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Real national test for students is in the budget.

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

There are two critically important things happening in Australian education tomorrow and both of them involve tests.

One is the start of national testing for students in schools – the much vaunted initiative to have kids across the country in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit literacy and numeracy tests.

The other, and in my view, much more important test, is the Federal Budget where we will see whether the Rudd Government is prepared to confront the biggest problem in education – the chronic under-funding of our public schools . But more on that later.

Effective assessment is at the heart of successful teaching and learning. It provides information on student progress to students and their parents and important diagnostic evidence that assists teachers in planning for ongoing improvement.

National testing is being promoted by government as a way to identify underperforming schools and allow school by school comparisons to highlight the best and worst achievers.

However, the weight of international evidence strongly suggests that a mass standardised testing regime does not deal with the real issues involved in providing excellence and equity in education.

In fact, research from the US and UK indicates that mass standardised testing potentially compromises over-all education outcomes because it narrows curriculum by forcing teachers to “teach to the test”. Misleading school by school comparisons have been counter-productive and in some cases been used to justify school closures.

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

Accountability, however, does not end at the classroom door. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that schools and teachers are properly supported, and that all students have access to a public education system of the highest quality.

While students across Australia are sitting their tests, the real test of Australian education will be the first federal budget from the new Rudd Government.

Our education system's level of resourcing is an important way to assess whether we are giving Australian students the best opportunity to succeed.

Under the Howard Government, Australia's public expenditure on education declined dramatically by world standards. Australia is now ranked 3rd last against other OECD nations.

During the same period the share of funding for public schools was continually reduced. Now only 34% of federal schools money is allocated to the public education system which educates nearly 70% of Australian children.

The Rudd Government has committed to maintaining the funding system that delivers this inequity until 2013.

Without additional funding beyond Labor's election commitments, public schools and our students who attend them will continue to be ignored.

The key issue for teachers and students in the first Rudd Government budget will be whether it repairs the damage wrought by the Howard Government to public education.

Government research clearly shows that public schools nationwide are under-funded by at least \$2.9 billion per year.

Meeting this shortfall is vital to ensure that teachers and schools can continue to strive for the highest standards in education.

With adequate resourcing we can improve overall student performance and address underperformance.

This requires a commitment from governments to resource effective programs for students with special needs, to reduce class sizes, to provide 21st Century learning environments including modern buildings and equipment, and to provide competitive professional salaries in order to recruit and retain the best teachers.

Governments must ensure that all students, no matter where they live or what their socio-economic background, are guaranteed access to a rigorous, rich and rewarding curriculum aimed at equipping them with the knowledge and skills required to be successful in modern society and pursue the widest range of opportunities in life.

Teachers work hard to make sure every student achieves their best.

But we cannot achieve results on our own.

Kevin Rudd has stated the Commonwealth has a primary obligation to adequately and appropriately fund Government schools.

While hundreds of thousands of students are being tested tomorrow, the bigger test is whether the new Federal Government will fulfill its fundamental responsibility to fund a public education system of the highest quality for all.