

PUBLIC EDUCATION – THE FEDERAL CAMPAIGN

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The outcome of the next federal election and the subsequent policies on public education and industrial relations will define the kind of Australian society we and our students will be living in for decades to come.

As you're all well aware, the Federal government is playing an ever increasingly aggressive role in shaping policy in relation to school education through a form of coercive federalism by making schools funding conditional upon embracing its agenda. Ranging from flag poles to student reporting, curriculum control to performance pay, their interventions and interference is becoming increasingly problematic. It is also becoming increasingly problematic because of the fact that state governments have failed to stand up to the bullying of Canberra. In doing so, they run the risk of becoming administrative rumps of the Federal government.

It is against this backdrop that I wish to discuss with you the challenges we must confront in pursuit of our policy objectives in the lead in to the next Federal election.

Let's start with funding.

Funding.

In no other country does the provision of government funding for private schools dominate the agenda of national government as it does in Australia.

Whilst there are continuous attempts by the Howard government to create confusion on the issue of schools funding by blurring state and federal funding, in this federal election year it is critically important that we scrutinise the policies of the federal government.

Some of the facts:

The latest OECD report ranks Australia 3rd last when it comes to public expenditure on education.

Aimed at accelerating the flow of students from public schools to private schools, between 2005 and 2008 the Howard Government will hand approximately 75% of federal government recurrent funding to private schools which enrol 32% of students.

The Commonwealth now spends more on the roughly 13% of students nationally in "independent" private schools than the almost 70% of students in government schools.

The February 2007 Productivity Commission Report on Government Services, reported that for every \$1051 spent on students in public schools, the Howard government chooses to provide \$4515 for every student enrolled in a private school. That is 4.3 times as much.

Since the Howard government was elected the total share of Federal funding to public schools has declined. (In 1996 public schools received 42% of total school funding. It decreased to 35% in 2006. If this decline is allowed to continue, public schools will only receive 31% of federal schools funding by 2012).

Were funding maintained at even the unacceptable 1996 levels Australian public schools would be receiving around \$1B more per year than they do now.

According to projections in this year's budget papers we learn that funding for private schools will increase by \$1.7 billion over the next five years to \$7.5 billion, while the Federal Government's contributions for the nation's public schools will rise by \$300 million to \$3.4 billion in the same

period. The 30% increases over the next five years for private schools contrasts with a 10% increase for public schools.

With respect to additional schools money, both recurrent and capital, in the financial year 07 / 08 the increases translate into \$381 per private school student in comparison to \$80 per public school student. To close this gap would require \$677 million.

The resurrection by Julie Bishop in March 2006 of proposals advancing the introduction of a voucher system to fund each individual's education was not coincidental. Vouchers would be part of an end game strategy to achieve the absolute commodification of education, smashing any notion of public education for the common good.

Starting with the discredited Literacy Tutorial Vouchers, the next assault could come in the form of vouchers for special education.

The recent federal Budget further demonstrated the Howard Government's obsession with developing a "carrot and stick" education system that punishes teachers and students in our most disadvantaged communities. The \$101.7 million dollar Summer School program over 4 years will only reach approximately 0.3% per cent of teachers across Australia, "rewarding" those teachers who are already professionally accomplished and proficient at completing applications. In addition, a separate \$53 million "reward" program will distribute \$50 000 bonuses to a little over 1000 schools that improve the literacy and numeracy of their students. With so few teachers affected and funds being distributed at the discretion of each Principal, the program forces teachers and schools into competition for increasingly scarce resources. Such ideologically driven schemes represent the cynical repackaging of a deliberate under-investment in Public Education. Furthermore, they reduce the capacity of our Public Education system to target identified areas of need through well resourced programs.

Unfortunately, their attack on public education does not end with their funding policies.

Under the banner of so-called concerns about quality and standards in our schools, they are intent on creating a crisis in confidence in public education. Coupled with government funding policies providing private schools with obscene levels of funding at the expense of public schools, this campaign is aimed at accelerating the flow of students from public schools contributing to the residualisation of public education and the ultimate privatisation of compulsory education.

The attempt to create this crisis in confidence has come in the form of a never ending attack on the profession and the curriculum.

The denigration of the profession

The attack on the profession comes in the form of a constant denigration of teachers and an unrelenting attack on our professionalism, ethics and responsibility towards our students.

Following in the footsteps of her discredited predecessor, the Federal Minister for Education has taken the denigration of teachers to new heights.

In *The Australian* newspaper on Monday 10 July 2006, Ms Bishop was reported as saying that "teachers were one of the few professions not accountable for their performance and it was 'high time' they were.... held responsible for their students' achievements".

Demonstrating an absolute lack of knowledge and respect, the Minister's comments fail to recognise that we are amongst the most accountable of all professionals. Indeed, the level of public, media and political scrutiny that teachers and principals are subjected to daily is greater than it has ever been. The answer of course, according to Bishop lies in performance pay.

Scuttled by Treasure Costello's decision not to allocate any Federal Funding and despite the fact that her proposals were rejected at the MCEETYA meeting in Darwin a couple of weeks ago, her enthusiasm for performance pay has not been dampened.

Bishop is continuing to state that performance pay would form part of the next round of funding negotiations with the States and Territories.

She continues to assert that teachers should be rewarded on the basis of their students' results and that parents and students could in fact play a role in determining teachers' pay. In the absence of any additional funding she has said that some, ie most, teachers should be prepared to be paid less so that some, ie very few, teachers could be paid more.

Bishop's obsession with performance pay is part of the Howard government's agenda to impose their extreme industrial relations laws and AWA's, individual contracts onto schools.

You don't need me to tell you that advocates of so called performance pay fail to recognise the social and human dynamic of education. They fail to recognise that the educational well-being of each child involves much more than any single teacher.

There is no evidence that performance pay where individual teachers compete with each other over scraps improves performance. Indeed, there is research which indicates that performance pay damages productivity and morale.

Essentially it is a political gimmick based on failure to understand the essence of teaching and teacher quality. Research indicates that the key issue with respect to improving educational outcomes relates to support for the entire profession through the provision of relevant professional development for all teachers for which governments must exercise their responsibility.

The rejection of performance pay for teachers is best summed up in the words of former NSW Premier Bob Carr, who was quoted as saying *"I'm not sure if there's ever been a satisfactory way of measuring the performance of teachers. It strikes me as a very subjective area. I've been to schools for kids with disabilities, special education schools. I've been in a classroom where the teacher is working with these Down Syndrome youngsters to get them to the stage where they can read a rail timetable so they can get to work on their own. How do you measure the performance of a teacher in a comprehensive high school who has a class of youngsters all drawn from a public housing estate? Most from single parent families, few with a desk to study at, many of them with unstable homes? How do we measure the performance of that teacher compared to a teacher in a selective high, recruiting at the start of year 7 the most motivated youngsters in our society? I've never seen a system to do it"*.

NSW Minister Della Bosca also has a good take on this. In an opinion piece in the Sydney Morning Herald he wrote, *paying teachers according to their popularity is the sort of policy that might be proposed when absolutely everything else has failed.*

The Commonwealth Minister for Education, Julie Bishop, is trying to impose on the states and on public school teachers a simplistic, ill-defined and un-workable proposition for individualised, performance-based pay.

Measuring effectiveness by how much students improve on standardised tests is unworkable. If the first test occurs for students in year 3, how is it decided who should receive the performance pay? Is it the kindergarten teacher, or the year 1, 2 or 3 teacher? Does a high school teacher get rewarded for a student's results that are based on work done by primary school teachers?

While the opinions of parents and students are valued in many areas of school life, using their feedback to determine teacher pay introduces incentives that are contrary to school discipline and the fundamentals of teaching and learning.

We expect a great deal of our teachers today, including responsibilities that previous generations considered the role of parents, families and employers. But ultimately, teaching is not a popularity contest. Making teachers campaign for salaries, in the way contestants in Dancing with the Stars campaign for popularity, will do nothing for students.

NSW public school teachers already have their efficiency assessed annually. Salary increases require a performance review confirming the teacher merits the increase. They must show continued effectiveness in classroom practice, satisfactory performance overall and the development of professional skills.

In contrast to the “performance pay” announcements made by Julie Bishop, Federal Minister for Education, the Federal Labor Party’s proposal released in October 2006 is built around the notion of recognising and rewarding quality teaching in public schools through a process of assessing teachers against standards. It will be accompanied by “significantly increased funding in public schools”.

It proposes a salary rate struck at about an additional \$10,000 per annum on top of the maximum salary for teachers who are deemed to meet the standards for “highly accomplished” teaching. There is no stated quota limiting the number of teachers who could be assessed and deemed eligible. The package would be negotiated with the States and Territories as part of a national compact of schooling. It is to be implemented through negotiated collective agreements.

Control of the curriculum:

Despite international evidence to the contrary, conservative politicians and commentators are engaged in an irresponsible and unwarranted attack on the quality and achievements of public education.

Based on international research, we know that internationally we are punching above our weight.

Under the banner of so-called concerns about quality and standards in our schools, conservative forces are attempting to get a strangle hold on curriculum. The attack on curriculum and pedagogy underpinned by content and the development of skills enabling our students to engage in critical thinking and analysis is gaining pace. Some examples include:

- The so-called crisis in reading and the “phonics” versus “whole-language” non debate;
- The attack on “critical literacy” and the capacity to deconstruct text in an age appropriate way;
- The attack on the teaching of history where the Prime Minister declared that history “has succumbed to a post-modern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated”.

On 6 October 2006 the Federal Minister, couched her agenda to take control of the curriculum in the crudest and most offensive of terms. Her references to “themes emerging in school curriculum are straight from Chairman Mao” and “ideologues who have hijacked school curriculum” represented nothing more than, self indulgent, self serving offensive language.

As part of its attempt to gain control of the curriculum, and in doing so impose its ideologically driven world view upon future generations of children, on 8 February 2007 Howard entered the debate. You would recall the Prime Minister called aspects of it “*incomprehensible sludge*”. He uses the insulting language of the extremist to denigrate a curriculum that enables Australian students to achieve outstanding results against other OECD countries. His folly is underlined by his failure to realise that the curriculum taught in public schools is developed by the Board of Studies, and is the same for his much preferred and increasingly well funded private schools.

Teachers support a rigorous curriculum underpinned by content which equips students with the necessary skills to be able to critically analyse the world in which they live.

Whilst a discussion underscored by legitimate educational priorities aimed towards establishing a national framework for more consistent curriculum in the interest of a more nationally coherent education system can be supported, the Federation will strongly oppose attempts by politicians to interfere in our classrooms.

On 28 February 2007, the Federal ALP also announced plans for the establishment of a new National Curriculum for the subjects of English, Maths, Science and History.

A “rigorous, consistent and quality curriculum for all Australians”, it would provide capacity for local, State and regional variations. The proposal is underpinned by an understanding that a National Curriculum could only be achieved through an evolutionary process, emphasising that it would require the cooperation and collaboration of the states. Recognising that there are “considerable strengths in each of the State and Territory systems, Federal Labor is determined to ensure the national curriculum builds on these strengths”.

Whilst the main thrust of Rudd’s announcement is worthy of further consideration, he has caused considerable resentment as a result of his disregard for teachers and his repeated gratuitous attacks on their union.

Federal Labor announced that the National Curriculum would be established by a National Curriculum Board. It was announced that the Board *“will bring together Australia’s best and brightest educationalists”* and that it *“will be led by an eminent Australian education expert, appointed by the Commonwealth.”*

On 1 March Bob McMullan, Shadow Minister for Federal / State Relations clarified that practising teachers will not be represented on the Board. Noting that *“teachers have a legitimate interest in having their voice heard”*, he went on to say that teachers *“won’t be the decision makers, there will be expert decision makers..”*

Now, let’s be clear. Any attempt to develop a national curriculum, or any sort of curriculum, without practicing teachers will lack credibility and legitimacy. It will fail.

The ALP on Funding

Critical of the Howard government’s schools funding policies for having created “needy government schools”, Stephen Smith, shadow Minister for Education, moved the Education platform at the ALP National conference which reaffirms a priority commitment to public education.

The education platform states that:

“Labor recognises that government has a primary obligation for the provision of high quality public schooling that is accessible to all children and young people....public schooling must continue to be free and secular, to shape and be shaped by Australian society and culture, to keep pace with the times, to strive for educational and intellectual excellence, to contribute to the development of the shared values that sustain democratic life and to foster innovation, critical awareness, creativity and optimism towards a shared future..... Labor will give priority for public schools through enhanced Commonwealth programs for school.”

Mr Smith pledged that the ALP would invest more money in schools “on the basis of need and fairness”. He committed the ALP to invest more money for schools in rural, regional remote settings, special education and for indigenous Australians. He has also repeatedly made mention of more funding for primary schools.

However, in a move that continues to expose a contradiction on the part of the ALP’s commitment to “needs based funding”, Mr Smith again sought to reassure and appease the private school lobby by restating that the ALP would not take away any money from private schools. This is despite the

fact that private schools are operating with resources which exceed what has been described as a national resource standard. Indeed, under the ALP, private school funding would continue to be indexed to reflect the increase in costs incurred by government to educate students in public schools even when there is absolutely no justification to do so.

Whilst a “needs based” funding policy would be of greater overall benefit for public schools it could also have the effect of some private schools, particularly Catholic and “low fee-paying” schools, operating with more total government funds than their neighbouring public schools.

For this not to occur, the ALP must commit to breaking the nexus¹ in funding between public and private schools which sees an automatic flow-on in resources to the latter. It would have to freeze funding to private schools operating above or at the “national resource standard” and provide a huge injection of funds to public schools to reverse the current funding arrangements.

Ultimately, the ALP's commitment to public education will be measured by the level of additional funding it proposes to allocate to public education.

Now more than ever, all levels of government must be held responsible for providing proper investment in public education to support excellence in teaching and learning for all and the achievement of positive student outcomes.

We are calling on the Government and alternate government to immediately commit to fund the public education recurrent funding shortfall of \$2.9 billion dollars necessary for public schools to meet the national resource standard as identified by the MCEETYA Schools Resource Taskforce.

Established in 2002 by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), the Schools Resource Taskforce (SRT) has calculated that public schools require an additional \$2.9 billion in recurrent funding to ensure that the National Schools Resource Standard necessary to achieve the National Goals of Schooling. Indeed, the \$2.9 billion dollars grossly underestimates the true level of funding required as the SRT has not yet calculated costs associated with capital, or specific costs associated with special education or with assuring quality teaching for all students.

It is against this political backdrop that we must conclude and accept that never has it been more important for parents, teachers and principals to play an active and activist role in ensuring that the agenda is shaped such that it maximises learning outcomes for all students through the maintenance of a public education system of the highest quality.

In the words of acclaimed Canadian philosopher, John Raulston Saul, “any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of the long-standing essential role universal public education plays in making us a civilized democracy” - 2002.

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Breaking the nexus.

Funding levels for private schools are indexed to reflect the increase in costs incurred by government to educate students in public schools (This is commonly referred to as the Average Government Student Recurrent Cost - AGSRC). Because public schools enrol approximately 90% of students with disabilities, Aboriginal students and those from isolated and remote settings, the average cost of this public education provision is higher than in private schools. To automatically link this funding to private schools, therefore, is clearly inappropriate. By not breaking the nexus between the cost of educating students in public schools and the funding of private schools and the compounding effect of each abovementioned back flip, the ALP will ensure that the position of privilege currently enjoyed by private schools will be preserved.