



**AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION
NEW SOUTH WALES TEACHERS FEDERATION BRANCH**

SUBMISSION TO

Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment

ON

The Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024

Authorised by

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The Public Education System- Equality, Excellence and Equity

The responsibility of governments

Federal and state governments must ensure that all citizens can fully participate in society and achieve their human potential. The public education system provides the guarantee of academic excellence for all young people. There can be no social equality without academic excellence for all.

It is the responsibility of governments to ensure the confidence of all social classes in public education. Therefore, it is their responsibility to ensure funding, legislation, regulation, policy and programs deliver public education as a preeminent and desirable system of education for all young people, regardless of economic or social class, location context, or ability.

Governments must consistently demonstrate that they prioritise and value the public education system in all communities through the cross-sectoral and simultaneous implementation of:

- structural reforms that reverse and prevent school segregation, so that students who are advantaged and disadvantaged enjoy the same social and learning experiences
- compensatory reforms that seek to redress the effects of unequal outcomes due to unequal opportunities
- amelioratory reforms that result in closing achievement gaps through the increased provision of resources to students who are living with disadvantage and the decrease in provision of government resources to students who are living with extreme advantage.

The pursuit of equality and excellence

The concurrent pursuit of equality and excellence would mean:

- students from all social groups achieve the same level of excellence
- a student's social background does not hinder their achievement
- the provision of additional resources to ameliorate disadvantage for students in specific social or equity groups to ensure equality and excellence are achieved
- achievement for students of a high level of skills and knowledge in socially valued endeavours such as academia, arts, language or sports regardless of context.

Equity

Social disadvantage is the exclusion of people from social resources because of low socioeconomic status or not belonging to a dominant social group. For Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, people living in regional, rural and remote locations, people with a disability and people living in low socio-economic communities this is particularly so.

Social disadvantage can and should be intervened upon through the immediate, full and fair funding of the public education system. The ongoing and long term denial of the resources and appropriate laws and policies that ensure all young people can fully participate in the public education system is unacceptable.

Structural reforms that result in an increasing shift in the public education system enrolment share coupled with significant movement toward an equal distribution of students in each socioeconomic quartile within the public education system are critical.

Funding gap

NSW public schools face a funding gap of \$1.9 billion just this year alone. Over the next four years, NSW departmental analysis shows the federal government will provide \$24.2 billion to the state's 970 non-government schools, but only \$14.3 billion to the 2200 public schools.

All of this, in an environment that sees some private schools in NSW receiving up to \$6,219 more per student in government funding than public schools.

Loophole

The federal government must remove the funding loophole created by the Morrison government that further shortchanged NSW public school children. The loophole allows the artificial inflation of the NSW government funding share of the Schooling Resource Standard by including costs not directly related to the learning needs of students such as capital depreciation and regulatory costs. For NSW public schools in 2023 this loophole equated to \$640 million being included in the state's overall Schooling Resource Standard share, thereby depriving the system of \$640 million in funding directly linked to student learning.

Capacity to pay

Governments have a moral obligation to uphold public education as a public good by prioritising recurrent spending on public education. While both levels of government must lift their funding effort, it is federal governments that must accept a larger responsibility, as the then Federal Labor Government did when it signed the 2013 NSW Gonski Agreement, owing to their greater capacity to raise revenue and their historic and shameful prioritisation of spending on private schools.

It is abhorrent that the federal government could announce a surplus to the tune of \$15.8 billion (2023/24 financial year) while it has the fiscal capacity to increase its share of the Schooling Resource Standard in public schools to 25 per cent and chooses not to do so.

Underfunding is serious

The impacts of underfunding are serious. Underfunding schools forces merged classes, running classes without teachers, cutting necessary specialist programs and creating untenable system conditions to attract and retain teachers.

A survey earlier this year of almost 7000 NSW school teachers showed:

- six out of seven principals reported teacher shortages in the last year, the highest of any state
- half said they had unfilled teaching positions
- more than two-thirds of principals and teachers have seen a decline in student wellbeing and engagement
- nine out of ten teachers reported a decline in teacher wellbeing and morale
- only one in six teachers say they are committed to staying until retirement.

The failure of governments over the past decade to fund all public schools in NSW to the minimum level of funding needed to meet the needs of students, whilst simultaneously funding every private school at 100 per cent of the minimum level or more has created an uneven playing field of competition between sectors.

The current commonwealth legislation maintains a 20 per cent cap on its funding share of the minimum standard for public schools and 80 per cent for private schools.

The Albanese government has so far refused to close the funding gap denying every NSW public school the minimum level of funding they need while every private school is funded by governments at or above the SRS.

The bill

While the Federation welcomes legislative moves to remove a cap to funding and replace it with a floor, it is beyond belief that the Albanese Government in doing so will maintain the previous Coalition Government's 20 per cent funding level.

Additionally, should the legislation pass, it will continue to lawfully allow the NSW government to include a 4 per cent discounting of their funding contribution. As stated previously, for NSW public schools, this discounting denied our students \$640 million in 2023.

In short, the proposed legislation will continue to deny the necessary funding for student learning and the system support needed to underpin the work of teachers.

Furthermore, the legislation if passed, will allow federal and state governments to lock in a ten year funding agreement. Which, given current and past attitudes towards investing in public education, shows a willingness by the Albanese government to lock in a further decade of inequality for the next generation of young Australians.

Conclusion

Legislation must ensure that all citizens can fully participate in society and achieve their human potential. In this context, full participation can only be realised through the public education system.

Teachers in public education are proud to educate students across all economic and social classes, location contexts and abilities. It is the public school system that provides the guarantee of academic excellence for all young people.

Teachers in public education know they transform lives, and their work ensures a prosperous society that includes all people. Teachers know that to do this transformative work, their students must be supported by the necessary levels of government funding.

It is the responsibility of all governments to ensure the correct funding that delivers public education systems as preeminent and desirable.

It is full funding and protective legislation that that will ensure the confidence of all in our education systems.