

Australian Education Union
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Making Quality Public Education a National Priority
Senator Lyn Allison

The Democrats join enthusiastically with the AEU in its campaign to make public education a national priority. I think we have a lot to be proud of in our education system. Any testing of our levels of learning compares favourably with countries worldwide.

Our problem in education, in comparison with other countries and even in comparison with the Australia of a few decades ago, is that there is an inadequate commitment on the part of governments to bridge the gap in the educational achievements of the haves and the have-nots.

Kids who are bright and who have supportive, well educated and well resourced parents are doing much better than those who happen to be born into poor or isolated families or who might have a learning disability or a language problem or who are indigenous.

And, as we know, how well we do in school is a significant determinant of how well we do socially and economically in adulthood. 85% of our prison population did not even finish year 10.

To me, universality in education is public education having the resources to meet public expectations. The Federal Government will spend \$5.5 billion on private schools in 2006/7 and just \$2.66 billion on government schools. It is hardly surprising therefore that those expectations are not being met.

With a third of students now in private education where, on average, two to three times as much is being spent on them as those in government schools, it is obvious that parents expect more than they are being offered in government schools and, if they can, most are willing to pay a lot of money for their children to have those resources.

It follows that those who need educational help most are not getting it in the current system.

The Democrats are committed to public education. We have consistently called for much more investment in government schools and we have been one of the few political parties prepared to criticise the Federal Government's funding bias towards private schools and to vote against the legislation that delivers it in the Parliament.

We have enjoyed a very good relationship with the AEU and I hope we can continue to work together for the sake of public education.

1. Preschool

The OECD report in 2001 said that quality early experiences promote children's short term cognitive, social and emotional development as well as their long term success in school and later in life. It also supports the notion that investing in quality early childhood education and care is cost-effective in terms of preventing later costly intervention.

Preschool is important and we know it makes a difference in a child's success in schooling and their motivation to succeed. Why then would you not guarantee that every child has access to good quality preschool, and, at the very least see that children most likely to be educationally disadvantaged such as indigenous children, have the best we can possibly afford?

(I congratulate the AEU for its sponsorship of an independent inquiry into the provision of universal access to quality preschool education. The Democrats will be pleased to make a submission.)

Democrats Preschool Plan

In 2001 we pointed out that:

- There are no national standards, a patchwork of state, local government and community run centres, no coordination between governments, little access for 3 year olds, a great reliance on parents for organisation, prohibitively high fees and between 30,000 and 80,000 children in Australia thought to be missing out on preschool altogether.
- The Federal Govt has played almost no role in preschool education since 1985 when it withdrew funding of \$33 million/year

We should:

- Develop a comprehensive, well-funded and cohesive national education system overseen by a new National Board of Education. (I understand the Government is currently developing a *National Agenda for Early Childhood*.)
- Fundamental should be a system that is free and universally available for three and four year old children
- Reinstate the Commonwealth annual preschool-specific grants to the states to remove the need to charge parents fees (Most OECD countries spend between 0.4 and 0.7% of their GDP on early childhood programs, Australia spends only 0.03% - the third lowest of 24 countries surveyed)
- Shift administrative responsibility from parents back to state and local government
- Provide centralised curriculum and teaching support
- Develop a model of funding that provides a class size of say 15 children to each teacher and assistant but allows flexibility for reasonable fluctuations in preschool population
- Provide better linkages with maternal and child health services, childcare and primary school, coordination with other childhood development services and networks that can provide educational support for parents helping their children

- Provide additional funding for improvements in preschool facilities, many of which are substandard

Preschool Teachers

There is currently a shortage of preschool teachers; they tend to be isolated, particularly in single community-based centres in rural areas. A switch to percapita funding in some states has meant large class sizes and teachers forced into part time employment and, in many cases, preschool teachers are paid significantly less than their primary school peers.

- We need to improve teacher and staff salaries and conditions and provide additional teacher training places and ongoing Professional Development

Democrats Schools Plan

- \$1billion/year is urgently needed for Government schools to keep pace with community expectations and to narrow the gap between the resources available to government and non government schools

Like others, the Democrats have been very critical of the huge increases in funding from the Federal Government to non-government schools because:

- many of the wealthiest schools received disproportionately more than schools in far greater need
- the SES model takes no account of real ability to pay or private sources of income
- the funding maintained and Catholic school exclusion means that more schools are out than in the system making the rationale for the model highly questionable
- the funding for non government schools is linked to the AGSRC meaning it will continue to increase significantly under the guise of indexation

Louise Watson argues that it is not the model that's the problem but that the funding given to schools at the high SES scores is disproportionately generous compared to schools at the lower end.

I don't necessarily agree with that – I think needs assumptions based on average incomes over discreet geographical areas are crude and bound to deliver anomalies and inequitable outcomes, however simple they may be to deliver.

The Democrats will move for the Senate Education Committee to review the SES.

Teachers

The Democrats have been warning for some years about the shortage of teachers – ever since Barbara Preston published her first report on the subject.

In short there is no plan to overcome the problem. The states blame the Federal Government; the Federal Government blames the universities. 27% of the teaching workforce is eligible to retire by 2007. If nothing is done, we will have a shortfall of 5,000 teachers by 2005 and 20,000 to 30,000 by 2010.

The statistics on students being taught by teachers not fully qualified in the curriculum area concerned are frightening. They are not good for students or for the teachers forced to teach outside their subject area. I think it is one of the key reasons teachers are leaving the profession.

- 5,000 more teacher undergraduate places over the next 3 years
- HECS fee exemptions
- Generous incentives for maths, science and IT and people from rural and remote areas
- Long term workforce planning
- National registration of teachers and accreditation of teacher education courses
- Improved professional development, career progression, succession planning and mentoring opportunities

Facilities

I don't think there is any more obvious sign of under-resourcing in government schools than the facilities provided – or lack of them. I visit many schools – government and non-government and the differences are stark. At the last election, we called for:

- a fibro replacement scheme, replacing portables more than 10 years old
- an Australia wide audit and long term planning to see that facilities and equipment are appropriate

Literacy Plan

- at least one full time specialist teacher in each school skilled in learning disability
- additional education specialists for disadvantaged schools where literacy and numeracy problems are identified
- more post graduate places in learning disability

Indigenous Plan

- innovative distance education training programs for indigenous people working in schools as teachers or assistants
- support for teaching indigenous languages or bilingual education programs
- a new National Indigenous Advisory Council to develop improved indigenous education policy, tackling as a matter of urgency, the currently inadequate schooling for remote areas
- working with indigenous communities to tackle serious health and substance abuse problems

TAFE

In 2004 40,000 young people will miss out on a TAFE place because of the Federal Government's four-year old funding freeze. Apart from a somewhat limited growth funds in 2001-3, there has been no more money despite an annual growth rate for 10 years of around 6% per annum.

So more students missing out, higher class sizes, increased casual teaching and wasted money on dodgy non-TAFE training providers. You would never guess that Australia has a skills shortage!

TAFE Plan 2001

- Renegotiate the ANTA agreement and provide additional Commonwealth funding of \$670 million over three years
- To address the current drop out rate of new apprentices in VET, the funding models need to be changed to:
 - o Reward quality, student support and successful completion
 - o Recognise the reality of different learning rates and students' needs and circumstances
 - o Place greater weight on strong education values to underpin vocational training.
- For teachers:
 - o Expect that over 3 years, TAFEs will change their staffing profiles so that a minimum of 70% of content is delivered by permanent professional, accredited teachers
- For students:
 - o Increase the parental income test threshold
 - o Lower the age of independence to 18
 - o Increase Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy to parity with the aged pension over 5 years.

2004 is going to be an election year and I welcome the AEU's input into our education election campaigning. We will conduct another School Poll – the last one, the report of which is on our website - provided us with a very important critique from Year 11 students of their schooling. I can recommend their reflections on what makes a good teacher too.

We were pleased that the Federal Government acted on our push to see a National Safe Schools Framework and that has now been agreed by MCEETYA.

The shortage of teachers is now a serious crisis as is the funding deficit of the TAFE sector and we will pursue both these issues at the election.

The Senate Education Committee is currently considering terms of reference for its next inquiry. I am keen for this committee to look at the SES funding model and anything the AEU can do to encourage the ALP to support such an inquiry would be welcome.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today.