

A Fair Australia
Education
Policy
ACTU CONGRESS 2003

SCHOOLS AND PRESCHOOLS

1. The ACTU believes that education is an investment in the nation's future intellectual, social and economic well being and should be seen as fundamentally serving the common good of the Australian community rather than sectional interests or individual advantage. Education is vitally important for achieving a fairer and more equitable society and must be funded at levels which can redress the increasing gap between resource levels and students' educational needs.
2. Schools are important social institutions in which Australian children engage with and learn about their fellow citizens and come to acknowledge and appreciate their differences, beliefs and values.
3. Commonwealth and State/Territory governments must fund the public system to cater for all Australian children including those in small, rural, isolated, poor and disadvantaged communities, and Non English Speaking Background and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Australian community expects the public education system to be comprehensive and properly resourced and to set the benchmark community standard for the provision of education for all Australian school students.
4. The ACTU believes the Commonwealth has a central leadership role and responsibility in planned educational provision on the basis that new government and non-government schools should not threaten the viability and stability of existing schools. New non-government schools should be required to demonstrate initial and continuing financial and educational viability and be subject to rigorous accountability and reporting mechanisms.
5. Both government and non-government systems and school authorities must provide all students with access to high quality education in order that they achieve across the range of educational outcomes set out in the National Goals of Schooling, regardless of the school they attend.

6. The Commonwealth's investment in schooling is marked by inequity and confusion, largely the result of the Federal Government's SES funding regime for non-government schools, introduced in 2000. This policy has delivered some of the largest increases in public funding to some of the best resourced schools in Australia and consequently has abandoned the broad community consensus that non-government schools should be funded on the basis of need. The ACTU is opposed to the renewal of the *States' Grants Act* in its current form and supports the ALP and other opposition parties amending the Bill when introduced to direct public expenditure towards greater equity and accountability in funding based on the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education and Training, Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Principles.
7. Commonwealth expenditure on public schools, TAFE colleges and universities has been inadequate under the Federal Government, with serious adverse implications for the nation's long-term economic prospects. While State and Territory Governments are the major providers of funding to government schools, the Federal Government's percentage increases to government schools have not kept pace with those to non-government schools. Virtually all the increases in Federal funding for government schools are due to supplementation for cost increases, based on increases in an index of average per student recurrent costs in government schools - which arise from past State and Territory budget decisions.
8. The ACTU supports the current MCEETYA initiated pilot study, particularly if the outcomes hold the promise of a more fairly constructed general index for funding purposes. The pilot study seeks to more carefully distinguish the actual costs of providing schooling that are needed to meet the national benchmarks for learning.
9. To give reality to the MCEETYA Principles, as outlined below, the outcomes of the pilot study should inform a broad inquiry conducted by the Schools Resourcing Taskforce of the total resources available to all schools, both government and non-government. This should then lay an equitable basis for ALP policy and for a revised formula and amended *States Grants Act* in the future. This should take account of the socio-demographics of the student populations concerned and the impact of Federal State and Territory funding arrangements over the last decade.
10. The ACTU supports a comprehensive reform program with significant increased investment in education to ensure that Australia becomes a high skill, high value added nation, including:
 - (a) Raising public expenditure on education from the current level to achieve the UNESCO recommended level of 6% of GDP.
 - (b) A partnership between the States and Territories and the Federal Government to ensure that all Australian children have

access to at least one year of high quality free pre school education before entering school.

- (c) An acceptance by the Commonwealth that it has responsibility for public schools as a national priority within a comprehensive funding policy. State and Territory Labor ministers for education through MCEETYA have established a framework of principles for funding schools in both sectors which is a complementary approach involving both levels of government. The Commonwealth Education Minister has refused to endorse these national principles. These principles are:

- (i) the total level of resources available for schooling is adequate so that achievement of the National Goals for Schooling is a realistic objective for all students,
- (ii) public funding across different schools and sectors is distributed fairly and equitably through a consistent approach to assessing student needs and through having regard to the total level of resources available for students,
- (iii) the total level of funding for government schooling is adequate to ensure access to high quality government schooling for all, and all governments' funding policies recognize this as a national priority,
- (iv) resourcing for all students is adequate for meeting the National Goals, notwithstanding the school or school sector they attend, and
- (v) public funding for schooling supports the right of families to choose non-government schooling and supports non-government schools on the basis of need, within the context of promoting a socially and culturally cohesive society and the effective use of public funds.

- (d) A commitment by the Commonwealth and States to this co-operative framework being a more equitable approach than the current Federal Government formula.
- (e) Consideration of the Connors Report for the ACT Government which also provides a basis for the development of government responsibility around principles that recognise:
- (i) its primary obligation in education for the provision of high quality public schooling accessible to all children and young people;

- (ii) the respective roles and obligations of government and communities as funding partners in non-government schooling; and
 - (iii) the distinctive and the shared purposes of schooling in the public and the non-government sectors and the need for a complementary relationship between them.
- (f) Targeted programs to address the needs of disadvantaged and special needs schools and communities where disadvantage is endemic.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

11. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Nations peoples of Australia, and as such, have a distinct and inalienable set of rights. The right to education is one of these.
12. The ACTU acknowledges that the education system has played a crucial role in the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through the denial of opportunities, the reinforcement of racial stereotypes, the lowering of expectations and quality, the exclusion of participation, and the reinforcement of cultural and political values which are ultimately alien to the original inhabitants of this land.
13. The ACTU recognises the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to achieve within the same range of educational outcomes as non-Indigenous students and consequently the need to position and prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy to bring this objective about.
14. The ACTU also recognises that industrial and workers' rights are human rights and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are entitled to have the same access to education and training and employment as all other Australian citizens and to be part of, and have the support of, the trade union movement.
15. The ACTU:
 - (a) Is committed to ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to high quality education throughout their lives. Quality is characterised by appropriate student teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and education workers, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments.
 - (b) Is committed to the process of National Reconciliation through education as part of a comprehensive strategy to redress the

profound and continuing legal, political, social and economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We believe that in the first instance this must include a recognition of, and responsibility for, the causes underlying such disadvantage including the dispossession of land, racism and government policies of family separation, assimilation and welfare dependency.

- (c) Affirms its conviction to value the diversity of the cultures and forms of social organisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and commits its members to the educational development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in light of the imperative contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to the socio-economic, cultural and environmental advancement of Australian society.
- (d) Recognises that schools play an important role in the construction, critique and transmission of social values. Fundamental to that process is the responsibility to develop a knowledge and understanding of the history of Australia, including the history of relations between non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- (e) Believes that education systems and institutions, teachers and support staff have a vital leadership role and obligation to practise and promote the ideal of racial equality and to develop and implement anti-racist education and sanctions against racial discrimination, prejudice and harassment when they occur in the school community.
- (f) Is committed to the principles of self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and asserts the fundamental democratic right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved in decision making to enable them to attempt to rectify the history of neglect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by both Federal and State/Territory Governments. This right must be applied in all areas of decision making, including educational decision making.
- (g) Emphasises the important role of cooperation and partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in promoting and implementing the goals and activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

16. Therefore, the ACTU will:

- (a) support the implementation of the principles of self-determination and negotiation, as appropriate, with employing

authorities, Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups and the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to address considerations as they emerge, and to safeguard the rights of teachers and students;

- (b) support advocacy for the development of inclusive curricula either by, or in collaboration with, relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and groups, which presents all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures from times prior to the invasion, to the present, across all curriculum areas;
- (c) support the increase of employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all education sectors, across all levels of the sectors, and give particular priority to ensuring that Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) are employed under an award structure which provides career path and professional development opportunities and employment security, and remunerates them for the specific sets of skills and knowledge that they bring to the educational setting;
- (d) support the position that States and Territories make a commitment to ongoing resourcing and permanency of AIEW positions that is not dependent on:
 - (i) supplementary educational funding provided by the Commonwealth, such as the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP), or
 - (ii) other community-based Commonwealth provided fund sources, such as the Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP);
- (e) support and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and State and Territory Governments to lobby for the development of appropriate recruitment and selection processes for teachers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- (f) support the position that all teachers and educators employed in all educational institutions in Australia must have completed Indigenous Studies as a minimum requirement for their employment; and
- (g) support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as a part of the curriculum for all Australians, but particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

POST COMPULSORY

17. The role of post compulsory education in ensuring that Australia becomes a high skill, high value-added nation is fundamental and requires:
- (a) Lifting the completion rate of post-compulsory schooling and training by all as a national objective including by the provision of quality articulated programs of vocational education and training in schools.
 - (b) Guaranteed access to vocational education for young people and existing workers and their families by:
 - (i) developing a National Plan for TAFE,
 - (ii) increasing federal growth funding to fund at least the average 5.9% per annum enrolment growth experienced over the last decade,
 - (iii) providing additional federal funding to address unmet demand, quality improvement, equitable access and to redress existing resource pressures,
 - (iv) providing a 'youth training guarantee', and
 - (v) ensuring that the training needs of existing workers are met including programs to redress inequitable outcomes of Indigenous and disadvantaged socio-economic groups.
 - (c) Ensuring that HECS is not extended to TAFE and that employers are encouraged to invest more in structured education and training leading to nationally recognized qualifications.
 - (d) Ensuring the quality of our university education through increased public funding, lifting the government expenditure on higher education by \$1 billion per year with a target of achieving the OECD average public expenditure on higher education by 2020, and creating mechanisms which ensure that grants are adequately indexed for movements in costs such as wages and recurrent expenditure on libraries and infrastructure.
 - (e) Ensuring the accessibility of higher education through increasing the number of fully funded places within universities and lowering the burden to students and their families through lower fees and higher income thresholds for their repayment.
 - (f) Ensuring that those most disadvantaged in our society, such as young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, older workers seeking to re-skill and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are provided with the necessary support from universities, TAFE institutes and governments to lift their

educational achievements and thereby be provided with increased opportunities for employment.

- (g) A commitment to fund the ongoing education and training of all Australians throughout their lives to meet the changing social and economic circumstances they will encounter in a knowledge society.
18. The ACTU calls for a commitment from all political parties to develop Australia as a high skill, high value-added nation. The future of employment levels, living standards and national development will depend on the skills and ability of workers to participate in high value-added competitive enterprises.
19. The ACTU is committed to boosting the number of traineeships and apprenticeships. Accordingly, we support:
- (a) provision of higher levels of public funding from Federal and State governments to TAFE;
 - (b) the introduction of a properly policed training levy on those employers who do not make an effort to train employees in their industry;
 - (c) new marketing arrangements which explain the practical industry and enterprise benefits of embracing structured training;
 - (d) additional government assistance to provide for capital costs for group training companies in the areas of establishment expenses, plus assistance with wage payment cash flow problems and market penetration costs;
 - (e) industry skill centres for the upgrading of skills of current industry employees to higher levels; and
 - (f) ensuring that government procurement and infrastructure project contracts require that suppliers or contractors by obligation carry their training responsibility.
20. The ACTU will also support action to:
- (a) improve the profile and depth of the auditing of training providers so as to maintain and improve the quality of training provisions;
 - (b) introduce practical Recognition of Prior Learning opportunities for existing workers;

- (c) ensure that existing workers without vocational qualifications have access to government funding to assist with structured training leading to a recognised qualification; and
- (d) work to better integrate VET in schools with the mainstream vocational training system and particularly TAFE.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

21. Research and development activities are at the heart of our social, cultural and economic development. Government plays a key role in providing broad funding for all research, including incentives for business to invest in research and development. However, Australia has a poor record of investing in R&D. According to the latest ABS statistics, the Government Expenditure on R&D (GERD) is well below the average level within the OECD, with Australia 12th out of 17 OECD countries. Universities are the largest research organizations, and some 49% of all research takes place in universities. Government also funds other public sector research agencies such as the CSIRO, ANSTO, AIMS and DSTO, but in these areas Government has cut spending and reduced their investment in research workers by near 10%.
22. Sustaining Australia's research capacity in basic and applied research depends upon Government lifting its expenditure across all areas of public sector research, including universities and providing increased support for postgraduate research education. Building research skills across all levels of our education system will enhance a culture of research and innovation.