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Towards fairer funding

The schools funding review panel's position on equity in education is a step in the right direction.

This year offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve a fairer funding model for Australian public schools.

The new funding system, due to begin in 2014, must reflect the public purposes of education and the primary obligation of Australian governments to properly and adequately fund public education.

An 'Emerging Issues' paper, released in December by the panel conducting the Review of Funding for Schooling, notes the diverse views presented in an initial round of consultations with almost 70 schooling stakeholders. However, its statements on equity of learning outcomes should give us heart as we continue our campaign.

The panel's position on equity is that it "...should ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. The panel does not intend it to mean that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes, but rather that they will not be prevented from achieving their maximum potential because of their background or family circumstances".

We must work to ensure that this definition of equity underpins the review's recommendations and future government decisions on school funding.

Recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results reinforce the AEU's view that while Australia remains in the second highest group of countries, our performance in the international assessment of 15 year old students should be a wake-up call for policymakers.

The review panel itself notes that Australia's performance in international assessments highlights the large number of students at risk of falling behind their peers. It acknowledges that many education groups have concluded that the allocation of funding

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for schooling in Australia may be inequitable and not fully support the opportunity for all students to achieve their full educational potential.

The panel has stated that it wants to identify arrangements that enable funding to be "equitably distributed among schools; that is, directed to where it is needed most so that students are supported to overcome barriers to achievement, regardless of their background or where they go to school".

We will continue to demand an unqualified commitment to equal opportunity through funding arrangements that, in the words of the review panel, "support universal access to a quality education for all students and, by extension, put all students in the best position possible to achieve their full educational potential".

In this context, any recommendations or decisions on the continuing use of the Average Government Student Recurrent Cost index [AGSRC] as a suitable measure for determining private school funding will be crucial.

Under the current system, funding levels for private schools are indexed through the AGSRC to reflect the increase in costs incurred by government to educate students in public schools.

This is clearly inappropriate because public schools enrol the great majority of students from the five most common categories of educational disadvantage – lack of English language proficiency (including refugees and migrants), Indigeneity, remoteness, disability and low SES – so the average cost of public education is higher than in private schools.

The panel is aware that public schools enrol the bulk of students with resource-intensive high educational needs. It needs to go further and recommend new arrangements that end the current inequitable linkage. |

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