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ADDRESS BY PAT BYRNE, AEU FEDERAL PRESIDENT

The OECD conducts a Program for International Student Assessment every three years. This is known to us as PISA and it assesses the educational achievement of 15 year old students in 35 OECD countries.

An analysis of the results from the test conducted in 2000 showed that the performance of the highest achieving Australian students is comparable with the best in the OECD. Only Finland performed better in reading literacy; Japan better in mathematical literacy and only Korea and Japan performed better in scientific literacy.

However, PISA also showed us what we already know that there is a correlation between educational outcomes and socio-economic status. More specifically, it showed that in Australia, socio-economic background is more significant than in most other countries.

The strength of the relationship between home background and school achievement varies some countries counter the effect of home background better than others. The results show that Australia is not one of those countries. Finland and Korea, for example, do far better.

In other words, the spread between high achievers and those not doing so well is far greater in Australia than in other countries. Or to put it another way, as Barry McGaw does, if you are going to be born in circumstances of poor family background, it would be better to be born in Finland, Korea, Japan or Canada than in Australia.

This disparity between quality and equity in Australia is of concern to the AEU and should be of concern to everyone here. We would like to be in the position of having a high quality-high equity system and the AEU is committed to continue to work towards achieving that goal.

Public education represents our country's future. I say public education because there is no doubt that the majority of those students from low socio-economic backgrounds attend public schools. I say our country's future because we know - and OECD research supports this - that there is a direct and positive link between the level of educational achievement of a country's citizens and its economic success.

For example, we know that for all children, and especially those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, pre-school makes a difference in intellectual progress and the acquisition of positive attitudes and motivation to succeed at school. Yet we do not have a national system which guarantees universal access to quality pre-school education.

It is our view that a national plan for publicly funded, free pre-school education should be an integral part of the public schooling system. We have such a plan and would love to talk to you about it!

In relation to our plan, the AEU is conducting a series of forums beginning on October 21st, and occurring in other states and territories after that, involving a range of stakeholders to canvass the issues around pre-school education.

Overlapping with the pre-school issue is that of indigenous education. We are all aware that the outcomes of schooling for indigenous Australians in this country are shameful. We are seeking a commitment from state and territory governments to support and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to implement a range of strategies aimed at improving educational and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

From the point of view of the TAFE sector, we also have a view about what the ANTA Agreement should be doing. We understand the impact of student retention rates on the economy. We need a guarantee that school leavers do not leave school without a qualification of some sort - say, a minimum qualification at Certificate IV level; the ANTA Agreement should also provide for Vocational Education and Training courses for those already in the workforce - those OECD statistics also show that the benefit to the economy improves with each additional year of schooling, even as an adult; and it must be adjusted to cater for the huge unmet demand which presently exists in TAFE.

Another concern for the profession is the imminent teacher shortage facing us. This is a result of the age of the teaching workforce, the smaller numbers of enrolments in teacher education courses and the high numbers of new teachers leaving the profession. The predicted shortfall, based on a study by the Australian Council of Deans of Education, is between 20,000 and 30,000 teachers across Australia by the end of this decade.

But we've got a plan for that too! Come and talk to us.

Solutions to this must involve co-operation between state and federal governments increased places at universities must be accompanied by improvements to career paths and conditions; it's not enough to do one or the other - governments pointing the finger at each other achieves nothing and creates cynicism within the community. The electorate wants state and federal governments to work together to provide solutions.

Some of these issues are touched upon in this first Parliamentary Brief and obviously we at the AEU are happy to elaborate. The Brief contains AEU contacts in all states and territories and also the national office if you need to know anything. We are intending to publish this on a regular basis and will ensure that you all continue to receive copies.

It would be fair to say, I think, that no political party has yet met the expectations of teachers in relation to public education.

What we are seeking is a fair funding system which takes into account the need of all children to have access to quality public education. The AEU supports the MCEETYA funding principles which were adopted last year and which are based on notions of need. Only through proper provision for ECE, TAFE and Indigenous students will Australia become a high quality, high equity system.

That surely must be a goal with which we can all agree. The AEU will argue - with all political parties - about the strategies we use to get there but we want to work with all of you towards achieving that outcome and we look forward to doing that.

Pat Byrne, AEU Federal President