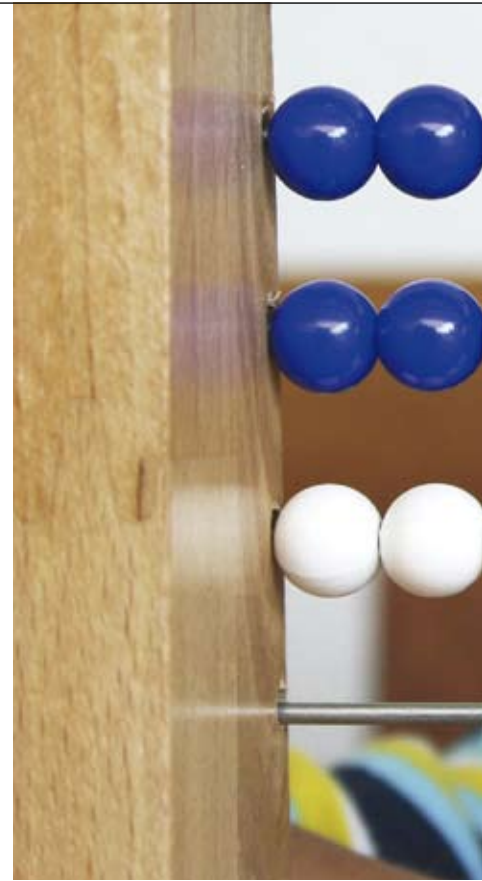


# All eyes on funding review

Union leader Julius Roe says much is at stake with the federal government's pending review of school funding. **Steve Packer** reports.



**T**he Rudd government has a universal obligation to adequately fund the provision of quality public schools in every community and for all children, says Julius Roe, national president of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

The AMWU sees public school education in the same light as post-school education for adult workers, he says. Roe has had a leadership role in vocational skills and training for more than 20 years, including as a member of the Australian National Training Authority board and the National Training Quality Council.

"It is a fundamental issue of democracy and an essential precondition for the development of a more equitable and just society," he says. "Australia can't participate in what is loosely called the knowledge economy, and it can't have a high productivity future, if it doesn't address the fundamental issues around education.

☞ **...every local community must have a socially inclusive public school...** ☞

"It is at this level of policy orientation that the government needs to make a stronger affirmation. Its 2010-11 review of public and private school funding [see p5] needs to lead to change."

### Neo-liberal affliction

Roe says an obsession with neo-liberal marketisation and privatisation policies has afflicted both the school and post-school sectors of education, particularly in the past 10 years.

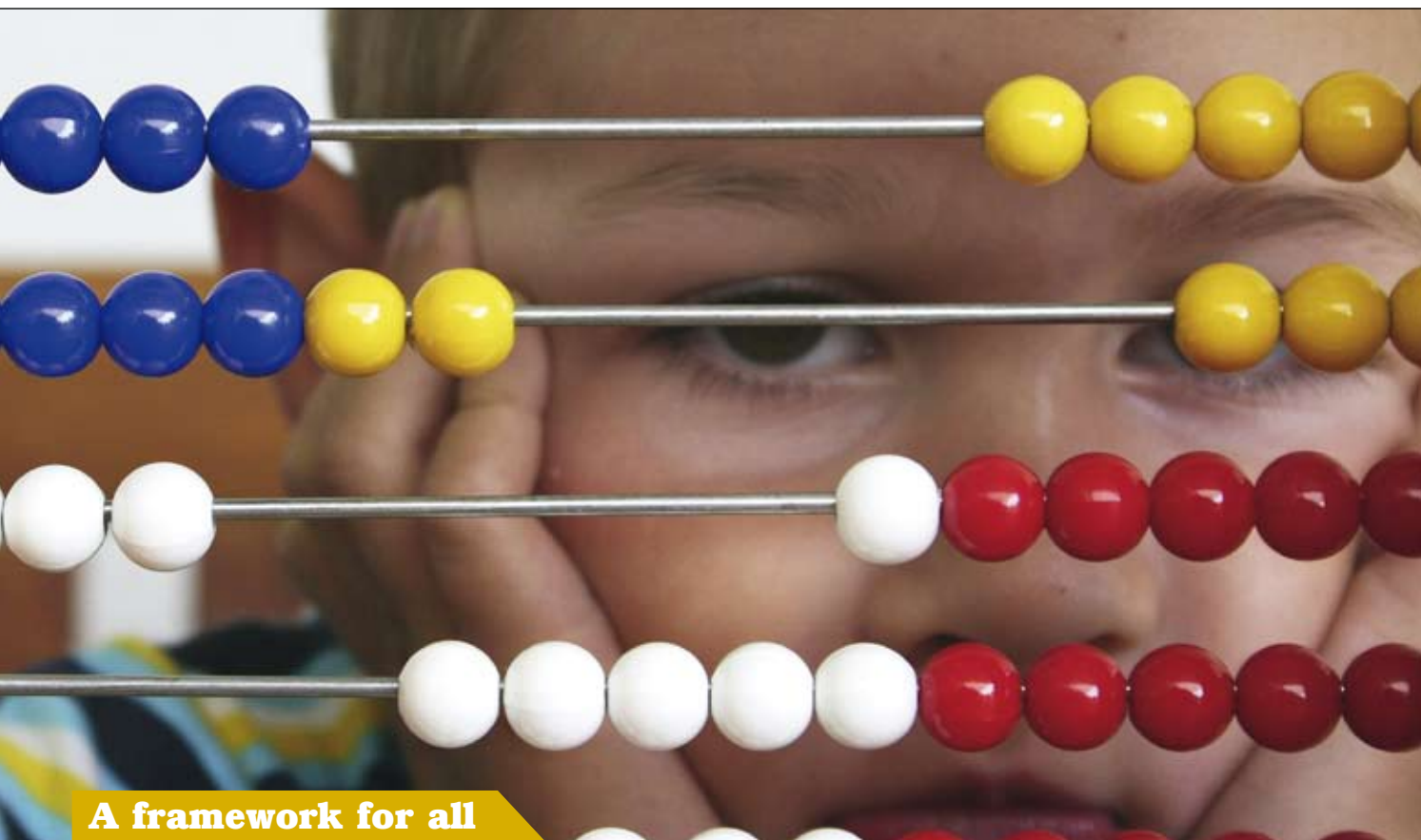
"I've argued that this obsession—dealing with education as a commodity within a market lies at the core of widening inequality and poorer education outcomes. It is also closely linked to deregulation of the labour market, which has led to lower-quality work.

"If you have marketisation policies in education and training, you

have qualifications and training that reflect the narrow short-term needs of individual enterprises rather than the broader needs of industry, industry development, society and greater equity."

Roe praises the Rudd government for its recent major investment in buildings and related infrastructure for schools, higher education and vocational training. It ends an era of decline in the level and proportion of investment in public education and is a "tremendous step forward". The government's commitment to better funding for disadvantaged schools is also a step forward.

"However, we are still concerned that the government hasn't fully repudiated the marketisation and privatisation policies of the previous government. In particular, you can't fix the problems of educa-



## A framework for all

The impending review of school funding, which sets the formula for the next four-year funding period, beginning in 2013, represents one of the most important chapters in the history of school funding in Australia.

"This review will inform the system of schools funding for years to come", says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos. "It represents the opportunity to rid our education system of the universally rejected and discredited Howard government funding regime."

"Even more importantly, it is the opportunity to create public policy and funding arrangements that recognise the fundamental role of public schools in safeguarding and advancing the national interest," he says. "It's about providing a framework of universal opportunity for all to gain the benefits of education".

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tional inequality simply through investment, even though it's a necessary condition. You also need to have clear policies that every local community must have a socially inclusive public school that reflects its community."

Turning back deregulation and neo-liberal policies is hard to do, says Roe. "Once you privatise something, you create a whole new set of vested interests. That's why the massive level of privatisation of education which now exists in Australia is very difficult to turn back, notwithstanding the importance of trying to do that."

Roe sees the government's new Fair Work legislation as a significant improvement in industrial relations and a remarkable achievement for the trade union movement.

"The deregulation of the labour market has handed employers not just greater industrial power, but much greater political and social power," he says. "And yet, in a period when the trade union movement has had lower density of membership, and after a period of labour market deregulation, we've been able to turn back the tide to some extent through the

Fair Work bill. It takes important steps to restoring minimum standards and the rights of workers to collectively bargain and organise.

"But we never expected, and we certainly haven't achieved, changes that remove the outrageous restrictions on and extraordinary penalties for industrial action, and the restrictions on industry-level bargaining. Obviously we as a trade union movement need to continue to work to improve workers' rights."

In the 19th century the fight for universal, free and secular education was closely intertwined with the fight for democracy and workers' rights, he says. "There were many leading activists of my union at that time who were part of this struggle, and also for greater access to education for older workers. There is an urgent need to renew this united struggle for educational equality in the 21st century." ●

**Steve Packer is a freelance writer.**