

Australian Democrats' Report

The Democrats are in agreement with the majority of recommendations and observations of the Chair's report. Accordingly, our supplementary comments and recommendations will be confined to additional issues or areas where we have different views from those covered in the report.

The Democrats acknowledge the useful information produced during this brief inquiry and its relevance to the current debate on the issues surrounding future school funding.

Needs based funding for government schools

The Democrats consider that 'need' as a criteria for differential Commonwealth funding is too narrowly defined as the capacity of parents to pay fees and that educational need should be included in funding models for both government and non-government schools.

Non-government schools can determine how many and which under-achieving students they accept, as can selective-intake government schools. It is also the case that government schools in better-off metropolitan areas will have fewer students with educational disadvantage and who under-achieve at school. Evidence before the committee draws attention to the need to deal with the gap in achievement.

The NSW Public Education Council in their submission to the inquiry state:

'It is imperative that in conjunction with each other, Commonwealth, State and Territory funding models are configured not only to raise the bar of overall student achievement (which international studies indicate Australia does well) but to close the gap between high and low achievers (where the same studies suggest we do poorly).

To achieve this, funding models will need to take account of the fact that the workload of schools and teachers vary markedly among schools and between schooling sectors, reflecting the differences in needs of their student communities. For example, public schools enrol disproportionately high levels of educationally disadvantaged students, including students from low-SES backgrounds, Aboriginal students and students with disabilities'.¹

The Commonwealth Literacy, Numeracy and special Learning Needs program (replacing SAISO) provides \$338 million a year for early intervention programs, literacy and numeracy, student assessment and achievement reports, students with disabilities; teacher professional development and resource materials across both government and non-government sectors. Only 66 percent of this fund is for socio-economic disadvantage and students with language backgrounds other than English.

¹ Submission No.52, NSW Public Education Council, p.9

This represents a fraction of what it costs schools to provide under-achieving students with the help they need to reach the National Goals of Schooling.

A 'needs' loading ought to deliver funds for early intervention, special needs assistance, teacher training in overcoming barriers to learning, more flexibility in class sizes, and implementation of what have been shown to be effective in pilot programs.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That, in the short term, the SES funding levels are adjusted such that where fees and charges are levied by non-government schools in excess of the AGSRC for the appropriate level of education, Commonwealth government funding is not provided to those schools.

Recommendation 2

That, the Federal government devise, in conjunction with state and territory governments, funding formulae that provide adequate resources for all schools to deliver the National Goals of Schooling, based on need that includes educational need.

Recommendation 3

That the stated objective of government policy be to at least maintain the current proportion of the student population attending government schools, so as to avoid marginalisation of the public education system.

Recommendation 4

That MCEETYA conduct a national audit of all school buildings and facilities by 31 December 2005 and report its findings to the Parliament as soon as practicable after that date.

Recommendation 5

That MCEETYA develop national standards for school facilities and a future plan to fund schools to meet those standards.

Senator Lyn Allison