

The Australian Education Union's ACT Branch represents more than 3000 teachers and support staff members across 84 public schools and the Canberra Institute of Technology (TAFE).

The Melbourne Declaration on the National Goals of Australian Schooling sets two fundamental educational goals:

1. The promotion of **equity** and excellence in education.
2. That **all young Australians** become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

The purpose of the new funding system must be the attainment of these important educational goals.

Australia's new funding system needs to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to achieve his/her full potential at school. This can only be attained by lifting overall student performance whilst simultaneously addressing underachievement.

The only guarantee every child has to an education is enrolment at their local public school. Public schools are the only schools with a legal and moral responsibility to be open to all students. It follows that the primary obligation of governments is to properly and adequately fund public schools.

The provision of high quality public schools which are accessible to all and strive to provide equality in their outcomes requires funding measures which satisfactorily address educational disadvantage.

The AEU has adopted its Principles of School Funding, central to which is a belief that true equity in Australian education can only exist when government schools **set the standard** for high quality education and when the right of every Australian family to a well resourced, high quality public school in their community is guaranteed.

This guarantee ensures that every child has a right to:

- a high quality public school where all children can learn together and learn to live together.
- qualified teachers and staff to meet their needs and aspirations.
- a curriculum of the highest quality which ensures the development of the whole child.
- a safe, modern 21st century learning environment.
- achieve his/her personal best.

The achievement of high quality education outcomes for every student requires recognition of the additional costs involved in educating children from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances. Public schools educate the vast majority of "harder to educate" students. This "heavy lifting" needs to be acknowledged in any fair funding model.

Factors such as family income, Indigeneity, language background, geographic location, disabilities and special needs, and other socio-economic and cultural factors have an impact on the educational needs and outcomes of students, and thus of schools and sectors.

Australia's public schools educate the majority of students who are recognised to have particular educational needs, and there are large gaps in outcomes between many students in these groups. Students from high SES families, for example, have much higher education outcomes than students from low SES families, while non-Indigenous students achieve much higher education outcomes than Indigenous students.

Researcher Trevor Cobbold has shown that low SES students in low SES schools can be as much as four years behind high SES students in high SES schools.

Barbara Preston's extensive analysis of the 2006 Census data shows that the public sector's declining share of the enrolments has been accompanied by an increasing concentration of low SES students and an increasing concentration of high SES students in the Catholic and Independent sectors. Only 46% of students from high income families attend public secondary schools, while three-quarters of low income families with secondary school children enrol them in public schools.

Preston's analysis of the income background of Indigenous students also shows that public schools educate 90% of low income Indigenous secondary students compared to 70% of high income Indigenous secondary students. Catholic schools educate just 10% of all Indigenous secondary students, but 20% of high income Indigenous secondary students attend Catholic schools. Only 6% of all Indigenous secondary students attend other private schools, although they enrol 10% of high income Indigenous secondary students. (The pattern is similar at the primary level.)

ABS data shows that in 2009 85.7% of Indigenous students attended government schools. In the ACT, this figure is 80.1%.

Enrolment Numbers *ABS Schools Australia 2009* Released March 2010: Indigenous Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Students - by States and Territories and School Affiliation; All FTE Students

Productivity Commission data shows that in 2008 79.5% of students with disabilities and special needs attended government schools. In the ACT this figure is 80%.

Productivity Commission *Report on Government Services 2010* [ABS 2009, Schools Australia 2008, Cat. no. 4221.0; DEEWR (unpublished)]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that defence families choose to relocate to the ACT to take advantage of the special education provision that government schools provide.

Data from the 2006 ABS Census and the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services* shows that the majority of students with language backgrounds other than English are enrolled in public schools. In the ACT this figure is 60.3%.

National 2002-06 enrolment data for the ESL New Arrivals Program provided by DEST in 2007 shows that 91.1% of these students are enrolled in government schools. In the ACT this figure is 100%.

Enrolment data from 2008, reported in the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services 2010* showed that nationally, the proportion of students enrolled in schools in remote areas was more than twice as high in government schools (1.8%), compared with non-government schools (0.8%). Nationally, the proportion of students enrolled in schools in very remote areas was four times as high in government schools (1.2%), compared with non government schools (0.3%).

Australia has no accurate national data to assess the number of Indigenous school-aged children who have access or *no* access to a school within travelling distance. In 2006 the number of discrete Indigenous communities spread across Australia was 1,187. Of this number 767 Indigenous communities were in very remote locations most of which do not have schools, or if they do, the school is most likely to provide primary level education with a visiting teacher who attends for a number of days each fortnight. In the Northern Territory, approximately 2,000 Indigenous school-aged children (of a total Indigenous population of approximately 68,000) have no access to a school and it is believed that these young people are not attending school.

From Australian Human Rights Commission *Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples' Australian Mission 17-28 August 2009* (on AHRC website)

Education economist and policy analyst Adam Rorris' analysis of 'Students at Risk' data from 2006 showed that 78% of students defined as being 'at risk' by the MCEETYA Schools Resourcing Taskforce are enrolled in public schools.

The skewed nature of educational disadvantage correlates with the higher proportion of students from low SES backgrounds in public schools. The fact that nearly 80% of the students 'at risk' can be found in public schools provides a clear signal to governments as to where the real high priority funding needs can be found.

A fair and equitable funding model must provide appropriate weightings which acknowledge the role of public schools in educating a disproportionate share of students with particular needs and the factors which increase the costs of providing high quality for all students.

It must also take into account the total operating resources from all sources available to a school, including private income. It is unconscionable that some schools struggle to meet basic needs whilst elite private schools use government money to acquire assets for use by their already relatively privileged clientele, or to offer superior salaries to teachers to lure them out of the government system.

School funding arrangements which contain a mechanism such as the AGSRC which transfers the higher average costs of educating a child in public schools to private schools which educate fewer children with complex needs are indefensible and unsustainable.

It is no coincidence that nations leading the world in prosperity and those that are the most socially cohesive - like Australia over the last century – have proud histories of providing a high quality education guarantee through the provision of free, secular and universal education.

Today, schools in Australia, and especially the ACT, compare favourably with other OECD nations at the highest levels of achievement in tests like the PISA program for 15 year olds. What we should not be content with, however, is that other countries demonstrate higher levels of equity through a smaller spread – a narrower gap – between our high achieving students and those who are struggling. It is difficult not to link this to the current federal funding model which sees money distributed regardless of need. **Need** is a peripheral concept in the SES funding model. In a new model, it must be front and centre.

The AEU and its ACT Branch firmly believe that public schools hold a special place in the Australian social fabric, and they should be given what they need to set the standard for school education in this country.

The AEU points out that its polling convincingly shows that bold, responsible policy to address shortfalls in public school funding will have the overwhelming support of the electorate, even a high proportion of people who send their children to private schools.