

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

# Stealing from public education: where's the good in that?

Pat Byrne is the AEU Federal President.



// Over the last decade western governments have taken to privatisation with gusto. The current federal government has shown the same enthusiasm for ditching its commitment to the public good, but, in the case of education, this has been done in a form not seen elsewhere. The federal government is spending more money on education, but most has gone to private schools. Public funding to private schools has doubled since 1996 and it's been handed out with 'no questions' asked.

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The federal government's agenda for 'user pays' education is blatant and ultimately discriminatory. At all levels of the education system, it is pushing students from public systems into fee-paying private institutions. On this basis, if you can't afford to pay for an education, you won't get one.

The TAFE sector plays a crucial role in preparing people for employment, yet under this federal government it has been systematically stripped of funding. In higher education, massive fee increases are already translating into fewer student enrolments from lower socioeconomic groups and regional centres. Instead, full fee-paying places are being reserved for

those who can afford to pay upfront.

But perhaps the greatest fraud to the Australian public has been the government's rhetoric of providing 'choice' in education. This is plainly dishonest. Notions of choice in education are not real—they entirely depend upon a person's capacity to pay. Significantly, choice serves individual rather than community goals. It's not overstating the case to say that an undermined public education sector threatens democracy.

The federal government just doesn't get it. In late May, the 'Minister for Private Schools' announced that parents of year 3 students not meeting the year 3 benchmark will be allocated tuition vouchers equating to \$700 per student, to be used to purchase private coaching according to the 'choice' of their parents.

Never mind that public schools are crying out for additional funding and that the \$6.8 million allocated for this program could be used in schools to reduce group sizes, to provide teacher professional development, to better build a school's capacity to deal with literacy problems.

Education is a basic human right. It is critical that all of us are able to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and sense of citizenship to be positive and active participants in society. This cannot be true for only

some of us. It must be true for us all.

The AEU has launched a Charter for Public Education that sets out what it is that constitutes quality public education and how it can be achieved through partnerships with parents, school communities, and state and federal governments. We want to make sure that all political parties understand the importance that voters place on notions of the common good.

Despite what this government says, we are not all motivated by rampant individualism—most people in Australia still believe in a fair go and are prepared to help those in need. ■ //

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W [www.publiceducation.org.au](http://www.publiceducation.org.au)

Visit the National Public Education Campaign site for current information and news, resource material and event dates relating to the AEU's campaign for public education in the lead up to the federal election.