Labor public school plan a step forward

The Australian Education Union has welcomed Federal Labor's commitments to invest in education during the COVID-19 recovery, with new targeted funding for public schools.

Federal ALP leader Anthony Albanese outlined some of the party's education pledges during an address to the National Press Club last month.

It included funding for student well-being, upgrading schools to improve ventilation and the creation of outdoor learning areas and a review of the impact of COVID-19 on students with a disability.

The biggest pledge though, was towards fair funding for schools.

"Education is fundamental and essential to the jobs, productivity and prosperity of the future. And education is the biggest and most powerful weapon we have against disadvantage," Mr Albanese said.

"Labor sees education as about creating opportunity. Liberals see it as about entrenching privilege.

"It's why Labor remains committed, working with state and territory governments, to getting every school to 100 per cent of its fair funding level."

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said the policy announcements represented a significant step forward for its members, who have been campaigning long and hard for public school investment.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the deep inequality that has long existed for students across Australia," she said.

"Labor has recognised that education is the most powerful tool we have in addressing systemic inequality and disadvantage for students.

"Ensuring public schools have 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard will mean more teachers in classrooms, smaller class sizes, greater individual attention and more support to assist students to achieve to their full potential.

"This is critically important to cater for the educational needs of all students post COVID-19."

Mr Albanese said Labor's proposed Student Well-being Boost program would mean more funding for school counsellors and psychologists, camps, excursions, sporting and social activities that would improve children's well-being.

He said it would fund a free mental health check tool to help identify students who may need extra support.

"These children have been among the most vulnerable during this pandemic, and they deserve a government that prioritises their protection along with their education," Mr Albanese said.

"Every Australian school stands to benefit from this investment. And the schools themselves will decide how to use the extra money to best help their students."

Ms Haythorpe said there was clear evidence that COVID-19 has had an impact on students' well-being.

"We welcome Labor's planned investment in well-being initiatives for schools and students. These measures, such as psychologists, counsellors and specialist staff and programs, will assist schools to help students overcome the challenges of the pandemic," she said.

"Our members have been raising the urgent need for air filtration and ventilation in schools for many months now.

"Labor's commitment of $50 million for COVID-19 related capital works, including air purifiers, improved ventilation and outdoor classrooms, will help ensure students and staff can be as safe as possible."

In 2017, the Turnbull Government abandoned funding for public school capital works. Today, the Morrison Government makes no contribution to capital works for public schools, while providing $1.9 billion for private schools.

“Labor’s commitment of $188 million for public school capital works in 2022-23 will start the process of restoring the joint Commonwealth and state responsibility for capital works investment, helping to ensure students can learn in modern, COVID-safe and fit for purpose facilities,” Ms Haythorpe said.

“The AEU has been campaigning for fair and proper funding for public schools for many years.

Our members are deeply committed to ensuring every school has the resources required to ensure every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential. “Our members have also been calling for a national plan for schools during the pandemic and to ensure schools have the guidelines and resources required for the recovery period.

“It is clear that Anthony Albanese and Tanya Plibersek have heard our members’ strong message about the critical need for investment in public schools and for a national plan for recovery from the pandemic.”

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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