



## AEU Parliamentary Brief

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### Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution

*Federal Labor is reminded that the most important and valuable national asset of all is public education.*

Whilst recognising the importance of education for the future well-being of this nation, in releasing his 'Directions Paper' *The Australian Economy Needs an Education Revolution* on 23 January 2007, Kevin Rudd failed to acknowledge the critical social benefits which are derived from the provision of high quality public education. It is crucial that in pursuing education reform the emphasis is not confined to standards of achievement but also includes the building and maintenance of a cohesive, viable and democratic society. The role of public education in achieving this must be acknowledged.

The commitment by the Federal Labor Opposition to make education its first priority and its recognition of the need to greatly increase funding for education from pre-school to mature age education is welcome. (The latest OECD report ranks Australia 18<sup>th</sup> out of 30 OECD countries for government education expenditure as a proportion of GDP).

However, by continuing with the theme of refusing to distinguish between public and private schools, Federal Labor is failing to acknowledge that the almost 70% of children in public schools clearly have the greatest need of increased investment. Without adequate funding for public education Kevin Rudd's policy aimed at ensuring that every Australian has the opportunity to realise his or her full potential will not be achieved.

Since 1996 the Federal Government share of funding to public schools has declined from 42% of the total schools education budget to 35%. This reduction in share means that public schools are receiving \$1billion less than they would have been, had the share been maintained.

The Howard Government has also cut funding to TAFE to such an extent that there is now a skills shortage crisis. In excess of 300,000 people have been turned away from TAFE colleges since 1998.

The level of under-funding of public schools far exceeds the \$1billion referred to above. The Schools Resource Taskforce established in 2002 by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), has calculated that public schools nationwide require at least an additional \$2.9billion in recurrent funding to ensure that

the schools are resourced to a national standard which would enable all students to achieve the National Goals of Schooling (*The \$2.9 billion figure grossly underestimates the true level of funding required as the SRT has not yet calculated costs associated with capital, nor specific costs associated with special education or with assuring quality teaching for all students*).

Federal Labor must recognise and clearly articulate a primary obligation and commitment for the provision of high quality public education. Failing to do so would represent an admission that the ALP is either incapable or unwilling to guarantee the provision of public pre-school to Year 12 education of the highest quality in every community across the nation.

The AEU will continue to campaign for:

- a priority commitment to public education;
- a significant increase to funding in public schools; and
- a commitment to significantly enhance public education funding in the equity areas of special needs, low SES and Indigenous education.

### **Pre-School Education**

The AEU welcomes the ALP's acknowledgement of the need for a national strategy in early childhood education, to be developed in consultation with state and territory governments. The proposal to legislate for the provision of a right to universal access to pre-school for all 4 year olds is an important step in addressing the needs of the 17% of Australian children who miss out on pre-school education each year. The AEU is pleased to see:

- a specific investment of \$450M attached to the policy;
- the funding for 1500 new early childhood university places;
- HECS remission for 10,000 early childhood graduates working in areas of need; and
- the plan to eliminate TAFE fees for childcare trainees.

The concerns in relation to the social benefit of education which are outlined above, apply equally to pre-school education provision.

Those children currently missing out are overwhelmingly from rural/isolated areas, low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous families or are in some way disabled.

It is critical that any national strategy prioritises the needs of these children through public provision.

### **'Performance Pay'**

#### **The Coalition proposals:**

Minister Bishop and John Howard have been pushing the benefits of 'performance pay' for school teachers. Bishop maintains that paying teachers a bonus based on student results would improve student results and would encourage the best teachers to work in difficult schools because they would get paid more.

The Federal Government says this is the way to give individual teachers a pay rise...something they say is opposed by their unions who want low pay because it gives the unions control.

Bishop has floated the possibility of allowing students, parents, principals and other teachers to engage in "subjective assessments" of teachers from which judgements about increased pay would be made.

Bishop has commissioned ACER to research the issue of performance pay and intends to take this to the MCEETYA meeting in April to persuade state and territory departments of the need to introduce such schemes. She has also stated that she is considering linking federal funding to a requirement for performance pay, possibly by way of AWA's.

One model mooted by DEST has been that of Arkansas where, apparently, new research shows how performance pay improved teachers' careers. This particular research was conducted by academics paid by Wal-Mart in a university department funded by Wal-Mart on behalf of the Walton family. It involved 5 schools.

#### **The ALP position:**

The ALP released a policy paper in October 2006 which proposed a national, standards-based career structure which builds on the work

of states and territories being done through MCEETYA. Accreditation would be undertaken by state and territory professional authorities against criteria consistent with an agreed national framework.

It intends additional remuneration to be over and above teacher salary scales; it is not to be quota based; and it will be part of negotiated collective agreements.

The proposal also provides for additional positions in targeted schools which have high concentrations of disadvantaged students and a high proportion of inexperienced teachers. These teachers would receive considerable additional salary and professional learning funding.

### **The AEU response:**

AEU Policy asserts that the best way to attract and retain quality teachers is to ensure that the profession as a whole is well-paid.

Bishop's comment to the National Press Club (February 7) "We must move beyond the low salaries and artificial salary caps supported by education unions in their one-size fits all, lowest common denominator mentality" suggests that one of the Coalition intentions is to mirror the Bush Administration's Teacher Incentive Fund which pays the states to introduce merit pay, with the aim of eliminating single salary schedules.

There is no evidence anywhere in the world that results-based merit pay actually works. In those US states which have experimented with this, schemes have usually been abandoned after two or three years. There have been negative consequences for both teaching staff and teaching itself. Some schools have resorted to direct instruction approaches which stifle children's capacity to think for themselves; others have eliminated entire subjects because they are not tested and therefore seen to be "unimportant"; other schools and districts have engaged in dishonest behaviour in order to get the "benefits" which flow from such a scheme, including the right to remain open.

If the introduction of a scheme such as this was to shift the focus of teachers and schools away

from genuine student learning and towards passing standardised tests and exams then we will have done the profession of education a grave disservice.

Further, a scheme such as the one being discussed, would not guarantee the best or most experienced teachers in those schools with difficult to teach students. Quite the opposite. How is it possible to compare the work of a teacher of students with disabilities with that of students in academically selective schools? Many teachers would actively seek to teach in those schools and those classes where students were likely to do well.

Bishop's further comments re the "subjective assessment" of teachers by students, parents, principals and other teachers indicate that this is less a serious proposition than a strategy to divert attention away from the critical issue of school funding.

Coalition polling will have indicated to them that they are vulnerable on the funding issue. By attempting to drive a wedge between teacher unions and the community, Howard and Bishop hope to undermine the credibility of Australian teachers and their national public education campaign.

AEU policy, together with the broader education professional community, supports a standards based approach to recognising and rewarding quality teaching. As such we see the ALP proposal as a constructive beginning from which to develop a national strategy.

## **National Curriculum**

- 1 The AEU believes that is important that there be an open and wide debate on **the learning needs of students in the twenty-first century**. This debate should:
  - Acknowledge that knowledge and the organisation of knowledge is always in a state of reconceptualisation, and curriculum development needs to reflect this. At the current time, there is a particular need to look at the curriculum needs of students in the twenty-first century who will be spending their lives

in a world undergoing rapid and fundamental change.

- Value the inputs of all stakeholders, and in particular value the expertise of teachers and those with expertise in curriculum development;
  - involve all stakeholders such as parents, the general public, community organisations, and the business community;
  - be conducted in a rational and informed manner, based on appropriate processes such as those outlined in the A Guide To Productive National Approaches To Curriculum Work produced by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association;
  - include consideration of the appropriate forms of national comparability/consistency and cooperation and develop proposals for a workable and flexible level of national curriculum cooperation/consistency/ collaboration/framework.
- 2 It is important to note that to date states and territories:
- have been attempting to grapple with the issues around these curriculum needs, leading to new theories and ideas and new expressions of appropriate curricula;
  - have in general based this on consultation and discussion with the profession and other stakeholders;
  - may need to implement further discussion and refinement of some of this;
  - have in several cases created problems through rushed and inadequate consultation and implementation processes including an unwillingness to give schools the extra planning time and resources needed.
- 3 The processes of curriculum development should be open and widely discussed and must give due recognition:
- to the expertise and experience of teachers who implement the curriculum on a day to day basis, including through

their involvement in curriculum committees;

- to teacher unions as a preferred way of expressing these views collectively as a profession;
  - to curriculum authorities and education department officers with ongoing responsibility for and expertise in curriculum areas;
  - to the inter-relatedness of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and reporting.
- 4 The AEU condemns the Federal Government, supported by conservative commentators and elements of the media, for attacking teachers and denigrating the critically important work they do in educating the nation's children by:
- creating a debate based on scare tactics rather than rational debate;
  - using tactics designed to intimidate and silence those who do not agree with them rather than welcoming a range of viewpoints and an intelligent debate;
  - failing to acknowledge success in international tests;
  - providing dubious research and interpretation of data and seeking and concentrating on negative aspects and results rather than an honest examination of improvements as well as areas in need of further consideration;
  - basing the debate on false standards and the mythology of a past golden age, rather than a vision for the future;
  - using the debate to seek to re-impose an outdated curriculum that will not serve students well in the future;
  - seeking to enhance its political control of the curriculum through undermining public confidence in current practices in schools;
  - setting up an undesirable state versus federal dichotomy rather than working in partnership with the states and territories to the benefit of all Australian students.

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