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Build the common wealth

It seems nothing much is right in Australian education this year. Politicians from both major parties reinforce stereotypical views about public schools. Newspapers and television reports routinely portray public education as being in crisis. Right-of-centre organisations continue to churn out commissioned reports that claim to show how our education system is failing.

The Prime Minister, following on from his 'values-neutral' claim about public education, used his Australia Day address this year to attack the teaching of history in Australian schools. Other coalition politicians are demanding chaplains in state schools.

Both the Menzies Institute and the Centre for Independent Studies produced reports attacking Indigenous education. Gary Johns, the author of the Menzies Institute Report, condemned the teaching of Aboriginal culture and languages in schools, suggesting that both detracted from the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

The CIS used Indigenous student outcomes to return to an old argument about school autonomy, arguing for schools to be able to opt out of government education and operating standards.

And there's Brian Caldwell's report suggesting that 'hundreds' of public schools should be

bulldozed. While this remark may appear to be sympathetic to public education, Caldwell in fact claimed that people would really rather send their children to private schools—using some fairly dubious statistics to do so.

Federal education minister Julie Bishop contributed by throwing in a half-baked idea about setting aside funds for a performance-based pay scheme based on student test results, the rationale for which was "getting better teachers in state schools".

All of this is gleefully snapped up by *The Australian*, which unabashedly pushes a neo-conservative, free-market education agenda.

Educators are heartily sick of this refusal to acknowledge and promote the achievements in our public schools. It is particularly galling when this criticism comes from the highest level of govern-

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ment and without any regard for the positive and difficult role that educators play in a range of circumstances. And it is even more so when the policies of that government actively contribute to the difficulties.

For example, the changes to the funding of Indigenous education

introduced under Brendan Nelson have had a significant negative impact on school—community relationships, programs and Indigenous employment in some communities.

Educators working in Indigenous communities deserve commendation for their efforts to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, despite the failure of governments to address the social and educational disadvantages in some of those communities.

Australia is a wealthy country, and research shows that 73 per cent of voters would prefer to see additional resources provided to education and health rather than returned in tax cuts. Yet federal government values—such as those which underpin its schools funding policies—are focused more and more on the individual benefits of that wealth rather than the wellbeing of the community as a whole.

A strong, quality public education system remains the best way to ensure social stability and economic wellbeing. Australians understand this, with nine out of 10 supporting the view that any additional education funding should go to public schools.

Australia's two main political parties need to take heed and commit to real and sustained funding increases for public education. ●

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