

# Schools

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## AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN SCHOOLS EDUCATION

*The Federal Government's manufactured debates on values, teachers' standards and curriculum are designed to distract us from the real issue – misdirection of funds and under-funding of our public education system. Australia has a high performing, low equity system which means that some of our kids – the most privileged ones, by and large - perform very well, and some – the most underprivileged – very badly.*

### Our Action Plan

- An extra \$2.9 billion a year in tied Commonwealth **public schools funding**, based on the Schools Resource Taskforce 2006 finding
- Commonwealth per capita **primary school funding** raised to match secondary schools
- Universal **free preschool** for three and four year olds
- Incentives to **reduce class sizes**, particularly in the first three school years
- An **Education Innovation Fund** to explore, evaluate and implement successful teaching practice, resources, IT and school management systems.
- A **Transition Fund** for schools to implement flexible, supportive measures for the transition between preschool, primary school, junior and senior secondary school and to vocational training and employment
- An **Educational Needs Supplement of 50%** for schools meeting disadvantage criteria as per the Primary Principals Association recommendation, to fund specialist teaching and support services; speech therapy, diagnosis of learning disability, nurses in schools, etc.
- A fair and rigorous system to **reward quality teachers**, based on:
  - independent, multifaceted assessment of teaching practice, and
  - post graduate qualifications and mentoring of teachers and students
  - Reduced teaching loads for teachers in their first year
- A **Building Basics Program** to bring school facilities such as classrooms, indoor gymnasiums and performance spaces, lecture theatres and equipment, up to a national benchmark. Retire portable classrooms
- Better fund **technology** streams in all secondary schools with high quality workshops and kitchens and support for tradesmen and women in acquiring teaching qualifications. Boost funding for in-school VET programs to match that provided to TAFE.
- Specialist programs for **gifted children** and subject acceleration for all secondary students

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- A **Curriculum Expertise Program** for high-quality multi-disciplinary curricula grounded in contemporary issues and themes such as global warming, salinity, future energy demands and cloning
- A '**Primary Specialist Program**' of resources and teachers qualified in science, visual and performing arts, physical education, languages and school libraries in all primary schools
- **Sex and relationships education** from grade three to senior secondary school
- Incentives to encourage **maths and science graduates** to move into teaching
- **Teaching assistants** for secondary schools to help with administrative tasks
- Proper funding for the **National Safe Schools Framework** addressing bullying
- A dialogue-based, ethical inquiry approach to **values education** and the *National School Chaplaincy Programme* extended so schools can choose the an appropriate professional to provide social and emotional well-being support
- Support schools that provide **community service programs**
- Fund school-based or school-linked **health centres** for health education and access to health care for children and young people
- A national **marketing strategy** for public schools
- **Non-government schools funding** to take into account existing and historical whole-of-school income and assets and conditional on **compliance with the same obligations** as government schools in reporting, providing for special needs, minimum curriculum options for all students and in FOI and non-discrimination

## The Issues

### Preparation for school

The best preparation for school is preschool yet Australia spends the least of the 24 OECD countries on kindergarten for three and four-year-olds and an estimated 57,000 children miss out. (See also our Preschools Issue Sheet)

### Funding

Late last year the Schools Resourcing Taskforce findings revealed that the public school system needs an extra \$2.4 billion a year to meet the minimum educational goals set in 1999. The AEU says that this is \$2.9 billion in today's prices. Since 1996 the Federal Government share of funding to public schools has declined from 42% of the total schools budget to 35%. This reduction means that public schools are receiving \$1 billion less than had the share been maintained. Meanwhile on top of the millions of dollars that the federal Government has provided to non-government schools over the last decade, the Howard Government is proposing a minimum 30% increase in funds to private schools between 2006 and 2011 compared to a 10% increase to government schools. The Federal Government also funds primary schools at 8.9% of average primary school funding but gives secondary school students 10% of average secondary school funding.



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While the Government insists on national benchmarking for literacy and numeracy, there is no national standard of basic school amenities. There has been no real increase in the general capital works programme since 1996 and the Investing in Ours Schools programme is only for small scale projects, the money is capped (and the Government has reduced the amount originally available per school) and many schools miss out.

## Teachers make a difference

Teachers are undervalued, overworked and lack the resources to tackle the complex range of social and educational problems that children bring to school. Class sizes are too large and there are teacher shortages in many areas. Primary teachers are generalists but primary schools also need resources and expertise in physical education and the visual and performing arts. Secondary teachers are often asked to teach outside their subject area. Beginning teachers are thrust into full classroom responsibilities with little induction or mentoring to support them and a third of beginning teachers leave the profession within 5 years. Many existing teachers are reaching retirement age in the next decade. We must make use of their experience to get new teachers off to the best start.

## Special needs

Counselling and specialist assistance for children with learning disabilities are desperately needed and gifted children are not adequately catered for either. We need more money to support students with special needs but that doesn't mean more voucher type programmes. Vouchers cannot address the lack of funding in schools, or the lack of teachers or lower class sizes. Vouchers reduce accountability for taxpayers' dollars and promote discrimination and in many cases multiply the inequalities that children either struggle against or benefit from.

## Performance pay

The Howard Government is threatening to withhold funding to schools unless they introduce performance-based pay systems for teachers. They want to reward high-performing teachers based on student results, and feedback from parents and students but they are not offering any extra money to fund teacher pay rises. Higher pay for teachers and recognition of outstanding work is well overdue but pitting teachers against one another will damage cooperation and team work. Simplistic measures of teachers' performance may lead to little more than popularity contests and teaching for test results and ignores the diversity between schools and the very different student populations they serve.

## National Curriculum

Debates about curriculum should be about much more than making it easy for students to move between states and territories. A one size fits all standard approach runs the risk of ending up a lowest common denominator approach to national mediocrity that is slow to adapt to new knowledge. We need more curriculum expertise and a commitment to continual learning.



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## Values Education

Values education is a part of Australian education but the Government's simplistic approach does not build students capacity to make judgements about morality, ethics and social justice. Children need the opportunity to participate in discussions about resolving clashes of values not just a poster with some vague words.

## Literacy and the \$700 literacy vouchers

Most literacy and numeracy programs, like Reading Recovery, are only funded for Year 1 and 2 children and the same amount of funding is provided to all schools, regardless of levels of educational disadvantage or need. Children with a learning disability or those who are emotionally disturbed or have challenging behaviour will need assistance throughout their schooling. The Federal Government has wasted money on testing and benchmarking students in Years 3 and 5 when teachers and schools already know which students are not learning at the same rate as their peers. Their problem is that with class sizes of around 30 and no specialist assistance, providing the necessary individual tuition can be difficult. No amount of testing will solve their problems. Despite an analysis of the Government's \$700 for private tutoring vouchers to students who fail the Year 3 reading test program which found that for every \$700 voucher spent on private tutoring for a child, another \$171 went to administration in the cities and \$204 in country areas, the Government has allocated another \$457.4 million for National Literacy and Numeracy vouchers. The dollars should instead be directed into the public schools so that there are enough teachers to give students the attention they need and that will do more to improve education outcomes than anything else.

## Fostering Wellbeing

Abuse and neglect, disintegrating family support and other factors mean schools often need to provide students with emotional, behavioural and often physical support. Many schools have students with challenging behaviour and significant disabilities, for which there are inadequate resources. Bullying in schools is a problem but simply releasing tables of school data on bullying, as suggested by the Federal Government, won't help stop it. Schools need funding for more counselling or teacher training or teacher release time. Some States provide nurses in schools, others counsellors, but provision is sparse. The Government's \$90 million for school chaplains is restricted to staff with a religious affiliation.