

Turning the tide

With an election approaching, the AEU is raising the stakes for politicians in its fight for more equitable education funding. By Tracy Bower.



The controversial States Grants Act, governing the allocation of federal funding to schools, must be replaced by a fairer system over the next four years, says AEU federal secretary Rob Durbridge.

In a federal election year that is shaping up to be a critical time for public education, criticism of the Act is at the core of the AEU's new advertising campaign to highlight the inequities in federal education funding.

The AEU has told MPs of all political persuasions that it is determined to make education funding a vote-determining issue. It will run community-based campaigns in marginal seats in an unprecedented push for change.

In 2000, the federal Labor Party's consent to pass the Act lost it much of the support it had traditionally received from educators.

"We want to see the Act replaced by a new, fair system as soon as is practicable," says Durbridge.

The Act is due to go before parliament in the middle of this year. In its current form, it allocates funding to a minority of non-government schools based on the

socio-economic status of their students' addresses. Other non-government schools have been given exemption or special arrangements to ensure no loss of income.

In both cases, the system does not take into account any accumulated wealth a school has and as a result many wealthy independent schools have had large funding increases in the past three years—as the AEU campaign points out. Some elite schools have received increases of more than 200 per cent.

The government allocates two-thirds of federal school funding to private schools and one-third to the public schools that educate 70 per cent of Australian children, DEST (Department of Education, Science and Technology) figures show.

With a review of the States Grants Act and the federal election predicted to fall in the same year, the AEU believes it has the chance to turn the funding tide by raising the profile of the debate. It is pushing for equitable distribution to public schools from the national budget, federal funding for pre-school education, increased TAFE

funding and improved programs for Indigenous students, with more Indigenous teachers.

Some 39,600 prospective students were turned away from TAFE in 2002, says the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and the AEU blames the situation on a federal government freeze on funding to the states.

A lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers means Indigenous students have virtually no chance of

It will run community-based campaigns in marginal seats in an unprecedented push for change.

being taught by an Indigenous teacher. A serious shortfall in teacher training in Indigenous studies means students across the board are missing out.

"The funding mechanism the federal government put in place in 2001 is so gross that any person of fair mind has to oppose it," says Durbridge.

Pushed into private AEU polling indicates that the education funding issue could indeed be a vote-changer. Focus groups



Above: AEU federal secretary Rob Durbridge addresses Federal Conference 2004.
Left: The media was present to cover Federal Conference's endorsement of the National Public Education Campaign.

report community dissatisfaction with the level of privatisation of public services. There is concern that the government has not provided for needy students who rely on public education the most. Even some middle-class families with children at private schools feel resentment that the government's underfunding of public schools has effectively pushed them into the private system.

Polling shows the debate cuts across cultural and religious lines. The public school system educates far more low-income Catholics than the private Catholic system.

The AEU's ad campaign will target women because polling indicates they are most likely to change their vote over the issue, and they are the ones to influence male voters, who are more focused on other issues. Women with school-aged children and grandchildren are the campaign's primary focus.

The campaign will be community-based with schools sporting "Public education—it is our future" slogans.

Local organising committees will be formed, particularly in certain marginal electorates.

AEU research shows that, over the past two decades, government schools' share of enrolments has declined while the private schools' share has increased by about seven per cent. However, Durbridge cites successful programs in Tasmania, Queensland and Victoria as proof that public investment in infrastructure and teachers can turn enrolments around.

Set the standard

The AEU is also stepping up its direct lobbying of federal MPs as part of its recently implemented Hands Up project (see 'Stand and deliver' above). While the current Coalition government's policies are at odds with the AEU's stated objectives, the union is emphasising that it is not aligned to any political party and seeks to set the standard for all parties.

Opposition Leader Mark Latham's

STAND AND DELIVER

The AEU's new project to take its concerns directly to the capital's policy-makers is called Hands Up. It will beef up direct lobbying of federal MPs ahead of the next federal election.

The project, approved by the federal executive last June, will inform MPs of union concerns in a regular newsletter and by establishing links with all major parties. At least two issues of the Hands Up newsletter have already been distributed in Canberra.

AEU leaders have met with the Coalition's backbench education committee, and with the Democrats and Greens, who hold crucial Senate votes. AEU federal president Pat Byrne made sure she made contact with MPs from all parties when she was guest of honour at a Parliament House reception last year. Labor's Caucus Public Education Group is interacting regularly with the AEU on policy ideas and providing research material.

The Hands Up project—which will continue beyond the next federal election—is also to ensure that AEU members are fully informed about developments in parliament.

See www.aeufederal.org.au for the latest Hands Up newsletter.



Left: The AEU's advertising campaign was launched with this television advertisement.

stated pride in his own public school education and ALP policy is encouraging, says Durbridge, who nevertheless notes that the ALP and minor parties are yet to announce concrete policies on the relevant issues.

John Howard's recent criticism of the lack of values in public schools has helped the AEU's cause, says Durbridge. The comments alerted the community to "the hostility the Prime Minister has towards most teachers, students and parents in Australia, who choose the public system". ■

TRACY BOWER is a freelance writer.

Follow the progress of the national public education campaign and view the television advertisement online at www.publiceducation.org.au.