

2004

A watershed year



Pat Byrne is the AEU Federal President.

// 2004 is looming as a watershed year for public education.

The States Grants Act is due for debate in the first half of the year. The Act governs the allocation of federal funding to non-government schools over the next four years. Teachers in public schools are well aware of the impact that this piece of legislation has had on school funding over the past three years.

The States Grants Act uses a new system of allocating funding based on students' postcodes, effectively the socio-economic status of students' addresses. It does not take into account any accumulated wealth a school may have. That's the reason so many wealthy independent schools have received massive increases in funding over the past three years—increases which have enabled them to fund additions such as a water polo pool, extra turf wickets and another boatshed.

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Despite the additional funding, independent schools have increased their fees by about eight per cent. This makes a mockery of the Federal Government's claim that the extra funds would allow the schools to

reduce their fees, thus enabling children from poorer families to "choose" to attend.

The Act must be changed. The States Grants Act in its present form is untenable for teachers and parents of children in government schools. It is imperative that the AEU and supporters of public education achieve changes to the legislation. Calling on all political parties to make the legislation fair will be a major focus for us next year.

Meanwhile, it is highly likely that there will be a federal election in 2004. This will mean solid campaigning for AEU members on public education issues. The Federal Executive has endorsed a campaign plan aimed at promoting public education. Our message to parents and communities will be clear—public education is our future and must be given top priority by state and federal governments. It is about the kind of society we want and the opportunities that will be available to our children. The present federal funding policies are creating a two-tier education system that effectively means those who cannot afford to pay are increasingly in danger of only having access to a system which is being progressively drained of resources.

There will be many opportunities for the AEU to promote its public

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education message during 2004. The Inquiry into Early Childhood; a national "State of Our Schools" survey; a Beginning Teachers' Survey; the Federal Budget; a Charter for Public Education; Public Education Day; and MCEETYA/MINCO meetings will be some of the ways to carry our message forward. There will also be many other events at state and territory level in which members will be able to participate.

In addition, the AEU has commissioned extensive research to help support our campaign and provide information to members. This includes work on accountability mechanisms for private schools, demographic information on school participation by religion, trends and changes in Commonwealth and state education funding, facilities and resources of private schools, funding levels of non-government schools in comparison to public schools and stakeholder views on how to improve the provision of public early childhood education. This research will be published on our election website during the year. ■



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