment in smaller class sizes and addressing the special needs of disadvantaged students pays economic and social dividends, according to a prominent New South Wales academic who's spent a year reviewing that state's public education system.

The chair of the independent inquiry into public education in NSW, Professor Tony Vinson believes the trends revealed by study are not confined to New South Wales but have ramifications for public education nationally.

Professor Vinson will tell the federal conference of the Australian Education Union in Adelaide that improvements in the very early years of schooling are vital to a child's educational development.

"It's clear that some children begin their school careers with an educational advantage, having come from homes with books, where they have been stimulated mentally, and have probably attended pre-school."

"On the other hand, in the course of the Inquiry we encountered children who arrived at kindergarten without ever previously having handled a book or a pencil, let alone having benefited from the social-emotional and academic advantages of attending pre-school."

Professor Vinson says the inquiry found that children living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities have the greatest need of pre-school education but are the least likely to have that opportunity.

"However financial and other barriers to the participation of socially disadvantaged pre-school and kindergarten pupils can be substantially overcome when pre-schools are attached to state primary schools with an 'outreach' program. Just 5% of schools have such a program. Because it is a pressing social justice issue, the Inquiry has recommended a substantial increase in "attached" pre-schools within the next six years."

Professor Vinson says this initiative coupled with smaller class sizes is especially effective in boosting academic development.

"Students identified as being disruptive in later years are consistently described by teachers and parents as having grated with the school system from the beginning. And so, a socially just society should feel compelled to have small class sizes in the earliest years, especially in socially disadvantaged areas."

"An astonishing 800 research studies have been conducted in this area, some as comprehensive as research into new medical treatments. In my opinion, the evidence supporting the benefits of small

class sizes is as strong as that under-pinning any area of state policy that I have been aware of in over 30 years of closely following such matters.”

“The use of small class sizes in the early years of schooling can confidently be expected to have strong beneficial educational effects, especially for students coming from a socially disadvantaged background. Furthermore, those benefits can be expected to continue into secondary schooling and post-school education and training.”

Professor Vinson says long term studies have shown students given educational support to address disadvantage are less likely to turn to crime to make ends meet and less likely to be a burden on the welfare and penal systems.

Professor Vinson says a key element in additional educational support is attracting and retaining experienced teachers to areas of disadvantage. Greatly increased professional development funding is central to the revitalisation of teaching and learning.

He’s recommended that \$150 million a year for the next 3 years be spent in NSW alone to reinvigorate public education, rising to about \$200 million a year thereafter. While this sounds significant, it’s modest in an international context.

“OECD figures for public expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP reveals that Australia occupies a very modest 22nd rank position among the 29 countries listed.”

Professor Vinson is also critical of the massive diversion of funds to private schools.

“The result is that frequently twice as much is available to educate each young person in those schools as is available in the public system. The private purchase of that privilege might be justifiable but the diversion of public funds to sustain it in circumstances where public education urgently needs additional resources is not” Professor Vinson says.

AEU Federal President Denis Fitzgerald says Professor Vinson’s inquiry has relevance to public education systems across the nation.

“The clear message is investment in our young people makes human, social and economic good sense” he says.

“It is in public education that the majority of our children’s futures are forged, with public schools the educational choice for 70% of Australia. As a nation, we can’t afford to not invest more of our GDP – Gross Domestic Product – in growing our GDT – Gross Domestic Talent”

“This inquiry presents a challenge to *all* politicians. Do they have the courage and the will to secure the right of all young Australians to equality of educational opportunity? It’s a question on which the AEU will campaign strongly during 2003, to give all children the future they deserve” Mr Fitzgerald says.

Professor Vinson will present his keynote speech to the Australian Education Union Federal Conference in Adelaide at 2.30pm. Media welcome to attend – 163 Greenhill Road, Parkside.