

Balancing needs

Photography **Philip Martin**

Paul Somerville talks to five educators who give their views on why public education should be better funded.

Norm Hart

President
Australian Government Primary Principals' Association

Public education should be better funded because Australian children deserve the very best education regardless of their family circumstances. This goes beyond learning in an intellectual sense or preparing kids for a career; it's also about how students feel about themselves while they are at school. Putting them in schools with poor facilities, or putting them in oversized classes, does not make them feel valued by our society.

On the other hand, when school facilities and services are provided in a way that meets students' social and emotional needs, they will gain a sense of belonging and a sense of pride in themselves and their school.

Unfortunately, not all schools in Australia are funded adequately so that they can meet these needs. Indeed, some government schools are under-resourced to the point that they



“[Students] gain a sense of belonging and... pride in themselves...”

struggle even to get students through the basic curriculum. This is a particular issue when schools have students with disabilities or learning difficulties, or students whose behaviour is challenging.

Good facilities are extremely important, but even more important are the

interactions that students have with the people who care for them, namely the teachers and support staff.

School leadership should be of the highest quality so that kids get the message that they're important.

As a primary school principal with 32 years' experience, I know how important primary education is in laying the foundation for all the learning that will follow—and for youngsters it comprises virtually all of their life experience up to that point.

For too long, primary schools have not received the funding they need. We need to advocate to get the best for our students. ●

Meredith Farmer

Teacher

Ross Smith Secondary School
South Australia

For most of my teaching career I've worked in disadvantaged schools, so I've had first-hand experience of what education does for students from underprivileged backgrounds. Research shows that education curtails disadvantage; it's the key to breaking cycles like generations of unemployment and poverty. Public school teachers are mandated with the job of addressing that built-in disadvantage in our society.

As a secondary teacher, I see students that are on the cusp of making decisions about what they will do with the rest of their lives. Kids from disadvantaged backgrounds can often hold quite entrenched positions about what they can and can't achieve because of their parents' education or economic circumstances. But, if they are exposed to good teachers who care about them, then there is a chance that those attitudes will be overturned. It's a wonderful thing to be able to open students up to those possibilities.

So public education is a great equaliser, and that's why it needs to be properly funded. It has to be able to offer a quality product to all students.

Quality education requires quality resources and up-to-date facilities in public schools, so that kids don't think of themselves as going to 'the poor school'. That can have a huge impact on the way children view their schooling. Even something that seems trivial like



a coat of paint in a classroom can change students' attitudes to their own education.

Teachers in public schools are not necessarily doing it for the money; they're there because they love it and believe in what they are doing. But teaching is a stressful job, and there's no denying that money is one factor that attracts and retains teachers. Working conditions are also significant—and improving them takes funding. For example, if you want to reduce teachers' direct load so they have more time for planning or one-on-one contact with students, you have to employ more staff to cover that. ●

“It's a wonderful thing to be able to open students up to those possibilities.”



Edd Black

Principal
Huntingdale Primary School
Western Australia

If Australia is to be competitive in the future, and if it is to give all its citizens opportunity to reach their potential, then everyone needs a sound education. Unfortunately the idea of the Australian 'fair go' in education seems to be gradually dying and a big reason for that is diminishing federal funding for public schools over the past 12 years.

In Western Australia, educating the children of migrants who are brought in on short-term working visas or who have refugee status is becoming overwhelming for the public system. Many of these students speak no English at all, yet there is no additional funding to help schools. This will become an even bigger problem over the next five years as the intake of migrants increases to

handle the enormous growth we are seeing in the mining sector here. Fairer federal funding would greatly assist.

Isolation because of distance is also a particular concern in WA. Remote and isolated public schools need support services like psychologists, social workers and other specialist support but they are difficult to access. The reality is that many people don't want to go thousands of kilometres away from a capital city unless they're adequately remunerated for doing so.

The public system is the only one that takes all children and looks after them, no matter what their situation. We must hold on to this value of caring for all our children, and to do this the public system must be more fairly funded than it has been in the past decade. ●

"We must hold on to this value of caring for all our children."



Andrea Saggars

Teacher
Bellerive Primary School,
Tasmania

Public education is underpinned by very strong values, such as equity and acceptance of diversity. And these values are passed on to students in the classroom. Being immersed in a context that ensures exposure to people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds means that students are always gaining understanding about how different people do things in different ways. They are learning together, and about how to live together.

For example, one of the students in my classroom isn't allowed to eat meat for cultural reasons. That's led to some good discussions in class about why some people can't eat meat and about why people from different



backgrounds believe different things.

Similarly, when students see that everyone gets treated the same regardless of, say, their economic circumstances or a disability, they are learning that everyone should get an equal chance.

Public education should receive more funding. Last year I was working at a school in a very low socioeconomic area, and the school's literacy and numeracy rates were incredibly low. We did get some additional funding to address that, but it just wasn't enough.

When you're one teacher working with 30 kids, and half the class has major difficulties with the basics of reading and arithmetic, the task before you is immense. More money for teacher education is also critical. ●

"... they are learning that everyone should get an equal chance."

Interviews by Paul Somerville,
a freelance journalist.



Sheree Vertigan

President

Australian Secondary Principals Association

Principal (on leave)

Reece High School
Tasmania

Reece High School was burned down by an arsonist in 2000 and rebuilt as a school for the 21st century. On the day the new buildings were opened, a student standing next to me said, "It's fantastic isn't it, Mrs Vertigan?" Then he said, "It's far too good for us".

Those words have played over in my head many times in the intervening years. It greatly saddened me that a 12-year-old would think that he was unworthy of quality school buildings. To be so young and to have already made a decision about where you fit in the order of things is a terrible reflection on our community values.

Reece High School is in the electorate of Braddon, one of the poorest elector-

ates in Australia. While we do have some children from relatively wealthy families, others come from situations of serious poverty.

Nonetheless we have been able to give some fantastic experiences to our students, regardless of their family's economic position. We try to make sure that financial status does not stand in the way of getting a rich education.

For example, we recently held a 'Breath of Life' concert, organised in conjunction with the Australian Lung Foundation, where numerous musicians performed, including Diesel and Kasey Chambers. This was a great fundraising venture, but it also allowed many of our music students to work closely with these top musicians as a way of learning more about recording and performing.

In 2008, we conducted a project called 'From the Summit to the Sea', where students, teachers and community members had the opportunity to journey from Cradle Mountain back to our school, which is on the coast. Students experienced kayaking, mountain bike riding and even skydiving—opportunities many would not have had access to outside of the public school system. ●