

# **School Funding Review Vital For Public Schools**

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In announcing the terms of reference for the federal review of school funding last Friday, Education Minister Simon Crean pointed out that it will be the first comprehensive funding review in over 30 years.

That fact alone should give you an idea of its importance.

For the first time since the 1970s we have a chance to ask some fundamental questions: how do we ensure that all children have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and, as Prime Minister Julia Gillard neatly put it, ensure that “demography is not destiny”?

If we are serious about answering these questions we need to look at ways to lift overall student performance while simultaneously addressing underachievement.

This can only be done with an education system that has at its heart strong, well-resourced public schools. After all, it is only public schools which guarantee every child a place.

We must therefore reaffirm our commitment to the fundamental right of all families and all children in this nation to have access to a public school of the highest quality in their local community.

That means sufficient qualified teachers and staff to meet their needs and aspirations, access to a curriculum of breadth and quality and a safe, modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment.

It is painfully clear that the current funding arrangements for schools are failing to deliver the resources that public schools need.

In a survey of over 1,100 principals in May, almost three quarters said they did not have the necessary resources to deliver the programs that students need. More than a quarter said they had experienced teacher shortages in the past year.

It is a testament to the skills and dedication of the teachers and principals who work in public schools that they are able to consistently deliver education of such a high standard in the face of these resource limitations.

Both federal and state governments have a primary obligation to ensure that public schools are appropriately funded.

Kevin Rudd made this explicit in the lead up to Labor's election victory in 2007, but Labor chose to continue with the Howard Government's funding model in its first term.

The test for the expert panel conducting the review of funding arrangements will be whether they recognise this obligation and recommend the changes that would see it met.

From a political perspective, the Coalition has already indicated that if they win the upcoming federal election they will not shift away from the current funding model, regardless of what the review finds.

Tony Abbott is apparently comfortable with a system that funds schools regardless of their needs or resources, has no educational or equity goals attached to it and under which half the private schools get more than they are entitled to.

Labor has given no guarantees about the system it will put in place other than to assure private school heads that no school will receive less money.

Given the vested interests in education, reform will not come easily and that is another reason why this review is so important.

It is an opportunity for everybody who cares about our children and the education they receive – now and in the future – to make their views known. The expert panel conducting the review needs to hear clearly not only what we want, but how we think it should be achieved.

If we don't take the chance now it could be another 30 years before we get another opportunity.

