



Opening speech of the 2020 AEU Annual Federal Conference

Correna Haythorpe, Federal President

21 February 2020

Resilience. Determination. Hope.

Correna Haythorpe, AEU Federal President speech to the AEU Federal Conference, 21 February 2020

Delegates and guests, welcome to the 2020 AEU Federal Conference.

Thank you to Janet for the welcome to Boon Wurrung Country.

I know welcomes are not always easy to give and we shouldn't take them for granted...they are a privilege and we are privileged to walk, learn and work together on your country.

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the elders of the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations, past, present and emerging. This always was and always will be their land.

It must be especially difficult to do a welcome to country now after the summer that we have just had. We have just lived through the hottest and driest year and the worst bushfire season on record.

At least 33 people lost their lives. Homes, communities and schools burnt to the ground. Hundreds of millions of animals perished and the environmental damage is extensive.

But it is so much more than that. I can't imagine how it must feel for First Nations peoples who have watched us take over this land and not protect it.

To see land, animals – country – go up in smoke and burn to ashes is devastating for all of us.

But it must be particularly devastating for Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people and communities living in the path of the fires – watching country burn, knowing they have the knowledge and skills which could be applied to prevent these catastrophes – only to be ignored.

For at least thirty years scientists have been warning that climate change is real; but Traditional Owners have been observing the impact that our inappropriate stewardship of this land and its resources has had over generations.

It is a small but pleasing piece of progress that in the wake of this bushfire tragedy, western science is finally waking up to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and sea management practices – such as cultural burning – work.

For too long the knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have generated over millennia of caring for country has been ignored. It is why the AEU *has always* and *will always* argue for the comprehensive inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, including land management practices, into the Australian curriculum.

Traditional knowledge and its practice is important to all of us.

There would be few here in this room today who were not personally affected, or who didn't know people that were affected by these fires. Our students have experienced trauma, hazardous air pollution, many schools require repair or re-build and communities need time to

grieve. School communities which have been affected by the fires and the droughts will be dealing with the effects for months to come.

And while Scott Morrison holidayed in Hawaii, people stepped up with determination and resilience to protect and rebuild.

I recently visited Kangaroo Island, where the Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Narrunga and Kaurna peoples have traditional and contemporary connections. I met with members who shared their stories. For those of us who were not in the midst of the bushfires, it is not until you see and hear this firsthand that you really understand what happened.

At Parndana campus of KI College of Education, the blackened trees and bushes surround the school and town, pink fire retardant dusting the leaves of the trees left standing. 30 students out of 170 have lost everything while 95% of the other students have lost something from property to animals. Several teachers at KICE were on leave dealing with their own losses while the school leadership met with us and talked about the deep impact on staff.

Many of whom worked tirelessly all summer as they joined the local firefighting response. For others, late nights of 2 am were common as the school was set up as emergency accommodation for around 150 firefighters, beds had to be made, people had to be fed and buses had to be driven to and from the fire zone transporting firefighters.

Other staff loaded up their utes with firefighting equipment and went from farm to farm, day after day to help put out spot fires. One teacher told of the 55 hours without sleep defending his home from the firestorm and ember clouds while his family waited with the boat packed at their jetty ready to evacuate if all was lost.

And yet, these same people, our incredible, resilient, determined members were there at the beginning of the school year, making sure that their students could return to school. And while I have spoken about South Australia, who will ever forget the images across the nation, people seeking safety on beaches, in the water, in boats, in fire kilns, in cars.

As we drove out of town, we saw a gathered crowd around a tree looking up at a single Koala, high up in the branches, a sign of hope for the future.

Over the Christmas break, letters of condolences and solidarity arrived from our colleagues at Education International and from education unions across the world. I want to at this point, acknowledge our international guests:

- Paul Goulter, Secretary and Liam Rutherford, President, NZEI
- Amanda Martin, President, National Education Union (UK)
- Angela Roberts, Vice President, PPTA
- Combertty Rodriguez, Chief Coordinator, EI Latin American Region
- Anand Singh, Chief Coordinator, Asia Pacific Region
- Luisa Tongatama, Cook Islands Teachers Union

Many of our international colleagues have also written to Scott Morrison calling on him to act on Climate Change.

We did not see the same level of concern from the Federal Government. While the world watched our country burn, the Prime Minister and his coalition colleagues did what they have for the past six years on climate change – absolutely nothing.

Despite the evidence that climate change would inevitably result in longer and more intense bushfires, the government has fought every measure to reduce our impact on the environment and in particular, Australia's emissions that are contributing to the climate crisis.

One of the Coalition's few bushfire and drought response policies was yet another special fund for private schools. An additional ten million dollars on top of the \$10 million announced before Christmas. \$20 million for private school relief in blatant disregard for the vast majority of students in these areas who attend public schools.

At last year's Council of Pacific Education Conference, a young student spoke about her fears for the future. She challenged every single person in the room as she told of worrying about a future where there were no blue skies and blue seas, a future with decimated fish, animal and bird life and there was not a dry eye in the room as she broke down in tears. Her emotional fearfulness for her future is not something that my generation grew up with and that our children and students have these fears is a great shame on us all.

It is young people, our students, who are leading the voice for change.

This weekend school students across the country are involved in national climate change action, calling on governments to act now before it is too late.

And we will join them tomorrow as it is not only our responsibility but our hope for a better future.

This summer was a wakeup call for us all, both here and globally. We must push for swift action to drastically reduce carbon emissions while ensuring a just transition.

The AEU will call for climate change to be a national emergency. We want the scientific knowledge to be taught in schools alongside traditional knowledge.

Because we need to listen to the voices of First Nations peoples.

The importance of a First Nations Voice to the parliament of Australia, entrenched in our constitution, has been ignored by the Morrison Government. At first, in a resounding rejection by the conservatives, it was deliberately misrepresented as a 'third chamber of parliament'. And now the idea has been co-opted by this government and turned in to a 'First Nations Voice to government'.

That the carefully deliberated and beautifully worded aspirations contained in the Uluru Statement from the Heart have been ignored and then co-opted should be abhorrent to all of us.

The First Nations delegates who met in Uluru for the National Constitutional Convention in 2017 eloquently told us that:

(The) dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness. We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country.

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Indeed, it is difficult to fathom how we can continue as a country to ignore the decades of intellectual labour and hard work on the part of First Nations peoples asking us, respectfully, to tell the truth about the history of our country, to develop and implement a treaty-making process and, most importantly, entrench a representative voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the body which, since the 1967 Referendum, has the power to legislate for, and make decisions over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This body is the Australian Parliament. The instrument is the Australian Constitution. And the Voice must rightly be located within it.

Conference, the forces that deny a democratic voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the same forces trying to shut down union voice.

Scott Morrison's outrageous union busting 'Ensuring Integrity' Bill is just one example of the many deliberate and calculated attempts by the Government to weaken and undermine trade unions and prevent us from organising and protecting the interests of workers.

They failed in their first attempt to pass the legislation because the mighty union movement sent tens of thousands of emails, made hundreds of phone calls and lobbied key crossbenchers.

I met with Senator Jacqui Lambie in Burnie recently and she talked about the bill's impact on teachers and nurses and their unions, comments which reflect on the many, many emails, phone calls and meetings of determined unionists.

We stopped this bill once, and we will stop it again.

And it isn't just the voice of working people and the right of unions to represent them that the Coalition is trying to silence.

For several years now, the Coalition has tried to block our union from any dialogue and representation on behalf of our members about education policy.

The National School Reform Agreements contain many items which will impact on teaching and learning however this agenda is being rolled out without any consultation with us, the voice of the teaching profession.

The Learning Progressions and Online Formative Assessment tool for example, is being built based on an extremely limited and token consultation with 27 teachers across the nation. 27!

The legitimacy of any public policy rests on proper dialogue. Consultation which ensures that policy is more likely to work because it reflects the day to day realities of the people experiencing and affected by the issues.

The ILO/UNESCO recommendation concerning the status of teachers is very clear – authorities must establish recognised means of consultation with teachers’ organisations on such matters as educational policy, educational research and much more.

The fundamental failure of the Morrison Government is not only the lack of consultation but that there is no understanding that it is the teaching workforce who are the experts and that it is the expectation of our members that they will be fully involved in any decisions that will affect them, through a genuine and ongoing consultation with their union.

In the absence of this, we cannot support the implementation of any reforms as part of the national reform agenda and particularly those which we know will increase the workload of our members without any benefit to students and their learning.

According to a recent survey by Monash University, 75% of responding teachers said that their workload was not manageable. That’s not news to us, several Branches and Associated bodies have conducted detailed workload surveys over the past few years and the research is very clear.

Not only are our members experiencing escalating workloads, but the nature of that work has changed in complexity and in administritivia.

This only serves to de-motivate and ultimately de-skill teachers, to stifle the morale of the workforce and degrade the status of our profession.

The erosion of teachers’ professional autonomy in matters of curriculum, teaching and learning manifests through an increase in mandated government policies, administrative workload, and through the ever-increasing pressure of standardised assessment, NAPLAN.

But we know that NAPLAN’s days are numbered. Our campaigning on NAPLAN has shifted the public debate and there is a growing consensus that NAPLAN has got to go. The New South Wales, Queensland, ACT and Victorian governments are conducting their own NAPLAN review due to report later this year and more and more voices are calling for NAPLAN to be scrapped.

That is a direct result of the determination and resilience of our members and the work that we have undertaken with the Education Council to prosecute our arguments about NAPLAN.

Delegates, this is our profession. We will lead the debate when it comes to education policy.

We will fight for high quality Initial Teacher Education so that new educators have the skills, mentoring and support needed as they take up their profession.

We will fight to stop Dan Tehan’s blatant agenda to devalue the status of the teaching profession through the expansion of funding for Teach for Australia which brings people into our schools without the proper qualifications and training.

We will fight for leaders, teachers and education support staff in all sectors, who experience insecure employment and escalating workloads.

We will use our voice with respect to professional and industrial issues.

We will demand our rights to lead education policy and legislative processes, despite the efforts to marginalise and sideline us.

For our union, promoting equality and respecting diversity is core business.

The UNESCO definition of equality is that equality exists when women and men have equal access to quality education, resources and work in all domains, and when they are able to share power and knowledge on this basis.

We achieve this through challenging unconscious biases and stereotypes, recognising the pervasive nature of privilege and in education, building positive, inclusive learning environments. However, we know that access to education is not enough by itself, we must also have well-resourced quality education which focuses on enhancing teaching and learning, with a fully qualified and respected workforce with decent working conditions and pay equity for women and men.

Gender inequality in Australia means that women make up the majority of workers who rely on the minimum wage, so they get paid less while being increasingly locked out of a secure retirement. Women are more vulnerable to exploitative and insecure forms of work, while their careers are also impacted and disrupted with the work and life collision. And they are more likely to experience family violence with on average one woman a week in Australia murdered by her current or former partner and more women experiencing physical or sexual violence.

As teachers, we understand the importance of safe schools for our students and for our members of being able to deal with the dynamics of racism, sexism and homophobia whether in preschools, schools, TAFE or our communities.

At the end of last year, the AEU conducted a national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members on their perceptions and experiences of racism in the workplace.

Results show that while we know that it is vitally important that our public education system is inclusive and culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and workers, this is not always the lived experience of our members.

Members reported that they felt they had to minimise aspects of their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural identity in order to ‘fit in’ in their workplaces; and that they have known colleagues who have left the education industry because of racism.

However, Conference, the survey shows that the AEU’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members trust us to deal with these issues. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members overwhelmingly believe that our organisation is a safe and supportive place for them.

We must and we will stand together to fight all forms of discrimination in our workplaces.

And as unionists, we understand the issues that impact on our members in public education and we understand that we must organise to achieve the professional and industrial wins and we must campaign to secure the social change that we need to see in Australia.

We are a campaigning union. We work collectively on the issues that matter to our members to our students and to our communities.

For preschools, schools and TAFE our campaign focus continues in order to secure fair funding for each sector.

The case for preschool education has never been greater. But it seems that everyone is listening except the federal government.

It has been 10 years since universal access to 15 hours a week of preschool was introduced for every Australian child in the year before primary school, and seven years since the Coalition came to power, yet Canberra still funds its share of one third, year by year.

We know that you can't fund the future just one year at a time!

Right now, it's Groundhog Day. Each year has seen the Federal Budget announce a single year's funding. We have funding to the end of 2020 and that's it.

We have a national partnership; we've had over a decade of funding and we need the Commonwealth to stump up the cash. Funding shouldn't just be left to the states and territories alone. It's a joint responsibility of governments and the Commonwealth must contribute its share.

The AEU is leading the fight for an ongoing commitment to preschool funding with delegations to local MPs, thousands of post cards to be delivered to the PM and a national lobbying day in Canberra next month.

Politicians will also be hearing from our members and TAFE supporters about the urgent need to invest in a strong TAFE.

Half the new jobs in the future will require a Vocational Education qualification. There is a nation-wide skills shortage with 140,000 fewer apprentices learning their trade than when the government was first elected and a youth unemployment rate that runs twice the rate of the national average. The devastating reality of privatisation, marketisation and billions of dollars of funding cuts for TAFE.

The Government's own data projections are showing that the biggest boom sector of the future will be the aged sector– we need to triple the workforce in the thirty years – and as the Royal Commission into Ageing has vividly demonstrated – we need those students to be trained by a trusted public institution that provides the proper skills to look after people compassionately.

Construction will also be a boom industry, yet we have such a shortage of tradies due to TAFE funding cuts that major infrastructure projects are being put on hold. Without a strong and properly funded TAFE sector how can we hope to train the people we need to deliver the infrastructure that is essential to drive our transition to renewable energy and to limit the already catastrophic impact of climate change on our planet.

The rapid growth of artificial intelligence and IT as we head into the fourth industrial revolution means that Australia needs to be thinking now about the repercussions of new technologies, and planning how to provide life-long learning opportunities for people to re-train and transition as more and more jobs are transformed by technology or phased out due to a just transition for climate action.

These are just a few examples of growing industry opportunities but also it is important to recognise that TAFE has a strong social contract for our communities.

For young people, for people seeking a second chance, for the vulnerable and those who come from a disadvantaged background. TAFE provides not only educational opportunity but hope and it must be funded as the anchor institution of the public provision for vocational education.

When we hopped on the bus during the TAFE AGM last year to doorknock for TAFE in the Dunkley electorate, I heard a consistent message from the public.

And that is that TAFE matters to our communities.

Early analysis of the Australian Education Union's (AEU) 'State of Our TAFE 2020' survey has revealed that, on average, TAFE teachers are working an additional day per week over and above their paid work, resulting in soaring teacher workloads at all levels.

72% of respondents say that their working hours have increased over the last three years

93% of respondents said that the pace or intensity of their work has increased over the last three years.

That is a direct result of the \$3 billion in funding cuts since the Coalition took government.

It is crystal clear there is an urgent need to invest in a strong TAFE – it is going to be vital for Australia's future – and for tackling the big challenges of our future.

Only TAFE provides a highly qualified workforce and a trusted, world-leading education that will give Australians the skills they need for the future.

To convince the policy makers and decision-makers we are going to refresh our Stop TAFE cuts campaign and update our policy demands.

There is no time to lose. We are kicking off with the TAFE 2020 conference in April where leading academics, TAFE teachers, policy makers, politicians and our members will assist in defining the issues and objectives.

This will be immediately followed by the TAFE AGM which will chart the direction of the next phase of the AEU's campaign.

And then there is school funding. [Play video]

It's impossible to talk about school funding in Australia without talking about equity and fairness.

Where once politicians and the vested interests running private school systems tried to frame any discussion around funding in terms of choice, a decade of campaigning by AEU members has reframed the issue into one of equity.

By putting needs-based funding at the heart of the conversation, the questions now being asked are:

Why are some of the biggest increases in funding going to elite private schools, the schools that need it least?

Why does the Morrison Government think \$14 billion in cuts is a fair go?

Why are public schools missing out on billions in SRS funding.

We have achieved important policy change through campaigning together, change that we should be very proud of bringing about.

We have shaped the public and political conversation on school funding over the past decades and fought off the worst of the Coalition's policy agenda.

Needs-based funding for schools touches on every challenge that our members face – whether it is student engagement, workload, class sizes, lack of education support staff, or the need for literacy and numeracy programs. It is the only way to ensure that every student has the chance to flourish.

Supporters of fair funding are fighting hard for every win, but the challenge now is to make sure that all schools receive their full share of the fair funding they deserve.

Under current policy, 99 per cent of public schools will be below the Schooling Resource Standard by 2023 – the minimum amount of funding required to meet the educational needs of their students – while all private schools will be at or above the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

Our goal must be to see every school funded at a minimum of 100 per cent of the SRS.

It is unacceptable in the country of the 'fair go' for public schools to rely on fundraising fetes, cake stalls and teachers dipping into their own pockets to prevent their students from missing out.

Governments have a fundamental responsibility to fund our schools and must step up.

And it isn't just on recurrent school funding where the Government must step up, there are major capital works needs that can only be addressed with investment from the Federal Government.

According to the 2019 school student enrolment figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), public school enrolments have increased again in seven of eight states and territories, with teachers in public schools teaching 37,000 more students than in 2018, and 150,000 more than just five years ago.

By comparison, independent schools saw growth of just 55,000 students over five years, while Catholic school enrolments have flat lined for many years and only grew by 4,000 students last year.

And yet it is the private sector that the Morrison Government has shown blatant favouritism to as they have systematically dismantled any commitment to public school capital works altogether.

In 2017 the Coalition introduced legislation which handed private schools \$1.9 billion in capital works funding over ten years, a fund that has already handed over nearly 400 grants at an average of over \$1 million each, while simultaneously scrapping a Commonwealth-fund dedicated to public school capital works worth hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

Between 2013 and 2017, Australia's four richest schools spent \$402 million on new facilities and renovations, \$37 million more than the 1800 poorest schools combined.

ACARA data shows that many elite private schools are using recurrent funding provided by our taxes for their swimming pools, orchestra pits, fencing pistes and more. Just imagine what could be possible for our schools, public schools if our taxes were used as they should be – for the unmet infrastructure needs of our school communities.

The Morrison Government has entrenched inequality between the school sectors by refusing to provide capital funding for public schools.

Last year, I visited Alekarenge School in the Northern Territory. We toured the school facilities with the Principal and were confronted by 50 year old transportable buildings riddled with asbestos, with holes in the walls and floors, electrical wires hanging beneath buildings where children crawl to retrieve balls and rusty unsafe playground equipment with no shade nor grass or soft surface underneath.

The infrastructure refurbishment required for this school and hundreds of others is extensive and it is shameful that any government - commonwealth, state or territory believes that it is acceptable for students to learn in and teachers, principals and education support staff to work in substandard unsafe buildings.

There are hundreds of stories of schools across the country with a backlog of maintenance and new classrooms needed to cater for projected student enrolment growth.

Commonwealth investment in capital works is essential if we are to ensure that the 2 out of 3 students who attend public schools can do so in facilities that are modern, exciting and safe.

Several State and Territory governments have begun to invest in the infrastructure needs of the public sector, but this must be a joint responsibility of all governments.

We are determined to highlight the capital funding gaps as part of our ongoing campaign for Fair Funding Now and we know that public support is with us.

It's impossible to talk about campaigning without mentioning the major setback for all of us on May 18.

Election night was devastating because I knew that we had within our grasp one of the boldest education platforms from the ALP in years. An education platform and investment for preschools, schools and TAFE that was a game changer for public education.

Labor and the Greens understood that to address inequality for our students, we have to make a significant investment, one which ensures that every school is funded at a minimum of 100% of the SRS, that 3 year olds and four year olds have access to preschool and that TAFE must be restored to its rightful position as the anchor institution for vocational education.

As we determine our campaigning focus for 2020 and beyond, one thing is crystal clear. Labor must not abandon their funding commitments for preschools, schools and TAFE.

As their policy process rolls out this year, we will be highly visible and active, ensuring that they stay true to the more than 2.5 million students who are counting on them for their educational future.

Because the best way to close the student achievement gaps in Australia, is to close the funding gaps.

Conclusion

Our vision, and the world we imagine for our children demands of us nothing less than our total commitment.

At Education International's World Congress last year, General Secretary David Edwards said that "neither educators nor trade unionists can change the world alone. However, we should never underestimate our contributions and our impact. We are in every community, we are still, widely respected. And we work every day, with the future, young people."

David also said that only if we take the lead in our profession will we have the ability to ensure that education is human centred and that our classrooms are places of deliberation, inquiry and diversity.

Only if we take the lead can we secure equitable, long term funding for public education for our students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and for our members to have well resourced, supportive working environments.

And only if we carry with us that which we resolve this weekend when we return to our communities, will our shared agenda grow roots and take form and substance.

Delegates, my youngest daughter Kate was 5 years old when I began working on the Public Education, Australia's future campaign. She has just finished her schooling and is one of an entire generation of students whose schools have been denied Fair Funding.

It is our union that began this campaign for public education to be properly funded many years ago and it is our union that will continue this campaign.

It is our members and supporters across the nation who have been resilient, determined and hopeful.

It is our members who will continue to hold governments and political parties accountable.

I have stood before you and made a commitment and I will say it again. We will never give up and we will never give in until we win. We will take the lead because if we do not then who will?

See you on the campaign trail.