

Join the campaign

The AEU has launched one of the most ambitious and important campaigns in the history of public education.

by Tracey Evans

Principals, teachers and parents are being invited to join the Public Schools For Our Future campaign to achieve a greater investment in public schools that will help them to meet the needs of all children.

With the federal government embarking on the first comprehensive review of schools funding in 30 years, there is an opportunity to bring about significant change to properly fund the provision of public education in Australia, says AEU president, Angelo Gavrielatos.

Every school community can help to ensure that the review panel understands the challenges in providing a quality education for students by making a submission that shares their experiences and reminds the panel of the value of investing in public schools.

Public schools are achieving great results, says Gavrielatos, but a recent survey has found the cost is in higher teacher workloads and an increasing reliance on fundraising by parents.

The AEU's annual State of our Schools survey found that teachers overwhelmingly believe the best way to lift student outcomes is to cut class sizes to increase the individual attention every child receives. The survey also found

that fundraising is being used to provide much-needed classroom equipment, library resources and textbooks and computers.

Entrenched inequity

The current federal funding system, which was introduced by the Howard government, delivers only a third of federal funding to public schools that teach two thirds of students. "The private schools that get the most funding are the richest in the nation," says Gavrielatos.

"We need a better federal funding system that meets the needs of all our children – now and in the future," says Gavrielatos. "A future funding system must be appropriately weighted to recognise the additional costs associated with the high quality education of students with particular educational needs such as those relating to family income, Indigeneity, language background, geographic location, disabilities and special needs to participate in education on an equitable basis with other students.

"There is also an urgent need for more resources to ensure students with disa-



High stakes

Numbers alone show that public schools need more resources to achieve high quality education outcomes for every student.

- Ratio of public/private enrolments: 66:34
- The equivalent ratio for 'at-risk students': 79:21
- For ESL New Arrivals program: 91:9
- For students with disabilities and special needs: 80:20
- For Indigenous students: 86:14

bilities have the support and opportunities they deserve."

The federal government must put the needs of public schools first, he says, rather than favouring private schools. Even with the unprecedented school rebuilding program, Labor will still have delivered \$12 billion more to private schools than public schools by 2013.

"Private schools are funded regardless of their wealth, income or the real needs of their students. The system is so corrupted by political deals, half the private schools receive more than they are entitled to. That alone costs taxpayers \$800 million a year," says Gavrielatos.

"It is this corrupted funding system, which extends privilege not opportunity, that private schools have fought so hard to keep," he says.

Distinguishing between public and private schools does not imply an attack on the legitimacy of either or deny the need for their co-existence, according to University of Sydney professor Dr Lyndsay Connors during her delivery of the annual Henry Parkes Oration last



Jumping through hoops

The future of public education has become a politically complex and sensitive issue, says University of Sydney professor, Dr Lyndsay Connors.

We have a federal system conducive to political opportunism. There are many examples where the Commonwealth, with no responsibility for the direct provision of schooling, is reduced to opportunism to create avenues for influence. This explains a tendency for the Commonwealth to provide funding in the form of special purpose payments, with little understanding of or respect for state priorities. The practical effect is that even when public funds are properly directed towards the most hard-pressed public schools, they arrive in the shape of an ever-changing array of re-badged programs each with its set of hoops to be jumped through. An over-reliance on such programs – especially where the scale of their funding and their timelines are inadequate to achievement of their grand objectives – lead to fragmentation of funding and effort.

At worst, the deficit view of public schooling adopted by numbers of leaders at the national level on a bi-partisan basis has, in the words of one of our most distinguished education researchers, Richard Teese, subjected them to the indignity of ‘scavenging on the scrapheap’ of failed educational reform – flagpoles one year, league tables the next.

Flaws in our federal system of government are not, of course, the only factors that have affected the standing of our public school system.

Over recent decades, broad social, political and economic trends have taken us in the direction of a two-tiered education system, within which public schools are being positioned as the poor relation. The divides created by social geography within and beyond our cities have intensified social stratification among schools. Neo-liberal politics and economics have fuelled these trends in Australia, as well

month (see *Jumping through hoops*).

“How can any democratic government ask us to believe, however, when it distributes the public funding that now covers the salaries of teachers in around 95 per cent of all Australian schools, that the difference between public and non-government schools does not matter; or that it can simply be airbrushed away for political purposes, however bi-partisan?”

“How can there be no difference between placing those publicly-funded teachers in a system of public schools where their services are freely available to children without fees or religious tests, and placing them in schools where their services are available only to those that meet such tests, set privately by nongovernment authorities?”

“To fail to understand such differences, or to wilfully claim that there are none in order to silence public debate, is to put the future of our democracy at risk.”

“The fact that there may be a coalition of those willing to engage in collective dementia should not be confused with consensus,” Connors said. ●

Make it fair

The AEU principles for a fair and equitable schools funding system are:

- True equity can only exist when government schools set the standard for high quality education.
- The primary obligation of governments is to properly and adequately fund public schools.
- Every family has a right to a well resourced, high quality public school in their community.

This guarantee ensures that every child has a right to:

- a high quality public school where all children can learn together and learn to live together
- qualified teachers and staff to meet their needs and aspirations
- a curriculum of the highest quality which ensures the development of the whole child
- a safe, modern 21st century learning environment
- achieve his/her personal best.

as in many other countries. They are characterised by arguments for reducing the role of governments, and increasing reliance on market-based competition and the commodification of services to achieve policy outcomes.

In this climate, however, spending public funds to expand private services and strengthen market forces can be justified as a means of achieving overall reductions in public spending. The Howard government claimed that increased Commonwealth funding to non-government schools would produce a shift in enrolments to the private sector with overall savings to the public purse.

It achieved the first but not the second result, as confirmed by a 'before and after' snapshot of the financial effect of increasing enrolments in non-government schools over the decade, 1996 to 2006. This shows that, had public schools been used to accommodate the extra 200,000 students who enrolled in non-government schools over that decade, the additional cost to the public purse would have been around \$2 billion.

But the actual public funding increase for non-government schools over this period was more than \$3 billion. This was because the rate of public funding increase to non-government schools over this period significantly outstripped the rate of enrolment increase; as well as the rate of public funding increase to government schools. This was a longstanding pattern that gathered momentum during the years of the Howard Government.

Many countries have adopted neo-liberal policy approaches. But no other country has split responsibility for public funding of public and non-government schools between the national government and states in a federal system in a way so inimical to the health of public education. Australia sits around the middle of OECD countries ranked in terms of per capita investment in schooling. It now ranks third-lowest, however, in the developed world in terms of the public funding it allocates to public schools; and fourth highest in terms of the share it allocates to nongovernment schools.

This is no counsel of despair. The fact is that the Australia's schools generally perform consistently well by international standards. This suggests that our teachers know what they are doing, and that a higher public investment in the supply of

quality teaching and greater equality of access to it would be well justified. But our system is heading in dangerous directions. The effects of inequalities now built into our school system are most damaging for those young people who most need the sustained and mindful support of government. And they threaten social mobility and feed a situation where too many young people are leaving school prematurely or without useful credentials – while the country faces a mounting skills shortage.

Australia's federal system has evolved in ways that are making it a toxic environment for public schooling. ●

This is an edited extract of the Henry Parkes Oration 2011, delivered by Dr Lyndsay Connors on 29 October 2010. The full paper, 'Public Education and the Common Wealth: Towards Sustainable Democracy', can be found at www.parkesfoundation.org.au/HPOration2010.pdf



Flaws in our federal system of government are not, of course, the only factors that have affected the standing of our public school system.

Have your say

Making a submission to the funding review is as simple as telling your story.

The experiences of teachers, principals and parents from school communities around the country will help the federal government's funding review panel to make properly informed recommendations.

AEU branches in every state have allocated resources and established organising committees to encourage and support schools to make submissions.

"We're very mindful that, particularly at this time of the year, teachers are swamped so we're providing templates so the submissions can be completed as simply as possible," says Queensland Teachers Union president, Steve Ryan.

"It doesn't matter if it's a single page or a thesis," says AEU Victoria deputy president Meredith Peace. "We just want to make sure every school voice is heard."

It's useful to tell your story, says Peace, explain the resources you don't have and the programs you can't run. For example, Peace says she hears countless stories from teachers about the lack of support for children with learning difficulties and disabilities.

"It affects the individual child and all the other students because if they spend extra time with the child with the learning difficulty or disability, the other students don't get the attention they need. It's a real Catch-22. Teachers really feel it because they want to do the best for all the kids in their classes and they're just stretched too thin," she says.

It's about letting the panel know of the reality of providing quality public education – details of the size and location of the school, the programs that are being used, and any difficulties faced in



their delivery, says State School Teachers Union of WA president Anne Gisborne.

“Even providing details such as the money you’ve spent from your own pocket to provide additional resources at school, and for parents, details of the frustrations of fundraising for essential items rather than the special extras,” she says.

“We’ve had a terrific level of interest by parents and school communities in attending our meetings about the review,” says Gisborne.

“It’s been a real eye opener, particularly for parents, to understand the unfairness of the current funding model.”

“We certainly have a lot of stories coming in about teachers’ and parents’ frustration with the level of resourcing in schools. They’re seeing this as an opportunity to identify the work that they’re doing, the additional resources they’re bringing in personally or through fundraising if they’re parents and what they could do better for their children if there were additional resources,” she says.

Steve Ryan says there are useful stories to be told by the Queensland

schools participating in the National Partnership Agreement on low socio-economic status school communities.

“Many have received quite significant additional funding under that program and we’ve seen some really good things happening. That proves that additional resources can provide good outcomes,” he says.

In New South Wales, the NSW Teachers Federation has been touring the state, in three campaign vans visiting schools, setting up street stalls in towns and speaking at local functions to encourage communities to make submissions to the review.

There has been “very positive” feedback from both parents and teachers, says the Federation’s deputy president Gary Zadkovich, to the three key messages about schools funding they deliver. The messages are that a high-quality public school in each local community is a core government responsibility; that a new funding system should factor in all available resources and income, including private

school fees, investments and donations to fairly meet all children’s needs; and because public schools enrol a greater proportion of children from low-income families and those with special needs and disabilities, they need additional funding to meet these additional needs. (see *High Stakes*)

“Our research tells us there’s widespread support in the community for more funding for public schools – it’s not like you’ve got to convince anyone that public schools don’t need more funding,” he says.

“What we’re saying is that it’s imperative that the public school communities across the nation have their say, speak up and do all we can to advocate for our students’ needs to be properly met.

“So let’s tell our stories about what’s needed to ensure that our kids don’t miss out,” Zadkovich says. ●

To find out how you can make a submission go to www.forourfuture.org.au

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