



Opening of the 2010 Annual Federal  
Conference  
President's Address  
18 January 2010

Angelo Gavrielatos  
Federal President

Angelo Gavrielatos  
Federal President

Susan Hopgood  
Federal Secretary

Australian Education Union  
Federal Office  
Ground Floor, 120 Clarendon Street  
Southbank Vic 3006

***A real revolution in education will only come when a government ensures that its state schools set the standard of excellence. Then and only then will we have equity.***

*Geoffrey Robertson QC, National Public Education Forum, 28 March 2009.*

Conference, coming together at Federal Conference gives us an opportunity to celebrate the successes of the last 12 months but, probably more importantly, coming together in the spirit of our traditions of union solidarity and social justice unionism, gives us the opportunity and strength to build our campaigns for the next 12 months - campaigns necessary to achieve our policy objectives in the interest of public education – our students and members and a better Australia.

With respect to the celebration of achievements I wish to open conference by honouring Susan Hopgood on her election as President of our Global Union Federation, Education International and, what we hope and expect to be the election of our past president, Sharan Burrow to the position of General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.

Whilst these 2 achievements represent a great honour for Susan and Sharan respectively, they are a source of even greater pride for the Australian union movement and our union in particular. These achievements represent an acknowledgement by the international union movement of our history and traditions as an activist campaigning union.

Conference, that history and tradition is such a vitally important source of inspiration for us all. This will be particularly important to us this year which, without a doubt, will be a critical year in determining the future of public education for years to come.

## **Schools Funding**

Long overdue, in 2009, we witnessed an unprecedented increase in funding for schools education by the Rudd Government. The Rudd Government certainly deserves credit for this.

The first major increase was announced on 29 November 2008 as part of the COAG National Partnership agreements. In total the COAG announcements deliver an additional \$3.5billion in Commonwealth schools funding over five years.

As you know, this funding comes in the form of:

- Additional funding for government primary schools and an increase in indexation for all government schools, and
- Additional funding for the Digital Revolution and the National Partnerships for Quality Teaching and Low SES schools.

The second increase in funding for public schools was contained in the economic stimulus package announced on 3 February 2009. This included a \$14.7 billion, ultimately increased to a \$16.2 billion, investment in school infrastructure over a three year period. The education infrastructure investment represents the largest single investment in school education seen in this

country. Approximately 70 per cent of this infrastructure spending has been allocated to public schools.

These outcomes are without a doubt the result of the tireless campaigning by members and supporters of public schools for more than a decade.

Conference, today we have released a report by Dr Jim McMorrow. Called *The Rudd Government's Budget priorities for government and non-government schools: the latest evidence*, it is the third and final report by Dr McMorrow. The report highlights that despite its record investment in schools, the Rudd Government continues to be haunted by the schools funding policies of the Howard Government i.e. the discredited SES schools funding regime which it chose to extend until 2013.

A discredited, indefensible funding system that continues to deliver levels of ever increasing funding to private schools that cannot be justified on any educational or equity grounds.

A funding system so flawed that private schools are given huge increases every year regardless of their wealth.

A funding system so corrupted that 50 per cent of all private schools receive more than they are entitled to - \$3.5 billion dollars more than they are entitled to.

In the words of Dr McMorrow,

*Commonwealth funding of schools is projected to total \$82 billion over the funding period 2007/08 – 2012/13: \$35 billion for the two-thirds of the nation's students in government schools and \$ 47 billion for the one-third in non-government schools.*

In total, that represents a 60% increase in schools funding – an 80% increase for public schools and a 50% increase for private schools.

As Dr McMorrow notes, *from the standpoint of public schools, this substantial investment has begun to turn around some of the funding neglect that characterised the Howard years.*

However, *funding projections for the outer years of the budget continue to be driven by deep underlying currents in the form of the Howard Government's funding policies and formulae for schools.*

*This legacy is demonstrated by the fact that, despite the Rudd Government's record investment in schools, the projected share of Commonwealth funding directed to public schools at the end of the current funding period in 2012-13 - at 36% of total schools funding – would still be lower than the 43% share that was in place at the outset of the Howard Government's term. By the end of the Howard years, the Commonwealth was spending less than 32% of its schools budget on public schools, a decline that could not simply be explained by enrolment shift, nor justified on educational or equity grounds.*

*Another way of looking at this issue is to consider funding trends for each student in a public or non-government school.*

*By the end of the budget period in 2012-13, the MYEFO figures are projecting a real increase in Commonwealth recurrent funding for government schools of just over \$520 per student, or 45%, in comparison with 2007-08. This increase would fund the equivalent of three additional teachers, on average, in a government school of around 500 students.*

*The comparable real increase for each student in a non-government school is higher at \$860, or 17%, reflecting the Commonwealth's higher funding for non-government schools. This would support the employment of the equivalent of five additional teaching staff at a non-government school with 500 students.*

Deputy Prime Minister Gillard has committed the Rudd Government to a review of schools funding. It is due to commence this year and conclude in 2011.

Whilst there is still no clear indication of the precise commencement date, the terms of reference or what form the schools funding review will take, Julia Gillard has stated that:

*“Australia’s system of school funding is one of the most complex, opaque and confusing in the developed world,” and that the “review needs to be as transparent and comprehensive as possible, to maximise the engagement of the public and the wider community and to give every stakeholder full opportunities to contribute and get their point across.”*

Conference, this review represents one of the most important chapters in the history of schools funding in Australia. The outcome of the review will determine the shape of Federal Government funding for many years to come.

This review represents an opportunity to finally get rid of the Howard Government funding regime and replace it with a funding system that gives true meaning and effect to the ALP's policy and Kevin Rudd's own words that *“the Commonwealth has a primary obligation to adequately and appropriately fund Government schools”*.

Against such a backdrop, one could be excused for thinking that the outcome of the review will be a just system of schools funding. Regrettably that will not necessarily be the case as we cannot depend on the Rudd Government to deliver on its own policies.

Conference, the success of our campaigning in 2010 will be reliant upon the mobilisation of our membership and public education supporters across Australia. It will require the full resources of the union to achieve our objectives of establishing the primacy of public education with respect to funding and further policy formulation by the Federal Government.

We must now deepen our campaign as we work towards the review of schools funding.

Our campaign must be one that is clearly aimed at ensuring that we are able to mobilise and activate every single public school community right across Australia. At the time when the review is called we must have put in place the necessary leg work and organised to achieve that

outcome. A submission from every single public school community in Australia to the schools funding review is our minimum target. Beyond that we need to do a lot of work to intensify our efforts in targeted electorates where we would expect to generate even more activity amongst our members, parents and the broader community.

Paul Keating said of Kevin Rudd in the lead in to the last Federal election that Kevin Rudd needs a focus group to tell him which side of bed to get out of each morning. If this is true, we must ensure that our campaign objectives are reflected in every focus group conducted by this Government.

Conference, we must win the hearts and minds of mums and dads, local and aspiring members of parliament and governments on the fundamental issues related to the values and value of public education. It's about ensuring that they understand the value of public education to Australia's past and what it means to capacity building, community building and nation building in the future. It's about ensuring that they understand what public education means and guarantees for each individual child and the nation as a whole and the critical role it plays in bridging and bonding communities.

To that end the Federal Executive has endorsed a set of principles upon which to build our campaign. Indeed, any funding system should satisfy the following principles.

## **Principles of Schools Funding**

- **True equity can only exist when government schools set the standard for high quality education.**
- **The primary obligation of governments is to properly and adequately fund public schools.**
- **Every family has a right to a well resourced, high quality public school in their community.**

**This guarantee ensures that every child has a right to:**

- **a high quality public school where all children can learn together and learn to live together.**
- **qualified teachers and staff to meet their needs and aspirations.**
- **a curriculum of the highest quality which ensures the development of the whole child.**
- **a safe, modern 21st century learning environment.**
- **achieve his /her personal best.**

Conference, the very opportunity to recreate a priority government funding commitment in support of government schools has seen a number of predictable suspects seek to resurrect funding proposals aimed at further undermining the right of parents and students to a public school of the highest quality in their local community.

We have already seen the Liberal Party aligned Centre for not-so-Independent Studies and the Institute of Public Affairs resurrect radical right wing notions of school vouchers as a form of schools funding.

We know that vouchers are a smokescreen intended to disguise the further increase of funding to private schools.

A voucher system to fund each individual's education represents the absolute commodification of education, smashing any notion of public education for the common good.

By denying public schools any guaranteed minimum level of funding, vouchers will further divert funding away from the capacity of schools to develop programs to meet the needs of all children.

Whilst dressed up in the language of parental choice, vouchers will be beholden to the rules of the market place. As in all other social arenas the market place always favours the individual choice of those with power, money and privilege.

Conference, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August last year, I met with the then leader of the Liberal / National Coalition, Malcolm Turnbull. At that meeting he said, and I quote, "I've always believed that funding should follow students not schools."

Now, that was before their shift to the right with the dumping of Turnbull for Abbott.

Tony Abbott must rule out the introduction of a policy that would cut public school funding and replace it with vouchers for individuals. The international evidence shows the introduction of vouchers has increased the privatisation of education. Contrary to the claims made by proponents of such madness, vouchers have not increased the overall quality of education being delivered. As hard as it may be to believe, even John Howard was not prepared to introduce vouchers acknowledging they '*undermined the fundamental value and strength of public education*'."

Conference, our students and schools are not a marketplace and no place for a radical right wing agenda to be rolled out.

Conference, the Coalition remains no friend of public education. It spent the better part of school year 2009 attacking the Federal Government's multibillion dollar investment in schools infrastructure. Whilst refusing to nominate which 4 out of 5 schools should miss out, the Liberal party argued at the time the program was announced that it should be reduced to one fifth of its size. When they realized that was an electoral loser they turned their attack on the implementation of the program sighting "wastage" and "inefficiencies" attacking only projects for government schools. Not once did they highlight wastage by drawing attention to elite private schools getting funding to extend already lavish facilities.

Whilst the Liberal/National Coalition continues to attack public education and the Rudd Government maintains a notion that we must move “*beyond the public versus private debate that has blighted our education debates*”, the continued support of Public Education by The Greens is not only welcome, it is vital.

The Greens continue to articulate a strong opposition to the obscenity of the corrupt and totally discredited SES schools funding regime and maintain a position of winding back funding to private schools.

### **Invest in Quality, Invest in TAFE Campaign**

Conference, throughout 2009, Kevin Rudd delivered speeches and wrote articles repudiating market fundamentalism. He rightly attributes the cause of the Global Financial Crisis—which continues to cause hardship and pain for people around the world—to the unfettered markets of neo-liberalism and the ideologues who drive it.

Unfortunately, there remains a massive contradiction between what Kevin Rudd has said and the policies of his government. Nowhere is this contradiction more apparent than in the Rudd Government’s VET policies.

The result of the ideological obsession and ideologically driven rush by the Howard Government, and continued by the Rudd Government, to establish a competitive market i.e. privatise the VET sector has been playing out before our very eyes with the collapse or withdrawal of private provider after private provider literally leaving thousands of students on the scrap heap.

These very realities in VET for international students have already manifested themselves in the domestic VET market and will grow unless the Federal Government dramatically changes course. Failure to do so could result in a rerun amongst Australian students of what’s happened to the international student market.

Conference, we have seen a dramatic skewing of the domestic VET market to the private sector due to the policy settings for the Federal Government’s Productivity Places Program (PPP). In fact, the skewing towards private providers is even more pronounced in the PPP than in international VET.

Figures released by DEEWR show that only 2 per cent of PPP enrolments were with TAFE even though TAFEs provide around 80 per cent of vocational training in Australia and dominate trade skills training in the areas which are in critically short supply. Contrary to initial claims that PPP would be targeted at occupations facing skill shortages, the bulk of the PPP enrolments have been in cheap to deliver, lower level certificated areas which are not considered critical skill shortage areas.

Conference, the TAFE sector is being progressively undermined by underfunding and the enforcement of increased competition for scarce resources.

Between 2003 and 2007, under the Howard Government, there was a steady decline in the percentage of GDP spent on public vocational education and training. The most recent figures show that expenditure per student hour fell by nearly 9 per cent.

Whilst the Rudd Government has invested \$500m through a Teaching and Learning Capital Fund for VET as part of its economic stimulus measures, and opened the multi-billion dollar Education Investment Fund to VET providers, including TAFE, its major allocation of “new” funding for VET places has been the \$2 billion Productivity Places Program. The problem is, as I’ve just mentioned, the nature of the program and the pitiful level of funding per student, has resulted in less than 2% of places going to TAFE so far.

With the next Commonwealth State funding Agreement due in 2012, our campaign for additional funding for TAFE, **Invest in Quality/Invest in TAFE**, is designed to put pressure on the Federal Government in the lead up to the next election.

Conference, on Sunday, 3 January we awoke to media reports of an appalling racist Facebook group.

As reported in the Herald Sun, *“more than a dozen elite schools are embroiled in a race hate scandal as many of their students join a Facebook group calling for immigrants to get out of Australia.”*

*The group's page, which features a picture of the Australian flag with the words "F--- off we're full" written across it, tells non-English speakers "if you wanna speak your crappy language, go back to were (sic) you came from".*

*The Facebook group is called "Mate speak english, you're in australia now" and has more than 5000 members from across the nation. It is growing by more than 300 people a day.*

Regrettably, we continue to witness the result of the seeds of fear, division and xenophobia sown by the Howard Government.

We have often asked the question, what kind of society will we be in 10, 20, 30 or 40 years time if we continue to promote education and schools funding policies which exacerbate rather than ameliorate social divides.

As we go into the review of schools funding, let us remember that multiculturalism comes alive in the classrooms and the playgrounds of the local socially representative government school.

Public education – free, secular, universally accessible – remains the key to a vibrant socially cohesive and prosperous Australia. It is where students come to learn together and learn to live together ‘side by side’.

Conference, I started by talking about our history and traditions because I believe it is important. It is equally important to remember that as the custodians of our history and traditions we have an obligation to honour them and ensure they remain strong.