

Correna Haythorpe, AEU Federal President

Address to the AEU Federal Conference 2018

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Check against delivery

Let me begin by thanking all of you for being here today. Our union is only as strong as our members and when I look around the room today, I see passion, commitment and power in our union.

Thank you to Elder Perry Wandin from the Wurundjeri Tribe Land Council for the welcome to Wurundjeri Country.

I want to acknowledge that we are meeting on the lands of the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to the elders past and present and the elders of the future, our students. This always was and always will be their land.

I want to acknowledge and pay my respect to our sisters and brothers from other country who are with us for our conference.

Welcome to our guests:

- Shashi Bala Singh, Chief Coordinator of Education International Asia Pacific
- Masaki Okajima, Chair of Education International Asia Pacific Regional Committee accompanied by Minako, his interpreter
- Louise Regan, National President of the National Education Union of the UK
- Lynda Stewart, President of NZEI
- Jack Boyle, President of the PPTA
- Michael Stevenson, General Secretary of PPTA.

And I acknowledge you delegates, our members and the driving force of our campaigns and our union. Thank you to the AEU Victorian branch for hosting this conference.

Delegates, access to high quality, free public education is a fundamental human right.

With the release of the Close the Gap report recently, we were again reminded that it is a fundamental right which has not been fully realised for our first nation's people.

That is a source of shame for our country.

In education, we see first-hand the impact of achievement gaps for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and how these gaps impact on their education and their pathways beyond school.

It is very important to acknowledge the successful teaching and learning programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that are implemented across the nation in our preschools, schools and TAFE.

We know how important it is to work with communities to engage students and their families in their learning and by doing so, implement strategies to improve student attendance, enhance learning outcomes and lift the expectations of student achievement.

But the bottom line is we cannot close student achievement gaps until we close the resource gaps in education.

Principals, teachers and education support staff need resources and genuine systemic support to address the educational inequity faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The Turnbull Government's \$2.2 billion cuts will only make this much more difficult.

I was astounded to hear commentary recently saying that the Government may abandon many of the Close the Gap education targets because of the embarrassment associated with failing them every year.

Any government that walks away from their obligations to our children should hang their heads in shame.

We will continue to campaign on the issue of high quality education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

It will continue to be a significant focus of all of our campaigns but in particular our school funding campaign.

We will not abandon these goals just because the task is difficult and we will not rest until we close the gap for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Let's be clear about what should be happening in our public schools right now.

Principals, teachers, support staff and students should be benefiting from the biggest investment of needs-based funding in a generation.

The funding they have been waiting six years for.

For many it is funding that they were planning to use to build on the outstanding work they have already implemented:

- to lift student achievement
- to build a culture of self-determination, empowerment and excellence for our students
- to reduce workloads and empower teachers with the time to work collaboratively together to improve outcomes for every student.

In 2018, schools should have been able to employ more specialist staff like Literacy and Numeracy coordinators or speech pathologists to help teachers ensure children who start school behind their peers have the help they need so that they don't stay behind.

2018 should have meant more support for children with disabilities and those children at risk of disengagement and dropping out - the students that every person in this room can think of, whose life chances absolutely depend on what their public schools can do now – not next year, not in six years' time.

For principals, teachers and education support staff in places such as the Northern Territory and Tasmania, that have been denied additional funding, this was finally going to be the year that they got the resources they know will change the lives of their students.

Instead what we got was a government that said no.

No to a national schools funding plan that involves governments working together rather than going it alone.

No to a more level playing field where the federal government finally accepts its obligation to properly resource the public schools that educate over two thirds of our children.

And no to the needs-based funding we need to help close the unacceptable achievement gaps between children from different backgrounds.

The Turnbull plan cuts \$2.2 billion out of schools in the next two years.

86% of that cut is from public schools. Our schools, our students. Almost \$1.9 billion gone.

This is not just dollars – this is life-changing support our children are missing out on.

Malcolm Turnbull's idea of needs-based funding is to give public schools just 20% of the public funding they need to reach a minimum resource standard. Even that won't be delivered until 2023.

Private schools on the other hand will get 80%.

On top of this, private schools will also get \$1.9 billion in capital funding which, no doubt, will be wisely invested in swimming pools, wellness centres and hyperbaric chambers – whatever they are.

Public schools will get no capital funding – not one dollar for the fastest growing school sector where the money would be wisely invested in classrooms, new technology, art centres, science labs and more.

This delegates, is fairness Vacluse-style. Delivered by Malcolm Turnbull, the PM for private schools. He has turned his back on public schools, in fact he did not even bother to respond to our invitation to speak at our conference today.

Funding for students with a disability will be cut for public schools in five states and territories by up to 45%.

The Kings School, will get \$19 million extra while at the same time public schools in the Northern Territory go backwards every year.

Under the Turnbull plan, Northern Territory public schools, where many students experience compound disadvantage are treated as the most overfunded group of schools in the nation.

What is the bottom line of the Turnbull plan?

In 2023 87% of public schools will be in states that have not reached the minimum level – the Schooling Resource Standard.

Meanwhile 65% of private schools will be above it.

You will have seen the Turnbull ads on television using millions of dollars of our money to deceive people about what they have done.

They say it is about quality schools.

Well it is actually about inequality in schools and we will not stand for it.

Malcolm Turnbull boldly declared his plan would end the school funding wars.

But what he has done has restarted them.

No state government supports the plan outside of Tasmania – where public schools get the worst deal of any state.

And there is a growing civil war in the private sector between the Catholics and the Independents.

The Catholic Education Office in Melbourne broke ranks a few weeks ago and produced a report declaring that there were around 200 private schools that were so rich they should not get a dollar from the taxpayer.

A few of those were even Catholic schools.

There won't be peace on school funding until needs-based funding is restored and we get a political leader and government prepared to recognise that they have a fundamental obligation to properly resource our public schools.

Preschool

Delegates, we all understand the importance of universal access to preschool for our children. And finally it seems that governments are getting the message.

A report commissioned by state and territory governments earlier this year recommended we make both three and four-year-old preschool free and accessible to all Australian children.

This adds to a substantial body of evidence demonstrating two years of preschool gives children the best start in life and gives them the skills to go on to achieve their full potential.

Since 15 hours a week of funding has been available for four-year-olds, we have seen enrolments increase from 12 percent to 91 percent.

The same would happen if we made three-year-old preschool accessible.

Under the current agreement between the Commonwealth and states, universal access to preschool is offered only to four-year-olds, and that funding has not been guaranteed beyond 2019.

Minister Simon Birmingham talks the talk on this funding but he does not walk the walk.

Committing only one year at a time, creating great uncertainty for the sector.

If governments are genuine about building a strong, stable workforce of qualified educators then the sector needs funding certainty.

The preschool sector should not be campaigning for funding for four-year-olds year on year.

We have also moved beyond the question of whether three-year-old preschool will be made free and accessible in Australia.

The question now is when. States and territory governments want to do it now, so why wait?

A quality early childhood education for our children should be guaranteed and we will continue to campaign to secure this for our children.

TAFE

Vocational education should be fully funded by governments, because it is a public good. And it should be provided through a well-resourced public institution – TAFE.

This requires a holistic understanding of what TAFE does, in particular, the model of qualifications and curriculum that is needed to achieve its mission.

TAFE helps individuals to realise their aspirations. It assists communities to be resilient, strong and socially inclusive.

And it supports industries to be sustainable and innovative which ensures that people have access to decent jobs.

The decision by the ALP nationally to guarantee TAFE receives two thirds of government vocational education funding was a welcome step forward in the *Stop TAFE Cuts* campaign.

This guarantee will form part of the ALP platform going into the next Federal Election.

In four states and territories, New South Wales, ACT, South Australia and Tasmania, the ALP has committed to the 70% funding guarantee. This is a significant win for our campaign.

However, the most important lesson to be learnt from the current TAFE crisis, is that the damage caused by market reform cannot be fixed by more market reform.

More of the same, or tinkering around the edges will not save the TAFE sector.

The key focus of our campaign in 2018 must be a shift from the critique of the failed market experiment, to a serious attempt to engage in considered research and discussion, and then to promote new social policy in the system.

We need to reimagine the future of TAFE.

This is why our campaign will continue to engage with a range of social partners, including employers, governments, communities and academics, but also students, and teachers and other workers in the TAFE sector.

Our campaign has delivered these commitments from the ALP. It is our members and our communities that have achieved this.

They have had hope that from great adversity in this sector, we can change the outcomes for TAFE by our actions and we will continue to do so together.

Schools

Simon Birmingham has announced a new Gonski review, a review that he will use to determine the preconditions that state and territory governments must sign up to before they receive federal funding for schools.

These will be bilateral funding agreements built on the school reform agenda of right wing think tanks and ideologues.

It will be about what is taught, how it's taught and how our kids are measured.

I ask you, when do you see politicians standing next to surgeons telling them how to operate on their patients?

Or next to fire fighters telling them how to hold the hose to put out a fire, or indeed next to tradies telling them how to lay bricks?

So why is it the case that the Turnbull Government believes they can tell us how to teach?

This is our profession, our craft and our passion. Any reforms for education must be by the profession, for the profession. They must also be accompanied by the fairer funding arrangements that make sure schools are properly resourced.

Not delivered by tied funding to reforms.

We won't accept the Federal Government telling us how to teach. We won't accept right wing ideologues telling us how to teach.

And we certainly won't accept Simon Birmingham's plans to lower the bar on teacher registration and qualifications.

It is time for respect, it is time for trust.

And it is time to reclaim our professional agenda.

Right across the country we are campaigning to change the rules in education.

In every state and territory our branches and associated bodies are campaigning on issues such as:

- increasing workloads and occupational violence;
- decent salary and conditions of employment;
- state budget cuts and job losses;
- enhancing qualifications, professional learning and promotional pathways;
- initial teacher education;
- safe, well maintained facilities including air conditioning in schools;

And the issue that has mobilised our members most recently – robomarking and NAPLAN.

Delegates, we must take a moment to celebrate our win on robomarking.

A win brought about by the united commitment of every branch and associated body to our campaign strategy and our actions paid off with the Education Ministers taking it off the table.

We must stay vigilant though as there is much more to be done on the issue of NAPLAN itself.

In the words of children's author Michael Rosen,

*First they said they needed data about the children to find out what they're learning.
Then they said they needed data about the children to make sure they are learning.
Then the children only learnt what could be turned into data.
Then the children became data.*

We will not stand by and allow our children to become data only.

They are vibrant, young people who deserve to have their assessment intricately linked with their ongoing learning every day. Not as part of a big data collection by governments.

The AEU was the first to call for a comprehensive review of NAPLAN and just a short while ago, the Education Ministers came out on masse and agreed with our position. And this week, the Australian Secondary Principals Association joined the cause.

There is finally some movement on NAPLAN and we will be at the forefront of this issue.

High quality teaching and learning, backed with the resources that our schools need, is fundamentally important to ensure that every child can achieve their dreams, no matter where they live or what their background might be.

In an address to the UN Secretary General's Global Education First Initiative in 2015, Education International President Susan Hopgood said:

"On Education, the world is more than ready for quality: it's sick and tired of pretend solutions. More than two millennia of teachers and students have watched fads come and go while study after study reports the value of high quality professional teaching. Teachers matter. They are not merely a "means of implementation" but change agents with transformative powers when they are qualified teachers supported with professional development, quality tools and safe environments for teaching and learning."

This can be achieved when governments invest in our preschools, schools and TAFE.

When we reflect on 2017 and look forward to 2018, we must acknowledge that we are in turbulent times.

Much of the social and political order around the world is shifting beneath our feet.

But there is a simple truth that we hold to, and that is our belief in a democratic and just society.

This is a belief shared by many around the world, who are not prepared to sit by and watch the rise of right wing ideologues and dictators.

Where 2016 saw the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom and the re-election of the Liberal National Coalition in Australia;

2017 saw people standing up against injustice and unfairness here and around the world.

The most recent example of this in Australia, was when our politicians were unable, yet again, to lead on Marriage Equality and instead we had the postal survey.

While this survey should never have happened, we stood with our family, our friends and our LGBTIQ communities in fighting for the Yes vote.

Almost 80% of Australians took part in the postal survey and 61.6 % voted yes.

This is a matter of pride but also of relief for so many of us who dared to hope that Australians would show their commitment to the equality and dignity of every person and their right to marry the person who they love.

Love won.

In 2017, PM Malcolm Turnbull stepped up his defence of the top end of town and the undermining of the rights and living standards of everyday Australians.

Malcolm Turnbull has attacked workers. He has attacked the right to strike, the right to collectively bargain for better conditions.

He has introduced huge corporate tax cuts while slashing funding for health and education.

Inequality is at a 70 year high in this country and wages are not budging.

Malcolm Turnbull should pay attention to what is happening around the world with the women's march, the Times Up movement, the march for our lives student movement about gun control in the US and here in Australia with marriage equality, and the movement for recognition of the status and rights of the First Nations Peoples in Australia.

He needs to look at campaigns for C.U.B. and Streets Free Summer, the campaigning by the ACTU and at everyone here in this room.

For it's the power of people all around the world, the power in our movement and in all the beautiful things that are happening as people find their voices and speak out.

There is power in the union and we are going to Change The Rules.

There is no doubt that Malcolm Turnbull is the PM for private schools and there is no doubt that he has turned his back on the students in public schools.

We will hold him accountable, along with every politician who voted for his legislation.

Next month, we will launch the next phase of the AEU's school funding campaign.

It will be a campaign about getting back the money that Malcolm Turnbull has taken from our children and it will be a campaign about once and for all ensuring that all public schools are properly resourced to meet the needs of every single child.

We cannot stay silent while thousands of children miss out on the additional attention and opportunities that could change their lives.

We will win this fight. Why? Because we will never give in.

We will never walk away from our students, no matter how long it takes to achieve our goals. We understand first-hand the impact of the decisions made by politicians on our children's futures, we are passionate, dedicated and a significant force to be reckoned with.

Big cuts to our schools require a big response and that is exactly what we will deliver.

When we put the call out, thousands across the nation respond and we will harness that commitment in our fight for funding fairness for our schools.

It is my great privilege to lead our union, a strong united union that has at its heart public education.

I stand alongside Susan Hopgood, Pat Forward and our leaders in our branches and associated bodies in saying that wherever we go, whatever the campaign issue, we are never alone for our members walk beside us every step of the way.

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Australian Education Union, I thank you for your commitment and dedication to our union, to public education and most importantly to our students and their families in the communities in which we serve.

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