

Speech

National Public Education Forum

Friday, 27 March 2009, Canberra

Thank you for the welcome and the opportunity to speak at this important event.

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet on and by paying my respects to their elders past and present.

I also want to acknowledge the great advocates for public education here today, whether you're a teacher, a parent or like me, a proud graduate of our public education system.

Nothing is more important than the job you do.

You represent great schools and a foundation stone of our society. Schools like my old school Unley High, which takes all comers no matter what their wealth, culture or ability and gives them the chance to succeed.

This is an important time to be gathering to speak about public education.

At this moment, 16 months after the election of the Rudd Government, we are delivering on our commitment to bring about an Education Revolution in this country.

Education is now acknowledged as a major social good, with a big role to play in our economic fortunes, something unrecognised for too long.

Early childhood education is, finally, being taken seriously.

A major review has laid the roadmap to transform higher education.

Unprecedented new investments are now flowing through to our students, teachers and schools.

And we have created a challenging national reform agenda drawing in the Commonwealth, States and Territories and non-government school authorities.

That agenda will rely on your active contribution and collaboration to deliver its full potential.

I want to say to you today, while we may disagree on some details of the changes being proposed, those changes have the potential to create something about which we all strongly agree – an education system that pursues excellence for every Australian.

Overcoming a legacy of neglect

Let us just remind ourselves of the challenge that was left behind by the previous government.

A legacy of underinvestment and divisive politics.

A failure to insist on higher quality across the board in education.

A shameful last place in international comparisons of investment in early childhood education.

The only country in the OECD to reduce its public investment on tertiary education over a decade.

And a politics of schooling that was focused on symbols and on zero sum competition between sectors, at the expense of children and communities.

During last year I argued that disadvantage is not destiny: that we have a responsibility to every child in Australia to deliver to them the highest quality education.

During last year I argued that nothing matters more than the quality of teaching to the improvement of educational outcomes for those children.

During last year I argued that focusing on the symbols of an out-dated culture war and using funding to promote inter-sectoral competition while failing to address the overall quality of schooling were policy approaches that we must leave behind.

And during last year I argued for a new era of transparency, a new era of openness that would mean we would all be held to account for actions – politicians, school leaders and teachers.

A new beginning

We went to the election in 2007 arguing that Australian families deserved better.

That a global, knowledge-driven economy makes an excellent education for every child a necessity, not an optional extra.

That the early years are an essential foundation of a modern, equitable education system, not an afterthought.

That it was possible to undertake ambitious, long term reform through collaboration.

We're now delivering.

Our election commitment to start a Digital Education Revolution, under way with two rounds delivered and new computers already in schools around the country. A \$2 billion investment in equipping our schools and students for the 21st century.

Our \$2.5 billion program for Trade Training Centres also being delivered, with the first two lots of funding already delivered and a new round of funding underway.

Other election commitments, including A National Strategy for Asian Languages and Studies in Schools and Local Schools Working Together, smaller in scale but no less important in long term direction, are also being delivered.

And we have established the National Curriculum Board and passed the legislation that will create ACARA, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority.

A national reform agenda

Keeping those commitments is part and parcel of delivering as a Government, part and parcel of governing for the long term.

And of course, since the election we have gone beyond our commitments and delivered far more: a national agenda for school reform, backed by unprecedented investment.

In the National Education Agreement made at COAG last November, we set the foundations of a comprehensive reform agenda.

This Government is investing \$47.4 billion in our schools over four years, compared to \$33.5 billion during the last agreement.

\$635 million for government primary schools to end the arbitrary and out of date distinction between investment in primary and secondary education.

A new focus on accountability for outcomes, rather than control over inputs.

Ambitious long term targets to improve year 12 attainment and reduce the literacy and numeracy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students across Australia.

And further investment for National Partnerships progressed through a new, collaborative working relationship between the Commonwealth, States and Territories.

\$540 million to improve literacy and numeracy, with pilot projects already beginning in schools around the country.

\$550 million for reforms to improve teacher quality, including a \$50m investment in leadership development for principals.

And \$1.1 billion for a National Partnership on low SES school communities.

This means a staggering 40 per cent increase in the amount of recurrent funding available from the national government for schools.

Nation Building for the future

Of course, as these decisions were being made, Australia was also battling the effects of a gathering economic storm.

But in the midst of a global recession, our commitment to world class education remains as strong as ever. I see the global financial crisis as a reason for investing more in education, not as an excuse for investing less.

We know that in a tough economic climate, education will make even more difference.

We know that we cannot afford to leave behind the less skilled, the more at risk, during a downturn.

In a tighter jobs market, it is even more important that we keep our young people at school and in training ready for the economic recovery.

We know that simply following the market can lead to a downturn in skills investment just at the time when people need it most and harm the economy when growth and demand return, as it did when skill shortages constrained the economic growth during our recent boom years.

That is why, in the midst of this economic storm, we are undertaking the largest school building program in Australia's history.

\$14.7 billion.

\$12.4 billion for a major building project in every primary school across this country.

\$1.3 billion for a national school pride program, undertaking those maintenance and repair jobs that principals and teachers have struggled to fund in recent years.

\$1 billion to create new science and language labs in around 500 secondary schools.

Take into account the National Education Agreement, National Partnerships on Literacy and Numeracy, Teacher Quality and Low SES Schools, the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program and the Local Schools Working Together program, a total of \$62.1 billion will flow to schools from 2009-2012.

This is an 85 per cent increase, or getting close to double the \$33.5 billion from the previous Government in the last four years on recurrent funding and infrastructure.

This is a decisive demonstration of the Government's commitment to renewing Australia's schools and to achieving equity and excellence together.

The hard work is just beginning

These are the foundations of a new future for public education in Australia.

They are creating a new landscape in which to debate the best way forward – which must be to build an education system that helps students, teachers and parents meet higher expectations.

A world class curriculum, developed collaboratively across jurisdictions and sectors and in partnership with teaching professionals.

A new era of transparency, which for the first time in our history provides details of individual school performance along with relevant contextual information.

A new framework for accountability that will track performance and resourcing consistently across sectors, systems and jurisdictions in Australia.

A new investment in teacher professionalism, developing national standards against which teachers can demonstrate their achievements and supporting excellence among advanced and accomplished teachers.

A new generation of modern school buildings and computer technology to support 21st century learning.

But while they are significant, these decisions are only a first step.

The really hard work is yet to come.

It lies in the delivery of better outcomes for every child, in every community.

In the work of improving schools that have traditionally done well and schools that have been seen to struggle.

In the integration of better facilities with more ambitious professional development and more active engagement of parents and the local community.

And in the timely use of accurate data to pinpoint those areas where student performance can be improved and where schools are underperforming in relation to their peers.

Refusing to accept second best

I acknowledge that not every decision I have taken is popular or easy to accept for long-time advocates of public education.

Delivering this reform agenda involves working together to confront hard truths and overcome a status quo which has accepted the underachievement of some children for far too long.

But we already know outcomes for even the most disadvantaged children can, with the right strategies and the right leadership, be transformed.

We know it from the work of Jihad Dibb, at Punchbowl Boys High School in Western Sydney.

We know it from the work of Michael O'Brien at Debney Park Secondary School in Melbourne.

And we know it from the work of Chris Sarra at Cherbourg State Primary School in Queensland.

All these schools and others like them have proven that disadvantage is not destiny. That standards are universal. That every child has the capacity to grasp the most complex branches of science, mathematics, literature, history and the technical and vocational disciplines.

For these educational leaders, a commitment to equity is in their DNA.

It has led them to challenge the status quo, to focus on the basics of literacy and numeracy for every child and to seek out partnerships with the wider community.

They have shown what is possible.

Their commitment is matched by thousands of principals and teachers every day.

Our challenge is to make sure they have the support they need to make excellence an everyday expectation in every community.

The need for transparency

These principals have shown that massive improvements are possible in every school.

That is why I am unapologetic about my commitment to a new era of transparency.

I understand some of your concerns about the misuse of school performance data. I understand that league tables based on raw test scores can create a misleading picture and make the jobs of principals and teachers that much harder.

We are working with State and Territory Education Ministers to ensure that the side effects of a new transparency framework are not negative ones.

They are important issues that can be dealt with, but to focus only on these issues is to miss the larger point.

We still do not have in this country a comprehensive, accurate picture of how different schools in different communities perform.

But we do know that different schools, with very similar student populations, achieve very different outcomes.

Without reliable, comprehensive information about both need and impact, how can we ever be confident that we are applying the right resources and learning strategies to achieve the best results for every child?

And while public scrutiny might make all of us uncomfortable from time to time, so it should.

I accept the desire of teachers not to be judged by narrow or misleading measures.

But we serve the public. We are accountable to the public. And we can't shield ourselves from public scrutiny. Nor should we.

The legitimacy of a publicly funded education system must flow from public confidence and trust in it – and from the extent to which it is able to demonstrate quality and improvement.

When the wider community is actively involved in understanding and debating that quality, their support for investment in education will be so much the greater.

Funding for the long term

Our reform project is to build a school system in Australia that is genuinely world class, which meets the needs and competitive pressures of the 21st century with distinction, which is sustainable and equitable for every student.

Putting school funding on the right long term footing is part of that commitment. As I said last year, and the Australian Council for Educational Research has noted Australia's system of school funding is one of the most complex, opaque and confusing in the developed world.

I make no apologies for our election commitment to maintain the existing SES formula, or for honouring that commitment. Before the 2007 election we also committed to an open, transparent review of whether the SES model is the best one to take us beyond the 2009-12 funding period.

I said last year that I anticipate that review concluding in 2011, providing the basis for possible reform ahead of 2013.

The review needs to be as transparent and comprehensive as possible, to maximise the engagement of the public and the wider community and to give every stakeholder full opportunities to contribute and get their point across.

To that end, we will consult on the form of the review and the basis on which it is conducted, to ensure the widest possible breadth of input and to ensure that it is informed by the best possible evidence from around the world.

But I would strongly counsel that now is not the time to be diverted from the relentless implementation of our current broad and deep reform agenda.

2009 must be about the delivery of the mammoth and urgent Building the Education Revolution program and ensuring our new national partnerships on literacy and numeracy, teacher quality and combating disadvantage make the leap from being words on the pages of inter-governmental agreements to active reforms in classrooms.

There will be plenty of time in 2010 and 2011 to settle the form of the review, conduct the review and deal with its report.

Progressing national reform, together

So between us we have a great opportunity.

We are committed to building a dynamic, high performing school system. A system in which excellence and equity are inseparable and every child is entitled to aspire to the highest achievement.

This will be a diverse system, with many different types of school and many approaches to achieving excellence.

The National Partnerships create the opportunity to confront tough choices about reform and to build approaches that really work in practice.

Approaches to rewarding teachers for excellence and managing every school for continuous improvement.

Approaches to lifting literacy and numeracy for every child.

Approaches to school leadership which permanently change community expectations in our most disadvantaged communities.

We have a chance to show how diverse approaches in different settings can meet these challenges.

We have a chance to demonstrate that the same standards of public accountability and the same high expectations should be applied to every school, regardless of its location, ethos or origin.

And, importantly, we have a chance to demonstrate how public schools, working at their best, can set new standards of excellence and improvement for all schools to emulate.

States, Territories and indeed non-government school authorities are working together right now on the implementation of our national reform agenda.

Resources are flowing into schools on a scale not seen before.

As leaders and practitioners, you will be involved not just in debating the policy but in delivering the change.

There will be plenty of debate to come and I look forward to it.

But the test is what happens in the classroom and the community.

I look forward to working with you to pass that test with flying colours.

Thank you

Media Contact:

Deputy Prime Minister's Press Office: 02 6277 7758

DEEWR Media: media@deewr.gov.au

Non-media queries: 1300 363 079