

# Funding crunch

The government's school funding announcement needs to deliver a long-awaited boost to public education. **Steve Packer** reports.



## ➔ Briefly

- An increased investment in public schooling is needed to begin to reverse the effect of the Howard government's neglect.
- The AEU is calling for additional funding in line with the government's proposed national partnership for low socioeconomic status schools.
- Capital investment is required for modern building, facilities and equipment fit for 21st century learning and teaching.

**T**he federal government's announcement in late September of funding for non-government schools for the 2009-12 period has shed no light on what chronically underfunded public schools will actually get.

With the government embroiled in complex negotiations with the states over various aspects of school funding—including school reporting arrangements which

may be attached to the funding—it has taken the unprecedented step of splitting in two the legislation setting out non-government and public school allocations for the next quadrennium.

“The federal Budget figures [in May] predicted a cut in public school funding in real terms,” says Dr Jim McMorrow, author of the AEU-commissioned report *Reviewing the Evidence: Issues in Commonwealth funding of government and non-government*

*schools in the Howard and Rudd years*, released in August. "The government has yet to clarify its funding for public schools for the 2009-12 quadrennium. This will need to be done by the time Parliament wraps up for the year in early December—and the way things are going, I expect the government will need all of that time to negotiate agreements with the states and territories, and with school authorities."

In his report, McMorrow says it is "as if the machinery inherent in the Howard government's education funding policies is driving the Rudd government's agenda, almost independently of its own stated priorities".

AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos notes that in the lead up to the federal election, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stated that "the Commonwealth has a prime obligation to adequately and properly fund government schools".

### Flaws and anomalies

The government has announced a review of the schools funding formula for 2010-11. Any changes would not take effect until 2013. ►

☺☺...the government has an election commitment...☺☺



## A principal writes...

After Angelo Gavrielatos expressed deep and widespread concerns about Commonwealth funding for public schools in the previous (Spring 2008) issue of *Educator*, he received a letter from Terry Fisher, president of the Wollongong Primary Principals' Council, in NSW. "I believe that the government can talk all it likes about league tables, sacking principals, making schools more accountable, parents wanting comparison information and public versus private education, etc," wrote Fisher, who is also principal

school? What do I actually get to spend on my students? I get a base grant of \$6292 and a loading of \$58.65 per child, which for 350 students is \$20,528. A total of \$26,820 from two governments, state and federal. What percentage of this money is state and what percentage is federal is too hard to ascertain due to the complicated formula that is employed.

"In total, therefore, I get to spend \$76.62 for every child in my school. This is to purchase everything they need for the whole year including books,

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of Woonona Public School. "However, this rhetoric masks the major problem—the extreme lack of funding for schools. This is reaching critical levels, if it is not already there.

"I have looked closely at my school funding entitlement and my reports on expenditure and income for 2008, and they make for a sorry tale. Take out the short-term relief teacher tied grant, take out the social factors loading tied grant, take out the utilities tied grant, and take out the other tied grants, and what am I left with in my P3 public

pencils, crayons, paper, art supplies, administration costs, computer discs, ink cartridges...and the list goes on and on. I believe this to be utterly inadequate. It works out at \$1.91 for each child per week. And this is just the monetary side of the equation, not the human resources side. How good it would be to have a full-time Support Teacher Learning Assistance and a Reading Recovery teacher. How good it would be to replace the carpet we've had for 22 years, a new toilet block would be a godsend... The list goes on."

► McMorrow, who is honorary associate professor at the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work, acknowledges that the government is "confronted by the fiscal and political complexities of correcting the flaws and anomalies in the funding arrangements for non-government schools" it inherited from the Howard government.

"The Rudd government made the decision to defer any action at least to the end of the next funding period in 2012," he says in the report. "The first Rudd Budget reveals the consequences of this decision. The share of total Commonwealth schools funding being directed to government schools is projected to continue falling to a level of 33.8 per cent by 2011-12, having declined from 43 to 35 per cent under the Howard government.

"If the Rudd government were to implement its stated policy directions, it will require an increased investment in schooling, and specifically in public schooling, to begin to reverse the effects of the Howard government's neglect of the resource needs of public schools."

When it announced the quadrennium figures for non-government schools, the federal government also announced that non-government schools with significant Indigenous student enrolments will automatically receive the maximum level of Commonwealth funding.

"The effect," says Gavrielatos, "will be that non-government schools with significant Indigenous student enrolments will receive between seven and eight times more Commonwealth funding than government schools with significant Indigenous

"Raising its commitment to this level for the 2.2 million children and young people served by public schools in Australia is surely the least any Commonwealth government could do."

He notes that an increase of \$1.6 billion still falls short of the level of funding government schools need to enable students to achieve the National Goals of Schooling. A former taskforce of the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs said government schools were underfunded by at least \$2.9 billion a year (2007 prices). This figure did not include costs associated with special education, quality teaching or the urgent need for additional capital investment.

Gavrielatos also calls for additional funding to address entrenched socioeconomic disadvantage. "This is consistent

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student enrolments. And yet about 90 per cent of Indigenous students are enrolled in government schools."

### Restoring 1996 levels

McMorrow argues that until such time as the Howard government's funding formula is changed, the very least that should be done is to increase the Commonwealth's general recurrent grants to government schools by \$1.6 billion a year. "This would restore the share of Commonwealth funding to government schools to the levels of 1996, when the ALP was last in office," he says.

with the government's proposed national partnership for low socioeconomic-status schools."

The government should also make up the \$2 billion annual shortfall in capital investment for government schools, he says. "Put simply, we need modern buildings, facilities and equipment fit for 21st-century learning and teaching."

In a letter to government MPs after September's funding announcement, Gavrielatos wrote: "In the interest of our students, we ask that you fulfil that obligation." ●

**Steve Packer is a freelance journalist.**