

Public support

As the campaign for properly funding public education ramps up, a survey finds majority public support.

By **Carolyn Rance**

Briefly

n The campaign for a fairer school funding system moves into its next phase

n School communities will begin lobbying federal MPs for their support.

n A survey has found majority public support for increased funding for public education.

Breaking the nexus between public and private school funding is a central plank of the AEU's continuing campaign for a better, fairer system of school funding.

AEU president Angelo Gavrielatos told the 2011 annual federal conference that post 2013 funding must recognise that governments have a primary obligation to adequately and appropriately fund free and secular public schools, and a legal and moral responsibility to provide universal access to quality public schooling.

"Kids have only got one guarantee in life when it comes to schooling and that's enrolment at their local school. You can talk about choice all you like but the one guarantee is enrolment in a

local school. Therefore that school has got to set the standard for high quality education."

Gavrielatos said the AEU supports the definition of equity suggested by the panel undertaking a current review of school funding arrangements.

"We agree that equity means ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. Children should not be prevented from achieving their maximum potential because of their background or family circumstances," he said.

The union has encouraged school communities across the country to send submissions to the review, which is being led by businessman David Gonski. It wants all government schools to ensure that the voices of their communities are heard.

The next stage of the Public Schools for Our Future campaign – already underway – will be an intense lobbying effort, designed to increase community awareness of current inequities and ensure that all politicians understand the need for a fairer system.

Paid advertising, an online petition and distribution of lobbying kits will help schools get out their message.

Teams of teachers, parents and principals will lobby federal MPs and the union will brief the ALP, Greens and independent MPs on its funding principles and the results of relevant polling.

A national lobbying event will be held at Parliament House on Public Education Day (May 26) when hard copies of submissions from public schools will be presented to MPs.

"It is clear there is overwhelming public support for a new funding system that delivers additional resources for public schools and ensures every child

"The current system... has seen a massive flow of taxpayer money to wealthy private schools at the expense of public schools."



Angelo Gavrielatos
AEU president

can get a high quality education," Gavrielatos said in his opening speech to the conference. A new poll, commissioned by the AEU, showed almost 80 per cent of Australians believe public schools are doing a great job but are under-resourced.

When people were asked what is the best way to achieve the strong economy and opportunity for all promised by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in last year's federal election campaign, 77 per cent said invest more in public schools. Only 9 per cent said invest in more private schools and only 14 per cent supported maintaining the current funding system.

"In fact, 70 per cent of people said the federal government was currently giving too much money to private schools and

only 22 per cent said the funding balance was about right," said Gavrielatos.

When the federal government first provided annual funding to schools in the 1970s the majority of money went to public schools. Government schools now receive only one third of the federal spend on schools, even though they teach two thirds of the students.

Increases in the private school share of federal funding grew dramatically during the Howard era and have continued under the Rudd and Gillard Governments. Even with its unprece-

ded school rebuilding program, Labor will still have delivered \$12 billion more to private schools than public schools by 2013, said Gavrielatos.

The key principle of government funding for private schools should be that there is no pre-existing, pre-determined entitlement to public money. Post 2013 arrangements should end a funding regime that delivers billions to private schools, regardless of their educational needs and resources, and reflect the Federal Government's primary responsibility to properly and adequately fund public schools.

"An equality of learning outcomes cannot be achieved for all students through the current system, which is blind to the needs of students and has seen a massive flow of taxpayer money to wealthy private schools at the expense of public schools", said Gavrielatos.

AEU federal secretary Susan Hopgood emphasised the importance of a strategic approach to building support for a new funding regime. Members will be mobilised to target MPs in marginal seats and build broad community understanding of the issues. ►

Restoring the social contract

Differences in educational outcomes should not result from differences in wealth, income, power or possession, businessman David Gonski, chair of the Review of Funding for Schooling, told the 2011 AEU conference.

"The current Prime Minister put it very nicely when she said that demography should not equal destiny," said the ASX chairman, former chair of Sydney Grammar School and former Chancellor of the University of New South Wales.

In an emerging issues paper released late last year, the review panel reported on a listening tour that brought members into contact with government and non government education authorities, providers of Indigenous and special education and parent, principal, teacher and union groups.

It said the theme of equity of educational outcomes was widely discussed and there was "an almost unanimous view" that current funding arrangements are complex and not easily understood.

"We have a clear opportunity to consider the challenges of the current SES funding model for non-government schools and the AGSRC measurement and to think about whether these are appropriate and whether there are better ways to support schooling," Gonski told the conference.

"Many submissions from AEU members reflect these concerns and paint a compelling picture of the learning environments in which teachers and students currently learn and work."

The review panel was aware that although Australia has a high performing school system when compared with other OECD countries, a large group of socially disadvantaged students is at risk of falling behind each year.

"The current situation has seen schools funding turned into what is now called... a wicked problem – an issue that is technically and politically complex and highly resistant to resolution."



Professor Lyndsay Connors
Associate Professor, Sydney University

Submissions and meetings raised concerns about the shift in enrolments from government to non-government schools, an issue that Gonski said required greater investigation.

It was a theme taken up in an address by University of Sydney Associate Professor Lyndsay Connors who said student numbers in non-government schools rose by about 3 per cent a year during the Howard era while enrolments in government schools grew by only 0.1 per cent a year.

"Over the past decade it has become a struggle to preserve not only the great idea but the very identity of public education... By 2007, the then Prime Minister John Howard described (its) fundamental value and strength as being 'the safety net and guarantor of a reasonable quality education in this country.'

"In no time at all we had political leaders at the national level attempting to deny altogether the distinctive features of public education and to airbrush away the differences between public schools freely available to children without fees or religious tests and schools available only to those whose parents can satisfy such entry criteria, set privately by non-government authorities."

Connors said early visions of Australia's free, secular and compulsory public education system were based on the concept of education as a social contract where norms and values such as reciprocity, mutuality and altruism prevailed, rather ►

Funding campaign

“We’ll be lobbying in electorates, lobbying in Canberra. We’ll be talking to the ALP on what our polling is showing. We’ll be talking to everyone who will listen to us and everybody that we believe will be influential in the outcomes.”

Maurie Mulheron, principal of Keira High School in Wollongong, said the campaign must inform the public that unless the nexus between public and private school funding is broken, any additional funding to government schools will continue to be passed on

than a market place governed by norms of competition, choice and capacity to pay.

“By the end of the Howard years there had been a shift in total enrolments of around 12 percentage points away from public and into private schools. Over this period there was a turnaround in Commonwealth funding of around 40 percentage points in the same direction.”

Government schools had gained a greater share of students from low income families while losing students from higher income families to independent schools.

Connors told the conference that a case could be made that the changes were assisted by Howard government funding policies and mechanisms.

While the funding policies and structures implemented by the Hawke and

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David Gonski

Chair of the Review of Funding for Schooling

“in bucketloads” to private schools.

Furthermore, a new regulatory framework to govern – and restrict – the establishment of private schools must be reintroduced.

“We need a mechanism that will stop those schools from being established or at least require the community wanting to establish them to explain why there is a need when there are half a dozen good public schools down the road,” Mulheron said. |

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Keating Labor governments corresponded with an increasing rate of government school enrolments “there are signs that the Rudd/Gillard government policies have yet to slow, let alone reverse, the ongoing decline in the public sector share of enrolments.”

The prima facie link between funding policies and enrolment shifts deserves more analysis and consideration.

“History reveals that the Commonwealth, the major revenue raising government, has never developed a mature partnership with states in the recurrent funding of the nation’s public schools. The current situation has seen schools funding turned into what is now called, in some public policy circles, a wicked problem – an issue that is technically and politically complex and highly resistant to resolution.

“Government schools are now in competition for public funding and for a representative share of the school population. Non-government schools get public funds largely with minimal public planning or regulation and are attracting a disproportionate share of better off parents.”

Connors said school communities need to assist the review panel to clarify the questions that need to be asked and the priorities that need to be addressed.

“Funding is not an end in itself. The end is the quality of our school system and the equality of educational opportunities it provides... We have drifted into allowing our school system to become an artefact of our flawed, discredited and irrational funding arrangements instead of the reverse. We must defend the ideal of a school system that contributes, as much as schooling can contribute, to creating a more informed, rational, just and caring society.” |

A new system

The AEU regards the Review of Funding for Schooling as an historic opportunity to achieve a fairer funding model which ensures that every child has an equal opportunity to achieve his or her full potential at their local public school.

Post 2013 funding arrangements should give government schools a baseline funding guarantee with weightings to address disadvantage.

Funding should take account of the special needs of students and whole of school factors such as class sizes, teacher-student ratios, staffing arrangements, equipment, ICT, curriculum, leadership, infrastructure and the linkages between the school and its community.

Funding to private schools should be determined by rating each non-government school with reference to enrolment practices, compliance with mandated curriculum, public accountability, fees charged and the total income, assets and resources at the disposal of that school. This is necessary to ensure that their total level of funding and resources do not exceed funding and resources of public schools

“The funding review represents a most significant moment in the history

“The funding review represents a most significant moment in the history of schools funding in Australia.”

Angelo Gavrielatos

AEU president

of schools funding in Australia. We have a responsibility to generate the necessary political imperative to get a new system that is not blind to the real needs of students and recognises the place and role of public schools in Australia’s future. A funding system that recognises that true equity in the provision of education can only exist if public schools set the standard for high quality education,” Gavrielatos says.