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State of inequity

The Rudd government's first budget has done nothing to restore balance to school funding.

In Julia Gillard's first speech to Parliament in 1998, she described the inequality of educational opportunity in her own electorate. She declared that "this massive discrepancy would be lessened if we as a nation were prepared to seriously tackle the inequality of opportunity that exists in our education system and create a high-class state school system".

Fast forward 10 years and the Education Minister has declared in a number of speeches over the course of the last two months that the public versus private school debate is over and that we need to move on.

The first such occasion, in a speech on 21 May to the Association of Independent Schools annual general meeting, Gillard said: "I believe it's time we got beyond the public versus private debate that has blighted our education debates for so long, and replaced it with a debate about the quality of education and how we can guarantee that every child, no matter how rich or how poor, gets the best education possible."

The minister knows full well that the aim above can be achieved only by governments fulfilling their primary

obligation to adequately and properly fund government schools—free, secular, universally accessible and inclusive public schools. A public school of the highest quality in every community is the only guarantee "that every child, no matter how rich or how poor, gets the best education possible".

The worst aspect of the minister's statements is that she knowingly fails to acknowledge the place of public education in Australia's history, and even more importantly, the place of public education in the maintenance of a socially inclusive, cohesive and prosperous Australia. She fails to

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articulate the centrality of public education in the development of an individual child and the nation as a whole.

In making these recent pronouncements, the minister has in fact drawn further attention to the inequities that exist in terms of government policies.

The 2008-09 budget projections show that school funding remains on the same dangerous

trajectory over the next five years. Regrettably, the Rudd government's first budget has not fulfilled the expectations created among the vast majority of Australians. It did nothing to restore balance and proportionality with respect to Commonwealth funding of our schools.

The projections show that government schools' share of the total education budget will continue to decline from a current 33 per cent to 31 per cent over the course of the next quadrennium funding arrangements.

As a society, we remain on a trajectory where education policy exacerbates social divides,

and where parental wealth may become the only discriminator in the provision of education.

We hope that Gillard returns to the values expressed in her first speech.

The mission of advocacy for public education has never been more important. ●

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