



Opening of the 2009 Annual Federal
Conference
President's Address
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Conference, we have always maintained the view that the well being of a child, whether s/he is in our classroom, school, state, country or anywhere else in the world, is fundamental teacher business.

It is within that context that I wish to open conference by expressing particular sadness at the reported killing of some 300 children in Gaza since the commencement of Israel's military campaign on Gaza on 27 December.

The Israeli bombing of a school and a university is particularly condemned.

This latest conflict has seen approximately 1 000 Palestinians killed. It has also seen the reported killing of 13 Israelis, 10 of whom are soldiers at least 4 of whom were killed by "friendly fire".

While condemning the unlawful rocket attacks by Hamas and other militias, these actions do not legitimise nor legalize the actions of Israel which continue to impose a collective punishment on the people of Gaza.

According to the ***UN Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories occupied since 1967***, the unlawful blockade of Gaza which has inflicted 'a massive form of collective punishment' and the disproportionate use of force by the occupying Israeli forces constitute violations of International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

We will be revisiting this matter when we consider the International Report on Sunday.

Conference, the current "Global Financial Crisis" reminds us of the importance of our ongoing campaign against the marketisation and commodification of education as we continue to hold governments responsible for the provision of high quality public education for the common good. It should also serve a very timely lesson for the prophets of neo-liberalism.

Now more than ever, the failure of the "free market" having been exposed, governments should be providing certainty in the public institutions that guarantee every citizen's right to quality public education and other essential public services that are the hall mark of civil society.

Now more than ever we must join with like minded people for whom the failures of neo-liberalism are all too apparent. Now is the time for us to work towards the restrengthening of institutions built out of a commitment to the common good. It's time for us to see the end of Thatcherism which elevated individualism above all else decreeing that there is no society, only individuals.

These last few months have seen some unprecedented actions by governments around the world finding trillions of dollars to prop up failed markets.

What has been exposed is that when there is a political will, money can be found.

I can't help but to recall the Make Poverty History campaign when people interested in a greater humanity called on the richest nations in the world to wipe out 3rd world debt. What were we told? We can't afford it.

I can't help but recall our ongoing global Education For All campaign aimed at achieving the target of guaranteeing all children access to quality primary education. What are we told? We can't afford it.

Yet, as I just mentioned, we have been witness to announcements by governments allocating sums of money with too many zeros to count to bail out profiteers.

But what of our Federal Government's actions?

On 3 October 2008 in a speech to the Federal Labor Business Forum, commenting on the global financial crisis, Kevin Rudd said ... *this crisis bears the fingerprints of the extreme free market ideologues who influence much of the neo-liberal economic elite.*

Now is the time to put an end to discredited neo-liberal policies that have been to the detriment of public education. Now is the time for leadership and a bold vision for public education.

How bold and visionary would it have been for example if the Government chose to take an alternate path with respect to the collapsed for-profit early childhood empire of ABC Learning Centres.

The AEU has long campaigned for universal access to Early Childhood Education. As we know, this can most effectively be provided through our public education systems. The collapse of ABC Learning has opened a window of opportunity for a bold and visionary Federal Government to work with the state and territories on the development of a strategy so that ABC Learning Centres can be acquired and integrated into our public education systems.

On the topic of Early Childhood Education, as the government continues to rollout its early Childhood Education and Care policy and the creation of the 260 additional early childhood education centres, we must remain vigilant to ensure that there is no slippage when it comes to a vital aspect of this policy, namely the requirement of qualified early childhood education teachers in its delivery.

Continuing with the theme of bold vision, bold vision would see governments put an end to the failed policies of competition, contestability of funding and competitive neutrality principles for vocational education and training which have contributed to the skills shortage in this country. If fully realised these policies would decimate TAFE.

Through our efforts, and those of like minded people and organisations, we were successful in achieving the postponement of the Government's proposed National Partnership for the National Reform Agenda for VET.

On this issue we must remain vigilant as we know that the pursuit of this agenda remains in the minds of "free market ideologues".

Let me once again make it clear. It is planned provision through guaranteed funding for TAFE which remains the key to addressing the skills shortage.

Conference, the Rudd Government remains conspicuous by its silence when it comes to embracing the value of public education and its centrality in capacity building, community building and nation building.

We continue to witness this government promote false notions of “choice”. We know that the marketisation of schooling promoted as the means via which to enhance so called parental choice is not only the antithesis to but in fact displaces democratic notions of schooling namely the common good, equity, and the collective empowerment of the citizenry.

With his reference to shutting down schools, sacking principals and teachers and calling on parents to “vote with their feet” when making decisions about “which school”, the prime Minister simply shows the Australian public that he acquiesces to the ‘education as commodity’ mindset.

Market theory which may advantage some but disadvantages many is rejected.

The education as a commodity mindset is also clearly evident in the Government’s “transparency agenda” and notions of ranking schools.

It never ceases to amaze me that there are people who really believe that the very complex and complicated social and human endeavour called teaching and learning can be reduced to a single figure and ranked.

As we have said repeatedly, we have no issue with accountability. Our schools have been and will continue to be subjected to accountability measures. Indeed there has never been a period in history when teachers, principals and schools have been subjected to more public, media, political and, appropriately, parental scrutiny.

Parents, students and the public have a right to know that schools and teachers are competent, professional, and engaged in high quality teaching practices. Similarly information can and should be meaningfully reported to each school’s community in ways which will enable parents and prospective parents to make an informed judgement about the effectiveness of school programs.

Rather than promoting policies which will result in the construction of hierarchies of schools that will ultimately choose their students, governments should be ensuring the most fundamental of choices namely a public school of the highest quality in every community.

Simplistic and crude “school by school comparison”, a euphemism for league tables, is rejected by the profession. This does not constitute accountability nor valid comparison as no two schools have an identical student enrolment profile.

The answer doesn’t lie in competitive choice between schools but rather in policies aimed at properly resourcing and supporting schools and the establishment of a culture of evaluation and progressive refinement and improvement in all schools.

This whole debate is so beautifully summed up in this cartoon in the Sydney morning Herald on August 12 which shows the Deputy Prime Minister saying to someone who appears to be an advisor or a bureaucrat “if we spend money improving public schools it will be harder to rank them” ...“yes, better keep the inequities stark”. Says it all.

It is also under the guise of “choice” that successive governments have pursued policies which have promoted the funding of private schools at the expense of public education leaving public schools underfunded to the extent that Australia is now ranked second last out of 27 OECD nations in public expenditure on public

institutions. It is hardly a coincidence therefore that the same research shows experienced teachers being paid significantly less than the OECD average but teaching longer hours and more days and weeks than teachers in most OECD nations.

Conference, it is an understatement to say that the public education community remains bitterly disappointed that the Rudd Government has maintained the Howard Government's corrupt and discredited schools funding regime.

The Schools Assistance Act 2008 or, more accurately, the private schools assistance act was passed through the Australian Parliament on the 4th of December. It provides the quadrennium funding, 2009 -2012, for private schools.

It will see the continuation of the Howard Government's discredited school funding arrangements which favour private schools for another four years. It is a bill which maintains and extends privilege. The corrupt features of this funding regime will see the continuation and extension of largesse in the form of a further \$2.7 billion to private schools over and above what they would be entitled to were the funding formula properly applied. The five year cost will be over \$3.5 billion. As you know, approximately 60% of private schools remain funded outside their own SES model funding criteria.

Knowing that the government would not waver on this "election promise", in February of last year the Federal Executive developed a three year schools funding campaigning strategy with the following policy objectives

- in the immediate/short term (2008) the recasting of funding attached to flawed education policies into policies of greater impact in schools,
- in the medium term (2008-2010) the investment of significant additional targeted funding for public schools, and
- within the context of the announced review of schools funding in 2010 the ultimate rejection of the SES funding model

At this point I must digress. About a month or 2 ago a famous US citizen, in delivering a speech on the state of public education, declared that the school system in Australia, along with the US and Britain, is a "disgrace". Now, I don't know how qualified Rupert Murdoch is in making comment on the US and UK education systems, but I do know this, he is in no way qualified to do so with respect to our systems. What was equally appalling was the comment by our Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education who said that Murdoch is making a "hell of a lot of sense" .

Well for the record, the real disgrace in this country is the level of underfunding of public schools.

Without diminishing our fundamental belief in the need to constantly strive to improve on the outcomes of our students, research and data show Australian students doing well by international standards. Nevertheless, hysterical claims of a crisis in literacy and numeracy continue to have currency in the media and amongst decision makers.

As educators we will continue to fulfil our professional responsibilities to our students. What we ask for is for governments to fulfil their obligation to properly and adequately fund our schools.

Our campaign during the course of the year saw an unprecedented effort in political

campaigning. Strategic and systematic in its organisation we have maintained a significant presence at the local, state/ territory and national level.

Conference, I can guarantee that our lobbying efforts at the national level will continue. I need you to guarantee that they continue at the local level. The critical significance of local / electorate campaigning cannot be overstated.

As part of a “*come see for yourself*” strategy we need to ensure politicians are invited into our schools and colleges. This strategy will be most effective if it involves our members from each school working together in partnership with parents.

Politicians seeing firsthand the state of our schools and the extent of the chronic underfunding and neglect is the best political education they can be provided.

We also need to double our efforts in the establishment of public education alliances consisting parents and teachers and other stakeholder groups to broaden our electorate wide community campaigning, particularly in targeted seats.

We need to create the necessary political pre conditions to achieve dramatic increases in targeted investment in public schools in each budget cycle during the life of the quadrennium funding arrangements. Similarly, during that same period we need to establish the preconditions to inform the review of schools funding in 2010.

Our campaigning this year has also seen a significant paid and unpaid media strategy with an integrated community e-campaigning strategy.

Our television advertisement inviting parents, teachers and the broader community to join our campaign by logging on to the website www.forourfuture.org.au has been very successful.

To coincide with a heightened awareness associated with back-to-school and in an attempt to influence the next federal budget we will be relaunching our television advertisement next week.

Conference, much of our work and efforts during the course of the year were focused on the COAG meeting held on 29 November. The COAG meeting provided the perfect opportunity for the Rudd government to begin to redress the neglect of public schools. It provided the perfect opportunity to announce policies that would ameliorate, indeed off set, the discriminatory impact of the continuation of the SES funding model over the next 4 years.

The focus of our work was aimed at achieving a significant increase in funding, both **recurrent** and **capital**, for public schools and further funding to address disadvantage and issues related to teacher quality.

Conference our campaign for additional **capital** funding was informed by 2 things

Firstly, the bleeding obvious. The physical state of far too many of our schools is appalling. In the words of Professor Tony Vinson *in so many instances the fabric of the public schools is simply unworthy of what is being attempted within them and fails to honour our society's obligation to its children.*

Secondly, our campaign was and remains informed by the report prepared by education economist Adam Rorris. Adam is with us today and we'll be hearing from him shortly.

His report ***Rebuilding Public Schools 2020*** provides compelling evidence supporting our demand that governments must urgently redress the continuing under funding of public education infrastructure - its buildings, facilities and equipment.

The report conservatively recommends an additional \$22 billion over the next 12 years in capital works investment in public schools.

Refurbishing and / or rebuilding public schools across Australia will provide opportunities to create quality buildings and resources. Design should be informed by the need for all new infrastructure to conform to principles of environmental sustainability and allow schools to operate as genuine community hubs open to the whole community.

What better economic stimulus in these times than an infrastructure program aimed at building, upgrading or renovating our schools. Beyond the necessary economic stimulus, investing in our public schools and students is the most important infrastructure investment a government can make.

Given the failure of COAG to deal with this issue at all, we once again call on the Rudd government, in partnership with all state and territory governments, to establish a national standard with respect to a high quality teaching and learning environment.

With respect to **recurrent** funding, our campaign has been greatly assisted by **The McMorrow Report *Reviewing the evidence***

Supported by significant print media advertising, The McMorrow Report had an incredible impact on the politics of schools funding.

The analysis of the Federal Government's budget projections 2009-12 which showed a real funding cut for government schools but continued increases for non-government schools sent shock waves through the Government and the media.

Today we have released Dr Jim McMorrow's post COAG analysis of schools funding, ***Updating the evidence***

As is confirmed in this report, whilst we still have a long way to go, our campaigning for additional funding throughout the course of the year has achieved some positive outcomes. The COAG funding package announced on November 29 was the first serious investment in public schooling over more than a decade.

Whereas the Budget figures were indicating a fall in the share of commonwealth funding for government schools from 34.9% in 2007-08 to 33.8% in 2011-12, the funding share is now projected to increase to 37.1%.

This is a welcome development. That line on the graph showing an ever decreasing share of Commonwealth funding for public schools has been turned upwards.

That said, the adjusted share of Commonwealth funding being allocated to government schools is still lower than the level that applied when the Howard Government took office. It would require a further investment for government schools of \$1.4 billion above the COAG package simply to return government schools' share of Commonwealth funding to the 43% that applied in 1995-96 when Labor was last in office.

With respect to the projections for government school funding in real terms, the good news is that, in constant 2007-08 prices, Commonwealth funding of government schools in 2011-12 is projected to be around \$556 million higher than the Howard Government's last Budget for schools in 2007-08, an increase in real terms of 15.7%. This turns around the estimated projection of a cut in real terms over the same period as set out in Dr McMorrow's analysis of the May 2008 budget.

Conference, in total the COAG announcements delivered an addition \$3.5 billion in Commonwealth funding over the next five years over and above the funding budgeted for in the MAY 2008 budget. Our schools will receive approximately 80% of this \$3.5 billion.

The funding comes in the form of

- Additional money for government primary schools, ending a long standing anomaly,
- Additional funding in the form of additional indexation for government schools, and
- Additional funding for the Digital Revolution and the National Partnerships for Quality Teaching and Low SES schools which will be of benefit to approximately 15% of schools

Conference, whilst the COAG announcements are absolutely necessary, they remain insufficient. The majority of schools still miss out on what is needed. In the words of Jim McMorrow, *most government schools may not notice the increase at all, even if they notice the changes in school reporting and performance management now being required by the Commonwealth for all schools.*

Addressing underachievement associated with disadvantage is vitally important but it's not enough. We should be resourcing our schools to ensure we lift overall student performance **AND** address underachievement. Raising the achievement bar **AND** closing the gap is central to strengthening social inclusion and the productivity of the nation. It's not a case of choosing one or the other.

Having raised the issue of underachievement and social gaps, I'd like us to turn our attention to the plight of our Indigenous students and their communities.

Conference, it is almost 12 months since the Apology. The Apology remains truly a significant moment in Australia's history. In welcoming the Apology, this is what we said:

It marks the beginning of a journey which sees a painful and tragic period of Australian history acknowledged. It gives rise to ongoing opportunities for the process of Reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Australian Education Union stands in solidarity with the Stolen Generations, their families and communities as they experience, for the first time, a formal acknowledgement of their pain and suffering.

We concluded by saying *beyond today's apology, all levels of Australian governments must further acknowledge and urgently act to redress the significant and unacceptable gap between the educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.*

Whilst the Australian Education Union can take great pride in its history and traditions in championing the cause of Indigenous students and their communities, it is quite clear that the state of Indigenous education and the needs of Indigenous students still require urgent attention. Fundamental issues of access and equity have yet to be addressed in many communities.

By any measure, we have a long way to go in order to achieve an equality of learning outcomes for Indigenous students. The plight of our Indigenous students and their communities remains the most pressing human rights issue which confronts us and must be confronted by us.

The actions of the Federal Government with respect to the needs of Indigenous students and their communities remain inadequate and misguided to say the least.

As originally announced on 21 March 2008, and as reflected in the Schools Assistance Act, schools with significant Indigenous student enrolments will automatically receive the maximum level of Commonwealth funding. However, this announcement will only apply to non-government schools. The effect of this announcement will be that non-government schools with significant Indigenous student enrolments will receive 7 times more Commonwealth funding than government schools with significant Indigenous student enrolments. As you know, approximately 90% of Indigenous students are enrolled in government schools.

This was followed on 30 October 2008, with an announcement by the Prime Minister of a "\$20 million plan to address chronic levels of academic under-achievement, and close the education gap between black and white Australia". We are told that the money will fund 2000 school places over the next 20 years for Indigenous students to study at "elite" secondary boarding schools in the city.

Cherry picking students from their communities is not the answer to closing the achievement gap.

Conference, in accepting our responsibility to deal with the fundamental injustices still apparent among Indigenous students and their communities we must continue our campaigns aimed at achieving an increase in government effort, resources and the promotion of educational opportunities. While there are successful programs being implemented in some places, it must be acknowledged that these successes are usually isolated, short lived and do not have a wider positive impact on the overall system.

Today I want to announce the following key areas for action to improve the outcomes for Indigenous students and their communities.

Firstly, the need to explore different educational structures and models for the provision of public education to Indigenous students

The AEU continues to acknowledge that the provision of education to Indigenous students cannot be "more of the same".

Accordingly, the AEU reiterates the need to consider and develop different structures and models that take into account the needs of Indigenous students and their particular communities. Different communities may need different models. An isolated country community may require a different configuration of structures and approaches than a school in an urban environment.

Of course, the development of any such initiatives would require the prior consultation with and the agreement of local communities. The success of any such approach is reliant upon a shared sense of ownership.

The alternative structures / models may include the following characteristics.

- The establishment of programs operating from schools, involving appropriate government agencies, to support parents and their children aged 0 - 4. This would establish important links between school and community from an early stage.
- The establishment of education complexes delivering pre-school, school and post compulsory education (TAFE).
- The establishment of genuine inter-agency programs operating from schools with significant Indigenous populations, ensuring the school is the centre of community. These programs should be run by departments of Health, Sport and Recreation and other relevant government departments complementing the work of education departments.
- Without compromising the entitlements of employees, the establishment of extended operational hours and days - up to forty eight (48) weeks per year.

Staffing Policies.

With respect to the issue of teacher supply and retention in difficult-to-staff schools, whilst acknowledging the contribution and positive influence of beginning teachers, it is also acknowledged that teacher experience, continuity and stability contribute significantly to improved student outcomes and school development initiatives.

Whilst there is much to be learnt from successful programs the AEU supports the further development and negotiation of new staffing policies aimed at increasing the number of experienced teachers in identified difficult-to-staff schools, increasing leadership density and correspondingly reducing the number of beginning teacher appointments.

Furthermore, new staffing policy should include initiatives that include the early appointment and in-servicing of new teachers including principals who will teach in schools with significant Indigenous enrolments. The appointment of new teachers including principals during the final term of the school year will ensure continuity of programs for students.

Improvements in the recruitment and retention incentives available to classroom teachers, executive teachers and principals serving in geographically isolated, difficult-to-staff schools in Indigenous communities are also required.

Staffing policies must also promote the development and support of local Indigenous teachers and support staff. Apart from serving as positive role models for students such endeavours will serve to increase the capacity of community as a whole.

New industrial instruments / agreements

Let me again restate that the AEU, together with its Branches and Associated Bodies in each state/ territory, indicates its preparedness to negotiate changes aimed at improving the educational well being of Indigenous students. Of course, variations to

existing arrangements need to be negotiated and reflected in new / varied Awards / EBAs / Agreements as appropriate.

Conference, I want to finish off by thanking you for your activism and campaigning throughout 2008. It was a tough year. It's not lost on me that 2008 was a year of intense industrial disputation around the country with our members in nearly every state and territory engaged in industrial action. Disputes in some states have been resolved and they continue in others.

It is your resolute, brave and assertive campaigning that provides the evidence that we are a political force.

In 2009, on the national stage, we must continue to build our campaign to achieve additional funding and the necessary preconditions as we enter 2010 and the already announced review of Schools Funding. To be concluded in 2011 that review will inform schools funding from 2013. It will be a most significant moment in the politics of education in Australia

With respect to the terms of reference of the review, which no doubt the government is starting to consider, I'd like to say this.

In her first speech to Parliament in 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister describes the inequality of educational opportunity that exists in her own electorate. She declares that *"this massive discrepancy would be lessened if we as a nation were prepared to seriously tackle the inequality of opportunity that exists in our education system and create a high class state school system."*

In determining the terms of reference for the review of schools funding policy, we hope that Julia Gillard returns to the values as expressed in her first speech.

In closing let it be clear, it is free, secular, universally accessible Public Education that remains the key to a vibrant, socially cohesive and prosperous Australia.

Solidarity.