

Demand for equity

The battle for fair and equitable funding for public schools is ramping up.

by Tracey Evans

Briefly

- The “unprecedented” increase in federal funding for schools is welcome, but inequity continues.
- In the lead-up to the government review of funding, public school communities are urged to actively support a campaign aimed at creating a fair system.

With the Rudd government planning a review of schools funding next year, the AEU has called on public education supporters and school communities to send a message to Canberra.

“A submission from every single public school community in Australia to the schools funding review is our minimum target,” AEU president Angelo Gavrielatos told delegates at the recent AEU Annual Federal Conference.

The campaign also aims to “win the hearts and minds of mums and dads, and local and aspiring members of parliament on the fundamental issues related to the values and value of public education”, says Gavrielatos.

“It’s about ensuring that they understand the value of public education

to Australia’s past and what it means to capacity building, community building and nation building in the future. It’s about ensuring that they understand what public education means and guarantees for each individual child and the nation as a whole and the critical role it plays in bridging and bonding communities.”

As noted by Dr Jim McMorrow in his third and final report on schools funding, whilst the Rudd government has overseen an “unprecedented” increase in funding for all schools, the inequity between public and private school funding is set to continue.

Commonwealth recurrent funding for private schools is projected to continue to increase at a higher amount than that for public schools, reports McMorrow, “due mainly to the enduring effects of the unfair and dysfunctional general recurrent grants program the Rudd government inherited from its predecessor”.

“A comprehensive review of public funding policies for schools across all sectors and governments is increasingly urgent,” writes McMorrow, an honorary associate professor of education at the University of Sydney.

Professor Alan Reid from the University of South Australia argues that, central to any such review, must be the public purposes of education—that is those purposes that benefit society as a whole, rather than those that are solely focused on what education can do for the individual.

The danger of a focus on the latter, he says, is that it produces “self interested, competitive and culturally bound individuals who are more interested in their own self-advancement than they are in making a contribution to the common good”.



Principles of schools funding

The AEU Federal Executive has endorsed a set of principles that underpin the campaign for a fair funding system:

- True equity can only exist when government schools set the standard for high quality education;
- The primary obligation of governments is to properly and adequately fund public schools;
- Every family has a right to a well resourced, high quality public school in their community.

This guarantee ensures that every child has a right to:

- a high quality public school where all children can learn together and learn to live together;
- qualified teachers and staff to meet their needs and aspirations;
- a curriculum of the highest quality which ensures the development of the whole child;
- a safe, modern 21st century learning environment;
- achieve his/her personal best.

“In a globalising world where the role of the nation-state is changing and societies are becoming increasingly culturally diverse, schools are needed more than ever for the important public purpose of forming active citizens for a democratic society—people with the will and commitment to shape, and participate in, an inclusive and democratic society that is responsive to the new environments and challenges,” says Reid.

The “significant potential” for education as a public good had been marginalised during the last decade under the Howard government with its focus on choice and the market, says Reid.

“We now have a government which is at least using the rhetoric of equity, has increased spending on education

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Dr Jim McMorrow

Honorary associate professor,
University of Sydney

and has made education a central item on the national policy agenda. This is good.”

But with no changes to the way recurrent school funding is calculated, the Rudd government has simply maintained all of the anomalies

and inequities of the Howard years, he says.

The government’s planned review of funding must establish principles based on ‘public good’ purposes of education, says Reid, “starting with the fundamental principle of providing universal access to state provided quality schools in every community”.

The review represents an opportunity to replace the Howard Government funding regime with a system that gives true meaning and effect to the ALP’s policy and Kevin Rudd’s own words that “the Commonwealth has a primary obligation to adequately and appropriately fund Government schools”, says Gavrielatos. ●

Tracey Evans is a freelance writer and commissioning editor of *Australian Educator*.

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