

High hopes

The Review of Funding for Schooling should aim high when setting the targets for new funding criteria.

by **Carolyn Rance**

The current system of Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC) indexation lacks policy, financial and ethical integrity, says Jim McMorrow, honorary adjunct professor in the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work.

Although the "fraught nature" of current political discourse makes a national agreement on funding an ambitious objective, McMorrow says it is a vital prerequisite to putting schooling back at the centre of national priorities and agreements.

The commissioned reports for the review panel raised questions about the application of the AGSRC for the indexation of Commonwealth grants – a development that was welcomed by the AEU.

"The current system of indexing funding levels for private schools to increases in the AGSRC allows many private schools to benefit from the high demand, resource intensive characteristics of the student population in public schools. This cannot be justified on the grounds of educational need," notes AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos.

In its paper for the funding review, The Allen Consulting Group explored the feasibility of replacing current funding methods with a national

schooling recurrent resource standard that could be applied with added weightings to meet specific needs.

Its report suggests that any proposed new model for post-2013 funding should be linked to educational objectives and designed to ensure that students receive services based on consistent levels of resourcing.

The AEU agrees that, as a concept, such a funding model is worth considering. However, its development must take into account the fundamental differences in purpose and obligations between the public and private school sectors and the wealth and resources at the disposal of private schools. It must also be based on a clearer definition of the responsibilities of each level of government in funding education.

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McMorrow says any new resource standard should be based on the actual costs of schooling and the varying contexts in which schools operate. It must provide resourcing at a level that makes achieving desired educational outcomes possible.

Real data needed

Rather than relying on NAPLAN test results and data from the MySchool website, as suggested by The Allen Consulting Group, McMorrow says any new funding mechanism should be based on real data from schools that reach higher standards of performance on a range of measures.

"This would give an indication of the resources required to achieve exceptional learning outcomes in the context of each school's student profile."

Retired high school principal and education consultant Bernie Shepherd also warns against over-reliance on NAPLAN data, amid increasing allegations that schools are teaching to the test and distorting results.

"Whether intended, justifiable, or neither, the lonely presence of NAPLAN on the MySchool website inevitably invites its use as a proxy for a school's academic performance," he says.

While efficiency in the use of public resources is important, McMorrow says it cannot be viewed in isolation from other educational values including quality, equity, equality of opportunity, social inclusion, stability, sustainability and transparency.

"Rather than basing national school resource standards on current expenditures, [any new] funding scheme should have higher targets as its centrepiece." ●