

Australian Education Union Federal Secretary Rob Durbridge argues the Prime Minister has begun the new year with some very shoddy work.

At least the Prime Minister has the decency to put his mouth where his money is.

John Howard's attack on public schools this week brings into the light the shift in federal funding that is changing the very foundations of our nation's school system. It also makes clear that the PM is committed to elitism and inequity.

The Federal Government's education funding policies are entrenching inequities and creating a two-tiered system of education. It pours two-thirds of federal school funding into private schools including many elite schools, and only one-third into funding public schools. Why are universities putting up fees? Because now private schools have overtaken universities as the Federal government's prime area of education spending. TAFE funding is frozen for the same reason.

In monetary terms the Commonwealth gives \$2.9 billion to private schools, which 30 per cent of students attend and only \$1.7 billion to public schools which 70 per cent of students attend.

So we have a nation where elite schools like Trinity Grammar receive over \$5.5 million, The Kings School over \$3.5 million and Geelong Grammar, nearly \$4 million. On the other hand, a quality public school like Glen Waverly Secondary gets \$1,490,000, Bankstown Girls High School \$549,000 and Penrith High \$707,364.

As an economics student would know, such disparity in resourcing will tend to have an impact on demand.

What has been the impact of these funding decisions? It has caused a slow drift to private schools overall, but not nearly at the rate of change in funding.

Yes, enrolments in private schools have increased nationally, as have enrolments in public education. While the growth in private schools is greater than public, there are areas where the public school system continues to grow faster; areas where state governments have invested. In Tasmania and the Gold Coast there has been a drift to public schools.

When the Bracks Government reinvested in almost 2000 extra state primary school teachers, enrolments grew. In short, students go to where the resources are.

As any maths student knows, statistics are open to interpretation.

Presuming the shift is occurring, we should ask ourselves why. By focusing on issues like 'political correctness' the Prime Minister is importing his own values into the equation.

The proposition that our state schools are value-free is absurd. Public and private schools teach to a curriculum governed by national frameworks based on shared outcomes. We sit the same public examinations. Our schools promote inclusion and participation in the community. We are aware we are shaping the next generation of Australians and carry that responsibility with us every day.

Moreover, the research we have conducted, with both our members and the broader community, points to the fact that it is funding and not values that is the main factor behind the drift to the private sector. Some parents choosing private schools resent the fact that governments have failed public schools.

Parents who take their children out of public schools often do so reluctantly, not comfortable with separating their children from their friends, but concerned that the public system is being denied adequate resources. Factors like behaviour and uniforms are often exaggerated in the media to discredit public schools when they cut across both sectors.

Nevertheless, there are improvements and reforms needed in public schools; ask any teacher. If we had twice the time, half the students in the class, double the support and equipment and twice the professional development we would make a big difference. That is the difference between the level of resources on which elite schools operate compared to the average school. Those are the schools to which Mr Howard has given the largest funding increases.

As any science student should know, hypotheses should be tested rigorously before they are presented as fact.

So what is really going on here? Are the PM's statements really a further attempt to divide our increasingly diverse society? Is the call for values another coded call for mainstream Anglo Australia to place its history, culture and tradition above those of other groups? Or is it simply the anti-state mindset of this ultra-conservative taking him further into an unreal world of absurd hyperbole. Is he really saying that he will only provide funding to institutions that reflect HIS values?

An English student will tell you that there's a narrative behind the text – and this one is all about this year's election.

Teachers, public and private, have judged the PM harshly for his attempt to denigrate our schools and our teachers for political gain. But we know that many trouble-makers re-offend, if not dealt with promptly.

Stand by for John Howard and his conservative cheer squad to attack public school teachers as ideological trouble-makers, while ramping up the funding for the elite schools that reflect the PM's own values.

And remember that you were taught at school to consider the facts before coming to a conclusion.

