



Pat Byrne
AEU Federal President

New model needed

Early in April, the federal minister for education Julie Bishop announced that the SES funding model for non-government schools would be reviewed. This has profound implications for the government schooling sector which currently suffers from an unfair amount of funding being distributed to non-government schools which are not 'in need'.

A review has been on the cards ever since SES funding began in 2001. In that time, we've seen fierce lobbying from within the non-government sector for changes to the system. This has arisen largely because of the growing number of exemptions to the SES model.

There are significant inconsistencies within the current SES funding model.

While in theory each private school is funded according to its average socio-economic status, in practice about half of all schools are not. When the SES model was introduced, any school which would have received less kept its old funding level, indexed against inflation.

In Catholic schools, which came under the SES system in 2005, fewer than half are funded at their SES level. The majority have 'funding maintained' at 56.2 per cent of Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC). This figure is 51.2 per cent in the ACT. This money goes to the Catholic system, not the individual school.

Some schools which would have lost funding when the SES changed to 2001—rather than

1996—census data are also 'funding guaranteed'.

Before Catholic schools came on board, only about 1,230 private schools were actually paid on the basis of their SES, with approximately 1450 paid on a level higher. The addition of Catholic schools, with their 'funding maintained' category, has ensured that more than half of all non-government schools continue to receive more than their SES entitlement.

Bishop has acknowledged problems in consistency within the SES model, but she has also reiterated the Coalition

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government policy of supporting taxpayer-funding for independent and Catholic schools.

On the same day as the review was flagged, the ALP announced it would change its policy to reallocate money from some private schools to other, more needy, private schools. The ALP has given no details yet, other than to say it remains committed to a needs-based funding model.

This would require major changes to the SES model as well as increasing the share of federal government funds for public schools.

The AEU believes that, as long as the federal government maintains its policy of funding private schools, the SES model

should be abolished and replaced by one which reflects the resources available to a school. If the SES stays, however, it must be significantly modified.

Critical elements of a workable, equitable funding model include taking into account parent's actual income—rather than an average income of families in a census collection district—and a school's private income.

It is simply wrong for non-government schools to be given much-needed government funds when they are adding swimming pools, equestrian centres and elaborate sports complexes to their already superior amenities.

The current nexus with the AGSRC must also be removed. With private school funding indexed to the AGSRC, any funding increase to public schools automatically gives an increase to private schools.

If there is an increase in funding for Indigenous students, for example—of whom almost 90 per cent are in public schools—then the funding for every student in every private school, whether Indigenous or not, also increases. This is also the case for students with disabilities.

A recent OECD report noted that school resources in Australia appear to reinforce, rather than ameliorate, socio-economic differences, and that Australia's policy makers need to address this.

Reversing this situation must be the key goal of any changes to schools funding. ●



You can contact Pat Byrne at pbyrne@aeufederal.org.au