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Time to rebuild

Chronic underfunding of public school facilities has created an opportunity to reassess the role of schools within the broader community. **Steve Packer** reports.

Evidence of the lack of capital investment in Australia's public schools is as stark as it is startling in a new, independent report commissioned by the AEU.

The report reveals that between 2002 and 2005, annual investment in maintaining and improving school facilities barely moved from the national average of \$540 per student. During the same years, private school capital spending on infrastructure increased from \$1380 to \$1560 per student.

"The picture is clear cut," says Adam Rorris, a consultant education economist, fellow of the Centre for Policy Development and author of the report, *Rebuilding Public Schools 2020*. "Private schools are spending a lot more per student, and the report is

simply a calibration of that fact." The physical condition of public schools varies enormously, he says. "There is, however, a strong argument that school facilities have been in long-term decline. It is questionable whether many schools are up to the task of providing a suitable education for children. Under-pinning the general perceptions of parents, teachers and principals is a shortage of capital funding."

More than a million for severy school

National capital investment in public schools is about \$2.1 billion annually. To match the current per student capital investment in the private sector this would need to rise to \$4 billion per annum, says Rorris.

Briefly

- Average per-student capital investment in private schools in recent years has been almost three times the amount for public schools.
- Public school capital expenditure needs to almost double to \$4 billion annually to stop the long-term decline in facilities.
- Now is the time to start rebuilding public schools in the interests of national development and prosperity.

He calculated that if public schools had received the same per student capital funding as the private sector in 2002-05, each school would have received an extra \$1.2 million. "Enough to make your local principal go weak at the knees, let alone the P&C fundraising committee," he says.

Your say



Paul Rose
Principal, Ballarat Secondary College, VIC

"We're a multi-campus school and one campus is in desperate need of replacement. Ten classrooms and a library are substandard because they were built in the 1970s as dark, square boxes. They are simply not suitable for modern curriculum delivery. We've been trying to do what we can internally—painting walls and getting light into them—but they were designed in such a way that it's almost impossible."



Shane Gorman
Principal, Bonython Primary School, ACT

"Our school opened in 1992, so it's not very old, but we still can't afford the necessary improvements. This year we needed to update the IT cabling. The education department said it would meet half the cost of \$106,000, but there's no way we could afford the other half. In the end we needed to find \$37,000 this year, which has had a huge impact on the school. It will be years before we can afford to replace the out-of-date computers on the end of those cables."

"How do we justify having more than two-thirds of our children in an under-capitalised public school system when private schools receive large public subsidies? This is even harder to justify when government has just announced a \$21 billion federal budget surplus."

According to Rorriss, Australia has long had a "virtuous cycle" of public school funding, but it has been moving to a "vicious cycle". "Public school funding increases have been insufficient to meet infrastructure needs [while] public schools have also been outstripped by the growth in private school funding."

In a virtuous cycle, high levels of government investment create high quality services which the community highly values and appreciates. This creates a dynamic of political support for further investment and a spiralling upwards of investment and service improvement.

"Your average parent often sees a public school that is inferior in facilities to the nearest comparable private school. It is hardly surprising that there has been a constant dribble out of the public system towards the private sector. As more parents exit their children from public schools, it becomes harder to generate support for more public funding. Say hello to the dawn of a vicious cycle in public school funding."

He notes that most state and territory governments have increased investment in public schools in the last two years, "but it is nowhere near enough to overcome the funding imbalance".

Quality spaces

Australian children deserve learning environments conducive to effective teaching and learning in the 21st century, says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos. "That means quality buildings, learning spaces, music,

art and sport facilities, and continuous maintenance to keep them to a high standard," he says.

"While not letting state and territory governments off the hook, the fact remains that the greatest revenue raising capacity rests with the Commonwealth government. The key responsibility to redress the Howard government's neglect of public schools now rests with the Rudd government. The government's \$20 billion Building Australia Fund should be used for this purpose. When it comes to investment in infrastructure, investing in our public schools and students is the most important infrastructure investment a government can make." ▶

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Left and below: Upper Ferntree Gully Primary School, Victoria. Designed by Hayball Pty Ltd.



► Rorris' report conservatively recommends the provision of an additional \$22 billion of capital investment over the next 12 years to ensure that every child in public school has access to high quality buildings and facilities. Gavrielatos and Rorris see this as an opportunity rather than a burden for government.

"The day the report was released in June," says Gavrielatos, "I wrote to [Education Minister] Julia Gillard, saying the report gives rise to exciting opportunities for policy directions.

"In the letter I said that we are willing to work with the government to establish a minimum national standard for public school buildings, facilities and equipment. The standard can be informed by a redesign and redefinition of our schools to allow maximum community use of the facilities and to ensure that the buildings are environmentally sustainable. Having done so, the government could conduct an audit of all schools and put in place a program to ensure all our schools meet that standard. We need, as a nation, to aspire towards achieving the very best for our students."

Leapfrog ahead

Rorris likens the school infrastructure situation to maintaining a major road. "If you haven't filled in the potholes in a road for a long time, you can now use the money you have saved to leapfrog ahead by, say, widening the road into a four-lane highway. We can now leapfrog ahead in terms of school facilities and what they are used for.

"As they are doing in the United Kingdom and Canada, we can make our schools better resourced for school-age children, but also expand the concept to greater use by the wider community."

It's not just tit-for-tat in terms



Harmony Primary School, Western Australia.
Designed by Taylor Robinson Architects.

☞ **Schools the world over are being redefined and redesigned in what is an exciting period of reinvention.** ☞

of public versus private school funding, says Rorris. What is needed is the vision and dialogue to make primary schools effective before-school and after-school care centres and better-parenting centres. He says the nature of high school facilities would make them more suitable for serving and involving the community through sports facilities, auditoriums for meetings, evening classes and the like.

Such an approach would reinstate public schools as an integrated part of the community, make parents of current and future students more knowledgeable about what goes on at public schools, and discourage costly out-of-school-hours vandalism.

Gavrielatos refers to Professor Tony Vinson's landmark 2002 enquiry into the provision of public education in NSW in which he said

"the quality of school buildings and their surroundings can... be a potent symbol of the regard (or otherwise) in which public education is believed to be held by governments and the community."

International findings

As manager and principal analyst of the Schools Resourcing Taskforce, Rorris has been an adviser to education ministers through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). He has also advised governments abroad and worked for the United Nations, World Bank and other international development agencies.

In *Rebuilding Public Schools 2020*, he presents a number of important international findings:

- School facilities have a significant impact on student and teacher performance. The qualitative evidence suggests that this is particularly the case in relatively deprived areas, he says.
- Appropriate school buildings allow extended school hours and greater community use. Based on a community hub concept, schools in the UK are set to offer a core set of extended services by 2010, with half of all primary schools and a third of secondary schools doing so this year. These services include childcare, parenting support and community access to information and communications technology, sports and arts facilities, including adult learning. In the United States similar experiments suggest schools will have to become virtually full-service facilities that are open year-round, including evenings and weekends.

"Over the next 20 years there will be enormous growth in Australia's over-65 population which may have little direct contact with schools and will be more and more reluctant to tax

itself for any purpose, including education," says Rorris. "Schools may therefore need to position themselves and find a way to connect with an ageing population."

- The ageing of existing school buildings means an increasing share of expenditure on new buildings. In the US last year, the percentage of construction dollars spent on new buildings was the highest since 1979. "This move to greater expenditure on new buildings, as compared to a renovation of old stock, reflects the cyclical ageing of schools constructed for the baby boom period and the new needs of schools today for teaching and community uses."

- Environmental sustainability can improve school performance. The greening of schools is an important trend in Australia and elsewhere, says Rorris. "There is emerging evidence that energy efficiency may lead to quasi-natural environments in schools which are valued by teachers and pupils. A UK study found the quality of the classroom

environment resulting from green design approaches may reduce stress in teachers, helping lower rates of absenteeism and staff turnover, and in turn lead to improved productivity."

Rorris concludes that Australia can benefit from the new opportunities for 21st-century schooling. "Schools the world over are being redefined and redesigned



McKinnon Primary School, Victoria.
Designed by Kneeler Design Architects.

in what is an exciting period of reinvention. Schools may now include child centres which may include childcare, offer parent education courses and weekend/vacation use for the whole community. Factor in new designs for environmental sustainability plus new classroom technologies, and it all adds up to schools like we have never had before. Now is certainly the time to be investing in schools."

This may well be a critical moment for Australian schools, says Rorris. "The future for underfunded public schools is a downward spiral in confidence and quality. We know how that movie ends." •

Steve Packer is a freelance writer.

Resources

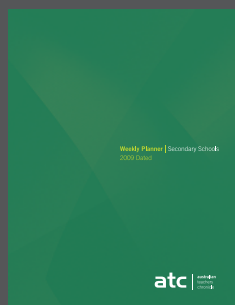
- **Rebuilding Public Schools 2020 study:** www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/Rebpucschls.pdf
- **AEU response:** www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/Rebuildingresp.pdf

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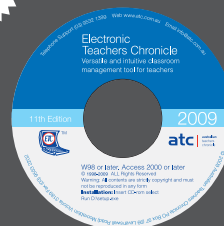
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