

# Time for action

The new federal government needs to live up to its tough talk about rebuilding the nation's educational assets. **Carolyn Rance** reports on the AEU's clear plan of action.

**T**he AEU has called on the new Commonwealth government to kick-start its promised 'Education Revolution' with a \$2.9 billion boost in public schools funding. The union has set out a blueprint to underpin the raising of literacy and numeracy standards. The six-point plan (see box) is aimed at ensuring that all students receive the highest

possible standard of education. Federal president Angelo Gavrielatos has stressed the need to reverse Howard government policies which have pushed Australia down to third last in the ranking of public expenditure on education in the 26 OECD countries. Speaking at the union's annual federal conference in January, Gavrielatos said that the crucial first step in reversing these policies was addressing the shortfall in recurrent funding identified by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) taskforce. A national poll, conducted by the AEU, indicates that a funding boost would be in tune with the thinking of many Australians. Seventy-one per cent of participants said education was an important factor in the way they voted last November. Sixty per cent of participants who switched their vote from the Howard government in the 2004 election to the Rudd government last year said the former government's neglect of public education was

## History will judge

History will judge former Prime Minister John Howard's leadership harshly, recalling for future generations his government's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, detention of children behind razor wire, the Tampa affair, children overboard and support for the war in Iraq, says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos.



Former Prime Minister John Howard will be remembered for his lack of social leadership

Criticising the ousted government for its use of fear and division to drive policy, he told the AEU national conference that the past 11 years would be remembered for lack of progress in reconciliation between black and white Australians, efforts to make multiculturalism a contestable concept, introduction of the most extreme industrial relations laws seen in Australia and unrelenting attacks on the public education system and its role in building a tolerant and cohesive society.

A decade of Coalition government had caused "serious erosion of progress on many social justice issues".

John Howard had much to say on the teaching of history during his years in office, says Gavrielatos. "But history will record that the policies of his government systematically undermined the sense of a fair go that has traditionally defined Australia as a nation."

FAIRFAX PHOTOS



AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos addresses the federal conference

Such remedies would have broad support among the Australian public...



an important factor in their decision to make the change.

The time for talking is past and it's time for action, said Gavrielatos. "Kevin Rudd said he would govern in the national interest. There could be no greater, more tangible example than ensuring that public education is a national priority."

He urged the new government to rethink its decision to maintain the controversial socioeconomic status funding model which, the union has consistently argued, favours wealthy private schools and entrenches inequality. He said the announcement that the "distorted, corrupt and discredited" model would remain in place until 2012 "makes a mockery of the ALP commitment to a needs-based funding model—a model supported by 87 per cent of people polled".

### Central role

In the run-up to the election last year, Rudd was adamant about education's central role in determining Australia's future. "Education must lie at the core of our long-term strategy for our national security, our national prosperity—even our national survival," the now Prime Minister said in a speech to the Melbourne Education Research Institute in January last year. He reiterated the point in media interviews and speeches throughout 2007. At the Labor Party's campaign launch in November, he said an education revolution was the cornerstone of his vision for the future, and described education as the engine room of equity, opportunity and the economy.

"I want every child growing up in Australia to have the opportunity of fulfilling their

## Your say



**Correna Haythorpe**  
branch president,  
AEU South Australia branch.

"Reducing class sizes is extremely important. When you have fewer children in your class then you obviously have more capacity to spend time with the students who require that extra support. This will produce the greatest outcome—in terms of increasing literacy and numeracy."



**Maurie Mulheron**  
principal, Keira High School,  
Wollongong.

"Over the past few years teachers have been locked out of curriculum design—this must change. It's important that we resist the notion of one centralised prescriptive national curriculum, which is really about imposing control through mass testing and diluting the influence of teachers on the ground. Equally, we should resist attempts by the corporate world to influence curriculum."



**Howard Spreadbury**  
Lead organiser,  
AEU South Australia branch.

"A significant number of four-year-old children across Australia are not accessing any preschool education at all. We need national consistency in access and we need to maximise young children's access to a quality preschool education before they enter school. Ultimately, three-year-olds should also receive 20 hours of quality preschool education a week."

### Briefly

- Significant public education funding is needed to kick-start the Rudd government's 'education revolution'.
- The AEU has launched a six-point strategy to underpin an increase in literacy and numeracy for all students.
- This strategy focuses on curriculum, class sizes, salaries, infrastructure, Indigenous education and early childhood education.

Your say



**Jeff Cooper**  
principal, Grovedale College,  
Victoria.

"Low salary levels are starting to impact substantially across the system—it's now difficult to attract new teachers and we're losing teachers to better paid jobs interstate and in the private sector. We've got to have a national system that fairly and reasonably rewards teachers across the board."



**Beth Craddy**  
English/History teacher and  
Indigenous Education  
Coordinator, Dickson College,  
ACT.

"When kids see that their education is valued through investment in buildings and facilities, they actually appreciate it and work more effectively. Educating for the 21st century demands an investment in infrastructure. Environmental sustainability is a key issue but the available funding is insufficient to make a significant impact in older schools."



**Charline Emzin-Boyd**  
NSWTF Aboriginal Education  
Coordinator.

"Firstly, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must have access to schools. A priority is for kindergarten students to start school with the appropriate readiness, to ensure better educational outcomes. If we don't look after the people who look after our children, what sort of hope do we have for ensuring our children have a better future in education?"

potential," said Rudd. "My vision is to build the best education system in the world so that we produce the most innovative, most skilled and best-trained workforce in the world."

"The sad reality is that over the last decade, Australia has been falling behind in early childhood education, in trades training and in national funding for universities. The economies we are competing against are making huge new investments in education. They know that knowledge-intensive economies will be the wealthiest economies of the future. We need nothing less than an education revolution—a revolution in the quantum of our national investment across the entire education spectrum, and a revolution in the quality of those investments to improve radically the performance of the education system."

A clear agenda for education, and improved funding for schools and TAFE, was needed to turn the words into reality, said Gavrielatos. With Labor in office federally and in all states and territories, there was an opportunity to end the blame-shifting that has plagued Australia for more than a decade, with all governments working cooperatively to build a public education system able to provide the academic and practical skills the nation needed.

Gavrielatos said the Howard government cut TAFE funding by 26 per cent in real terms. "This has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Australians being turned away from further education and training. TAFE offers the most efficient and effective way to build Australia's

skills base, and an immediate and dramatic investment is needed."

**State response**

State governments must also respond to demands for increased schools and TAFE funding, says AEU South Australian branch president Corenna Haythorpe. If literacy and numeracy levels are to be improved, teachers must be able to give students more individual attention, which raises issues such as reducing class sizes, she says.

Western Australian branch president Anne Gisborne says more funding to raise the performance of all schools is both an economic and a social priority. "Public schools already deliver strong, internationally recognised, literacy and numeracy programs, but a strategy is needed to ensure all students achieve to the best of their ability," she says. "Education professionals—the people who have been trained, who work with children and who understand the research—need to be part of frank discussions about how this can be done."

The recurrent funding shortfall identified by the MCEETYA taskforce is an illustration of the lack of commitment to public education over a significant period, says Gisborne. "Federal and state governments can't afford continued neglect. If we don't increase funding, it's not just individual students who will be the losers, it's the nation as a whole as we erode our capacity to compete internationally. We only have to look at the difficulty we have now in providing people with the appropriate skills to meet Australia's economic needs." ●

CAROLYN RANCE is a freelance writer.

**The AEU's six-point plan**

The federal government can start making its education vision a reality by immediately targeting six funding areas critical to underpinning literacy and numeracy improvements, says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos:

- A curriculum guarantee that all students receive a rigorous, rich and rewarding education regardless of their location or socioeconomic background.
- Reduced class sizes so teachers can give more individual attention to all students, from the most gifted to those with special learning needs. This would allow expanded enrichment and extension programs, and early intervention when needed. Reducing classes is the top education priority among parents and other members of the public, according to AEU polling.
- Competitive teacher salaries as a vital part of recruiting and retaining the best professionals. Australia's class sizes are above the OECD average while teacher salaries are below the average. The common incremental scale should be retained and salaries for all teachers significantly increased. Over and above this, the AEU will hold the ALP to account for its
- Commitment to fully fund a scheme recognising and rewarding highly accomplished professionals with payments of about \$10,000 a year on top of their scale rates of pay.
- Creating 21st century learning environments. The quality of school buildings and their surroundings is a potent symbol of the regard in which governments and communities hold their schools. Under-funding of public education infrastructure needs to be urgently addressed.
- A national strategy for Indigenous education is a vital part of ensuring that Indigenous children get the same education opportunities as other Australians. Investment needs to be boosted dramatically to end the national disgrace of a system that fails to deliver for many young Indigenous people.
- At least 20 hours a week of quality early childhood education is critical to preparing children for school and addressing the inequalities often apparent by the time they step into a primary school classroom.



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