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Teachers Want What Students Need

Opinion Piece by Pat Byrne, Federal President, Australian Education Union

John Howard and his Education Minister, Julie Bishop, have spent a good part of this week trying to distract Australian parents from the most important issue when it comes to educating our children: funding for public schools. But for all the headline seeking bluster, Mr Howard and Ms Bishop will not get away from the fact that they are depriving the majority of Australian students of the funding they need to get the best education possible.

This month students across Australia have been going back to school. Some may have gone back to private schools kitted out with expensive IT facilities, state of the art drama and music halls and perhaps even drought-proofed green sports grounds.

But if you are among the majority of Australians, it is more likely that your children have returned to public schools that are delivering quality education despite the shortfall in resources needed to maintain all their buildings, keep class sizes down and give students with special needs the attention they deserve.

The great challenge for Australia is to ensure that every child, no matter where they live or how much their parents earn has the opportunity to get a high quality education. To do that we need to ensure all public schools across the country are properly resourced.

Teachers want what students need, and that is what we are campaigning for.

A large majority of Australian children attend public schools. Yet since the Howard Government came to power, the share of federal funding going to the public education system has steadily decreased until now it receives barely one third.

The most recent Productivity Commission Report shows that the Federal Government spends \$1051 per public school student compared to \$4515 per private school student.

No matter how Mr. Howard or Minister Bishop try to distract from the issue, their Government chooses to govern for private schools.

Government research shows that public schools need an extra \$2.9 billion a year to ensure every school student in a public school is able to achieve the national goals of schooling.

These goals were established by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, with the aim of ensuring every student has the opportunity to fully develop his or her talents and capacities.

Because of the massive funding shortfall overseen by the Howard Government, many Australian children are cheated and miss out on this opportunity.

Is the Liberal Government doing what voters want when it reduces its share of funding for public schools?

Absolutely not. A national poll conducted for the AEU in 2006 found 66 per cent of people believe the Federal Government is not providing enough funds for public schools and 67 per cent believe public schools should be the main educational priority for the Federal Government.

Ninety per cent of respondents said extra money spent on education should go to public schools.

Despite a load of rhetoric about quality and standards, Minister Bishop recently proposed to allow unqualified teachers into classrooms, something the AEU unreservedly rejects.

Currently, teaching is one of the most accountable professions in Australia.

Negotiated processes exist to deal with underperforming teachers in every state and territory. The AEU also participated in the development of a national set of teaching standards by MCEETYA to map out career progression for teachers. Teachers are already using these professional standards by way of collective agreements in some states.

What we are opposed to is the Federal Government attempting to introduce individual contracts in schools which will force teachers to compete for bonuses based on test scores.

It's a cash for grades scheme that hasn't worked successfully anywhere in the world.

Australia ranks 18th out of 30 OECD countries on education spending and is in the grip of a major skills and teacher shortage. But instead of looking to fix this shameful record, the Howard Government persists with backward looking curriculum debates and teacher bashing.

It is way past time for a proper national education debate. In the lead up to the federal election the AEU will campaign to gain commitments from all political parties to properly fund our public schools. Public education must be a Federal priority.