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While there are significant announcements yet to be made by both major political parties as the federal election draws closer, a clear picture is emerging.

The Coalition's actions confirm its hostile attitude towards public education. If the Coalition was re-elected, the share of funding to public schools would continue to decline from 35 per cent this year to 31 per cent by 2012. Local hiring and firing would be required, and teacher performance pay would be introduced. We would see external public exams in all states and territories irrespective of what currently occurs, with school and student performance reported against national benchmarks. And there would be 'league tables', that is, school and state comparisons. To ensure compliance, federal government funding would be dependent on state and territory acquiescence.

The Coalition's strategy of bypassing state and territory departments of education to provide some funding direct to schools and individuals—through vouchers, for example—also denies public school systems much needed additional funding which could improve infrastructure or employ more teachers.

Federal Labor has announced that if it wins the election, it will legislate for a universal right of access to pre-school and a guaranteed provision of 15 hours per week for all Australian four-year-olds. To do this, Labor has also committed to provide almost half a billion dollars in federal funding and to transfer responsibility for early childhood education and care to the education portfolio.

Labor has announced a national action plan for literacy and numeracy, \$260 million for Indigenous children below the age of five to fund early learning programs, and the investment of \$2.2 billion over 10 years to fund Trades Training Centres in secondary schools. It has also committed to reinvesting in TAFE infrastructure.

There has been no change to Labor's quality teaching paper (released in October last year) that provides for teachers who meet established and agreed advanced standards to receive up to \$10,000 per year in addition to their salary—and to work with states and territories to build on current practices to achieve this.

On the broader question of the funding of public education, ALP leader Kevin Rudd and shadow education minister Stephen Smith have said that no school in Australia would have its present level of funding reduced. They have also repeatedly stated that the existing funding nexus between public and private school funding will not be broken. This remains a significant point of disagreement between the AEU and the ALP.

Both have consistently refused to indicate any priority for public education although Smith has identified federal funding targets including Indigenous education, rural and regional education, government primary schools and special education—all areas which will significantly benefit public education.

In supporting school league tables—in line with the Coalition—federal Labor is out of step with its state and territory counterparts. Smith is wrong in his claim that the publication of school data will enable departments to identify and support schools in need. This information is already available to states and territory departments.

Of concern to educators everywhere is the collateral damage that 'league tables' inflict on students and schools. Ironically, those students most negatively affected are precisely those whose needs are quoted as the rationale for introducing such a policy. This is a major issue for AEU members around Australia; the union will continue its campaign to inform all political parties of the available research that proves league tables are wrong.

In January, delegates to the AEU annual conference unanimously called on all political parties to properly fund public education—an additional \$2.9 billion—and to give special focus to Indigenous education, TAFE and early childhood education. Delegates also condemned the Howard government for its undermining of public education and committed to campaign for the removal of the federal government.

Nothing that has occurred since then gives AEU members any reason to change that view. ●



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