

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools

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Introduction

The Progressive Labour Party was established in 1996 and has been federally registered as a political party since 1997. The PLP has contested several elections at federal, state and local government levels. It was formed principally as a result of widespread disenchantment by its members - and many Australian citizens - with the economic rationalist policies pursued by both major parties. The Progressive Labour Party believes that a major injection of public funds into public education is urgently needed.

The PLP considers education to be of the highest priority. Education should be viewed as a fundamental human right for all, not as a commodity or a market within which individuals can buy comparative advantage for their children. Quality, accessibility and diversity are the mainstays of a healthy public education system and should be the goals of government education policy.

To secure a high quality public education system, adequate funding is required from both the Commonwealth and the States. A high quality public education system is an essential ingredient for civil society, for a genuinely democratic system of government, and for the maintenance of social and economic growth. Such a system fosters respect, sensitivity, critical inquiry, creativity and conviction throughout the community. It is a public good which benefits all taxpayers, not a private good enjoyed only by families with children in public schools.

When viewed as a fundamental human right and as an essential avenue for participation of individuals in all areas of our society, a quality public education system is seen to be necessary, not optional. The primary responsibility of government is to provide sufficient funding and support to ensure a public education system which is:

- free
- lifelong
- available to all
- equitable and diverse
- at the highest quality throughout
- designed to maximise community ability and participation
- essential to the future of Australia.

Re-establishing the Primacy of Public Education

The public school system needs a significant injection of Commonwealth funding to redress long term neglect, and to repair the damage done by years of preferential funding for private schools.

People who choose to send their children to private schools still benefit from the social good produced by the state school system, and should still contribute through their taxes to the funding of that system. And to protect the rights of children, who generally have no say in the "choice" of school made by their parents, it is essential for the government to put in place clear standards and accountability for private schools.

However the Progressive Labour Party believes there is no reason the Commonwealth Government should fund private schools. The responsibility of government is to provide a high quality, accessible public education system, and the choice of individuals to take their children out of such a public system and place them in private schools is not a choice for which the public purse bears any responsibility.

Instead of directing ever increasing funds to private schools, the Commonwealth should ensure adequate levels of funding for public schools, and should direct additional funds to areas of greatest need in the public system, including the provision of accessible secondary schooling in remote areas, additional resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, funding the refurbishment and renewal of schools buildings and facilities, and funding additional programs in working class schools. Instead of encouraging people to buy their way out of an under-funded public education system, the Commonwealth should provide sufficient funding to ensure that the vast majority of Australians continue to want their children to stay in a strong, diverse, accessible and high quality government school.

The teaching profession

Teachers are the hands in which much of our community rests and their importance has been seriously neglected over the last 15 years. Good teachers are essential in meeting the right of the community to education. The government must stop playing politics with red herring issues such as scholarships for men only, and attempting to discredit the fantastic job done by public school teacher in building values among young Australians. Instead, the teaching profession must be respected and properly paid, and their legitimate representatives – the teacher unions – should be listened to and consulted.

At all levels teacher-student ratios should be as low as reasonably possible, 1:20 should be the maximum at primary and secondary schools.

In conjunction with lower teacher-student ratios the required complement of support and ancillary staff and programs should be available.

Conclusion

The Progressive Labour Party urges the Senate to reject the States Grants Act in its present form, and to insist on the primary responsibility of the Federal Government to adequately fund public education. This is an urgent and important priority, and cannot be left for future governments to "fix".