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Widening gaps

Concern about equity in public education extends well beyond the blame games of party politics.

As a new federal government takes its place in Canberra, it's timely to reflect on the state of education after 11 years of the Howard government. No longer is it only the AEU and its branches and associated bodies calling attention to significant areas of neglect. In recent months, a number of reports have highlighted weaknesses in public policy development and implementation. The Australian Council of Social Service, Business Council of Australia, OECD and Dusseldorp Skills Foundation have all noted growing problems in education provision—particularly the widening gap between high and low achievers in our schools and severe skills shortages in the workforce.

The OECD figures give the overall picture. Australia's spending on education as a percentage of GDP has declined over the last decade and is now less than the OECD average. Public investment in universities has declined compared to an overall OECD average increase of 48 per cent. In early childhood education services, Australia spends 20 per cent of the OECD average, despite widespread recognition of the benefits of pre-school attendance. The OECD says education funding in Australia appears to reinforce socio-economic inequities rather than ameliorate them.

While public expenditure has been declining, private expenditure has increased to the point where

Australia has the third-highest level in the OECD, after Korea and Israel. In other words, education costs are being shifted from governments to individuals.

One indication is the huge rise in tertiary students' fees. It has already changed the social demographic of students enrolling at universities. A report by Barbara Preston recently revealed that high-income families are increasingly sending their children to private schools, while low-income families make up 40 per cent of those whose children attend public schools.

ACOSS, in its report on poverty in Australia, observes that inter-generational disadvantage is becoming entrenched, and children from poor backgrounds are more likely to be in schools which lack

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resources. The report notes the link between students' academic achievement and the level of schooling their parents/caregivers achieved. For example, 62 per cent of Indigenous students whose parents/caregivers had 13 or more years of education were rated by their teachers at average or above average academic performance. As the number of years of education for parents declined, so too did the proportion of Indigenous students

with average or above average academic performance.

'Between the cracks'

The BCA report notes the growing numbers of students "falling between the cracks"—about 600,000—and calls for a significant reinvestment in education, including an additional \$4 billion for teacher salaries. It also recommends early intervention strategies; making learning and training more responsive to student needs; supporting teacher professional learning; and overall increased public investment in education.

While the AEU is not in agreement with all of the BCA's suggested ideas and strategies, they are a welcome addition to public discussion. The simple fact that all these reports exist signals a heightened level of public concern about education, and particularly those students most in need.

All of the AEU's polling in recent years has consistently shown that voters want more money spent on public education. They are sick of the blame games. They want a federal government to work in partnership with state/territory governments. The challenge for the AEU, its branches and associated bodies, irrespective of which major party is in government, will be to ensure that equity issues are foremost in public policy development. ●

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