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A first, serious investment

We welcome the federal government's new funding for public schools.

School year 2009 began with the great news of a dramatic boost in funding for public schools by the Rudd government. It is the biggest increase in funding for public schools in decades.

This outcome is the result of the tireless campaigning by members and supporters of public education for more than 10 years.

The increases are located in two different Commonwealth government packages.

The first of the increases was announced on 29 November 2008 as part of the COAG agreements, which will deliver an additional \$3.5 billion in Commonwealth schools funding over the next five years, over and above the funding promised in the May 2008 budget. Public schools will receive approximately 80 per cent of this \$3.5 billion.

An analysis of this announcement by Australia's leading expert on schools funding, Dr Jim McMorrow, showed that the COAG funding package was the Commonwealth's first serious investment in public education in over a decade.

While clearly welcoming this announcement, McMorrow's report counselled that these increases should be kept in perspective.

The extra \$2.8 billion over five years for public schools arising from the COAG agreement remained less than the funding the Commonwealth will provide to guarantee above-formula recurrent grants to private schools. Over the next five years, private schools will receive approximately \$3.5 billion more than they would be entitled to, were the Commonwealth funding arrangements properly applied.

Approximately 60 per cent of private schools are being given above-formula funding. This is secured through The Schools Assistance Act 2008 or, more accurately, the private schools assistance act, which

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was passed through the Australian Parliament on 4 December and provides the quadrennium funding, 2009-2012, for private schools. It will see the continuation of the Howard government's discredited school funding arrangements for another four years.

The second of the two announced increases in funding for public schools was contained in the Rudd government's economic stimulus package announced on 3 February 2008. Aimed at ameliorating the

effects of the global financial crisis, it included the announcement of a \$14.7 billion investment in school infrastructure over a three year period. At least 70 per cent of this package will go to public schools. It will allow schools to attend to urgent small-scale school renewal and maintenance projects as well as more substantial projects such as the construction of halls, performing arts centres, libraries and multi-purpose learning centres that will also be available for community use. The fact that there is a public school in every community across Australia means that the benefits intended as part of the economic stimulus package will be felt everywhere.

Only weeks prior to the announcement, independent research by education economist Adam Rorris, released at the AEU's federal conference, had shed further light on the level of underfunding on public school buildings and facilities in Australia. The research showed that between 2002 and 2006 Australian governments spent on average \$1000 less per public school student per year than Britain and the United States. It showed a funding gap of more than \$2 billion a year. It confirmed the extent of neglect of public schools when it comes to vital capital funding.

Now more than ever, governments must provide certainty in the public institutions that guarantee every citizen's right to quality education—public schools. ●



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