



Australian Education Union

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Opinion piece – Angelo Gavrielatos, Federal President, Australian Education Union

Let's keep the focus on what our students need.

Education unions were the first to support Kevin Rudd's election campaign pitch for an Education Revolution in Australia.

Teachers, better than anyone except parents, know the challenges faced by the majority of Australian children who are educated in public schools. Schools suffering from over a decade of neglect and underfunding under the Howard Government.

The Education Revolution teachers want is one that delivers what our students need – smaller class sizes, more individual attention for special needs and modern buildings and facilities.

That's what parents want too – a high quality education for their child, no matter where they go to school or what their background is.

Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution seems to be about picking a fight with education unions. If it's a revolution it's already turned full circle and come back to the Howard Government blame game that helped to undermine morale in an already extraordinarily challenging profession.

Kevin Rudd says education unions want blank cheques without any accountability and that we are standing in the way of equity.

Accountability and monitoring are already a feature of every public school.

Parents, students and the public have a right to know that schools and teachers are competent, professional, and engaged in high quality teaching practices.

They also have a right to know whether governments are fulfilling their obligation to ensure that schools and teachers are properly supported, and that all students have access to a public education system of the highest quality.

What kind of Education Revolution would leave communities without schools?

According to his speech earlier this week, Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution is about more monitoring and more competition between schools, teacher sackings and closing schools where the kids aren't performing as well as other areas.

There was very little about the need for more investment. This is despite the fact that Australia spends less than nearly every other OECD nation on public education.

There was nothing about equity or creating an education system that gives every child the opportunity to succeed.

The Australian Education Union released a report this week by education expert Dr. Jim McMorrow. It shows that without new investment public schools could suffer a funding cut in real terms within three years.

This could equate to a loss of around 1000 teachers putting upward pressure on class sizes and the loss of vital education programs.

The analysis shows that the share of Commonwealth funds for public schools declined from 43 percent to 35 per cent in the Howard years. This share is projected to fall further to under 34 per cent by 2011-12.

This report takes into account all funding, including the Rudd Government's new programs.

The Prime Minister described Dr. McMorrow's report as dishonest. This is despite the fact that it was based on the Government's own budget projections – which according to Mr. Rudd, aren't 'concrete' yet.

Unfortunately, without any new detailed investment announcements, public schools have no other information to go on than federal budget figures.

The McMorrow report calls for an investment of at least \$1.5 billion to restore the share of federal funding to 1996 levels in order to ensure an equality of opportunity for all public school students.

This is not an ambit claim for blank cheques nor is it about teachers or education unions. It is not about private schools either.

This figure represents the bare minimum that public school students – the majority of Australian children – need to get the education they deserve.

The report acknowledges that this figure falls short of the \$2.9 billion needed according to Government research.

With this investment public schools could reduce class sizes and provide more individual attention and special learning programs for those students who need it. They could update old buildings and

facilities, or build badly needed new ones. They could offer a greater variety of programs and subjects.

Instead of investment, what we got earlier this week was 'schools watch'.

Greater data collection that will take years to complete and finesse and cost millions. What will all this information for parents tell them?

That the school their kids go to could do more and better if only they had the resources? Well, I challenge you to find any public school parent in Australia who couldn't tell you that right now for free.

All the evidence overseas and a recent OECD report shows that simplistic league tables do not improve educational outcomes, lead to school closures and to kids getting left behind.

Regardless of politics, Australia's dedicated public school teachers will continue to strive to lift overall student performance and address underachievement.

The drafting of new federal schools funding legislation does provide the opportunity to address years of neglect.

However, unless it includes substantial new investment for public schools there will be no Education Revolution.