



LITERACY AND NUMERACY VOUCHERS

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The recent Federal budget allocated over \$450 million over the next four years for literacy and numeracy vouchers. This considerably extends the Reading Assistance Voucher Programme, which supports students who did not meet the Year 3 national benchmark for reading in 2006 and which was allocated \$20.6 million for 2007.

The new program will provide a \$700 tutorial voucher per child to parents whose children do not achieve current literacy or numeracy benchmarks in Years 3, 5 and 7. Following the introduction of national literacy and numeracy tests in 2008 that will also cover Year 9, vouchers will also be extended to eligible students in Year 9 from 2009.

This considerably expands the Reading Assistance Voucher Program for students not meeting the Year 3 national benchmark for reading in 2006, which itself followed the Pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative in 2005.

Following a number of serious problems with the 2005 Initiative, the Curriculum Corporation took over the running of the Program in 2007. This has led to improved administration, closer connections with the state and territory departments, and greater involvement of schools, but still fails to overcome the basic flaws in the program.

Essentially the program is poorly targeted and driven by an ideological bias towards privatisation rather than supporting teachers and schools.

Some of the problems:

- The vouchers provide tutors who do not necessarily know the students and the tuition is conducted separately from what has and is already taking place in the school setting.
- A student only qualifies for assistance if they are already below the benchmark. One of the features of the information gained from the basic skills tests is that the number of students who fall below the benchmark increases the older the students get. For instance, in 2005, the percentage of students not meeting the benchmarks in numeracy in Year 3 was 6%; however, by Year 5 this had increased to 9% and by Year 7, 18% of students were not meeting the benchmark. Funding only those who fall below the benchmark does not address the whole problem. Those “at risk” are not identified and supported.
- The programme operates on the supposition that these students have “fallen behind” and that all that is necessary is that they be given a bit of a boost to “catch up”. Some students always need more support if they are to achieve at the same level. In fact, all students need differing levels of support throughout school in order to reach common objectives.

- Many students do not take up their entitlement to extra tuition. Only about sixty per cent of students entitled to vouchers actually took them up in the Reading Assistance Voucher program. To this extent, it is hit and miss.
- It is difficult to find tutors in rural and remote areas, and almost impossible in some of the remote areas in communities such as those in the Northern territory, where some of the reading difficulties are most severe.
- Reports suggest about one third of expenditure goes in administration and monitoring.

Rather than paying private tutors to “give a lift” to those that have already fallen behind, the money would be much better targeted by giving it to the schools and teachers who need the extra support and resources to minimise the number of students who fall below the benchmarks in the first place, and who can integrate the extra resources into existing and ongoing programs to maximise the success of all students.

There is also concern that the extension of the program to other grades has apparently taken the place of the government’s own Reading Review recommendations, which have been totally ignored.

The very first sentence of the Executive Summary of the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy states that effective literacy teaching should be grounded in findings from rigorous evidence-based research. The Review’s recommendations stress the importance of school-based literacy improvement strategies and the importance of teacher professional learning.

One of the most significant recommendations is for a specialist literacy teacher in every school with responsibility for linking the whole-school literacy planning process with classroom teaching and learning, and identifying and providing professional learning for school staff.