

Schools speak out

Australia's public schools have made a compelling case to government for better and fairer funding arrangements.

By **Carolyn Rance**

Briefly

- Thousands of public schools and their supporters have lodged submissions to the schools funding review.
- They show that politicians' statements about the importance of equity in education are not backed up by the current funding system.
- The AEU's submission calls for a new resources standard to counter disadvantage.

More than 6,000 public schools and supporters used the AEU's For Our Future website to lodge submissions to the federal government's schools funding review.

The submissions paint a picture of a public school sector that is increasingly dependent on teacher and parent goodwill to provide essential programs and equipment. They send a clear message of confidence in government schools, but say much more could be achieved with a fairer and more predictable flow of funds.

The review is an opportunity for

fundamental reform and the righting of historical wrongs, says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos.

"Statistics show that, in the 10 years to 2008, the present system delivered the greatest increase in funding to the schools that need it the least," he says. "There was a 112 per cent increase in funding to independent private schools, an 84 per cent increase for Catholic schools and only a 67 per cent increase for government schools.

"We have reached a situation where some private schools serving wealthier communities receive thousands of dollars more in government funding per student than public schools serving low-income communities. This is an absolute disgrace."

The public school communities that made submissions to the review deserve congratulations, says Gavrielatos. Their efforts show how lack of funding impedes the ability of schools to meet the needs of many students, especially those with socioeconomic or other disadvantages.

Strong evidence

By reading the submissions, the review panel, led by businessman David Gonski, will encounter strong evidence of growing dependence on unpaid teacher hours and parent fundraising. The combined statements reveal a complex system where many teacher and principal hours are spent pursuing special purpose funds to run programs that should be supported by recurrent and predictable funding.

The submissions reveal a deep sense of injustice among government school communities – an issue the AEU is taking to politicians across the land as its campaign for a new and fairer system moves into top gear with the distribu-

tion of campaign materials, political briefings and lobbying. Politicians in every state and territory will hear the argument that achieving a stronger economy, a more skilled workforce and a socially cohesive society requires strong, well-resourced public schools.

"The promotion of equity and excellence in education requires a funding system underpinned by an unqualified commitment to ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to achieve his or her full potential at school," says Gavrielatos.

When it comes to school education, the only guarantee every child has is enrolment at their local public school, and funding this guarantee is crucial to the notion that demography is not destiny, he says.

The AEU's own submission to the funding review, and its lobbying efforts in coming months, will raise public awareness of the unique cost of running

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Angelo Gavrielatos
AEU federal president



public schools and the way that government schools differ from other schools.

“Public schools have a legal and moral responsibility to be open to all students. Private schools don’t, and they aren’t, and it is from this simple premise that the primary obligation of governments to properly and adequately fund public schools logically follows,” says Gavrielatos.

An improved funding regime is a matter of political will, and many leading politicians know that the current system is flawed, he says.

In May last year, Prime Minister Julia Gillard told the National Press Club that school funding should allow all children – including those with disabilities and those living in remote areas – to meet high expectations, and that the current system had let children down.

In a speech to the Grattan Institute in March, Peter Garrett, Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, described government schools as the backbone of the Australian education system and the crucible of

the democratic right to accessible, affordable, quality education.

And yet, says Gavrielatos, political deals by successive governments have undermined public education. Directly or indirectly, they have encouraged private education and weakened community confidence in the public system.

This has occurred despite strong, widespread public support for government schools.

When the AEU commissioned a poll of 2,500 voters early this year, 70 per cent of respondents said too much government money was going to private schools and 77 per cent agreed that more investment in government schools was the way to achieve the government’s aim of building a stronger economy and providing opportunities for all Australians.

“There is an absolute expectation that politicians articulate the views, needs and aspirations of their electorates,” says Gavrielatos, “and in all electorates across Australia, the overwhelm-

ing majority of parents choose to enrol their children at public schools.

“We will be continuing our efforts in a range of targeted seats so that current and aspiring members of parliament understand the political consequences of their decisions with respect to public school funding.”

New standards

The AEU’s submission calls for the establishment of a new resources standard for all public schools, with additional funding to counter disadvantage and meet the needs of students with specific requirements.

It seeks a breaking of the nexus between public and private school funding, with an end to the indexation system that links private school funding to the average cost of delivering education in government schools.

“The current system fuels a resources gap between private and public schools that exacerbates disadvantage. It is fatally flawed,” says Gavrielatos. ●

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