



Pat Byrne
AEU Federal President

Missing billions

Public education's funding gap is prominent from both sides of the election fence.

Federal Labor's announcement earlier this year that an election victory would mean the introduction of an "education revolution" was welcome acknowledgement of education's centrality to Australia's economic wellbeing. By casting education as fundamental to economic prosperity and promising to commit significant additional resources, Labor leader Kevin Rudd has reinforced its importance as an election issue.

His critique of Coalition policies was well founded. It highlighted the neglect of public education at all levels—early childhood, schools and the post-compulsory sector. Under the Howard government, federal public funding has fallen well behind the OECD average in all areas of schooling. Among the 30 OECD countries, Australia ranks 18th in education spending, and 3rd in the amount of public funding going to private schools.

The ALP has made a good start in the area of early childhood policy, but its public position on schools funding has been a major concern. While going out of his way to reassure the parents of private school students that their funding will remain secure, Rudd has given no guarantee that public schools will receive the significant funding boost they require. In fact he has avoided any reference to public schools in all but one of his addresses so far.

In building an education package step-by-step, the gaping hole left by the absence of any schools policy is

becoming increasingly obvious. Rudd and the ALP need to rectify this well in advance of the election.

Ad launch

The AEU's television advertisement, launched in April, highlights the decline in the proportion of federal funds going to public schools—now 35 per cent despite the fact that they educate almost 70 per cent of the nation's school students.

The ad drew an immediate reaction from the Prime Minister. He accused the AEU of "atrocious dishonesty" and repudiated "the notion that governments, particularly the federal government, have given disproportionate preference to people who send their children to independent schools". This flies in the face of his government's budget fig-

The [television] ad drew an immediate reaction from the Prime Minister.

ures. Forward estimates show that the share will be 32 per cent in 2010. This year's budget increased federal funding to private schools by \$1.7 billion over five years while public schools will receive an additional \$300 million over the same period. This will further reduce the share to 31 per cent by 2012.

Given these figures, it is not surprising that Howard continues to try to reframe the agenda as one of standards and accountability rather than funding. The stance was reinforced by Education Minister Julie

Bishop's announcements during the budget that tie funding to a raft of conditions such as the introduction of core national standards for curricula in specified subjects, external assessments as part of Year 12 certificates, performance pay, greater principal autonomy—including the capacity to appoint and dismiss staff—and a requirement to report school performance against national benchmarks, with school and state comparisons.

It is little wonder that Howard and Bishop are trying to convince the electorate that there is no connection between standards and resources. As we know, a failure to increase public school funding in real terms puts pressure on parents and teachers to raise the money necessary for a range of student programs, thereby exacerbating the levels of disadvantage many government school students experience.

As a footnote, in 2003 the Schools Resourcing Taskforce calculated the amount of money necessary to ensure that every child in a government school was able to meet the National Goals of Schooling. It estimated that government schools were underfunded by about \$2.4 billion. Adjust the figure in accordance with the Average Government School Recruitment Costs index, which has applied since then, and you get \$2.9 billion—a minimum that doesn't include capital costs or those associated with educating students with disabilities. •

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