National education and union news



AEU welcomes funding commitment

Students will benefit the most from federal education minister Jason Clare's renewed commitment to get every school on a path to 100 per cent of its fair funding level, according to the AEU.

The Minister repeated the 2022 election promise while announcing the membership and terms of reference for an expert panel to advise on the best way to achieve fair education funding.

He announced Dr Lisa O'Brien would chair the expert panel that will advise state education ministers on the key targets and specific reforms that should be tied to funding in the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

Dr O'Brien is the Chair of the Australian Education Research Organisation and former CEO of the Smith Family.

She will be joined by others with significant and diverse experience in school education, including:

- Lisa Paul, former chair of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review.
- Professor Stephen Lamb, Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University.
- Grattan Institute School Education Program Director Dr Jordana Hunter.
- Dyonne Anderson, President of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association and Principal at Cabbage Tree Island Public School.
- University of Melbourne Professor of Educational Leadership Pasi Sahlberg.

The expert panel will deliver its report to Education Ministers by 31 October 2023. Meanwhile the current NSRA will be extended for 12 months to 31 December 2024.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe welcomed the federal government's commitment to consulting with the teaching profession as an essential part of the process.

"If Australian public schools had 100 per cent of their fair funding level, students from every background would benefit from smaller class sizes, additional teachers and more resources," she said.

"We welcome the Federal Government's focus on students who experience disadvantage, including students with disability, from regional and remote areas, First Nations' students and students from a language background other than English.

"As we said when the Government announced the review process late last year, funding delayed is funding denied. We have a cohort of students in year 12 this year who have never attended a fully funded public school.

"We need to see a clear timeline and pathway to delivery of full funding for every public school and for the students in public school classrooms as soon as possible.

"Public education is a joint responsibility between the Federal and State and Territory Governments, and all governments must play a role in the delivery of that fair funding for public school students."

AEU urges a reimaging of the early years

The AEU has called for the Federal Labor Government to prioritise universal access to preschool for three and four-year-olds and ensure greater investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce.

The calls come as an Early Years Summit was held in Canberra earlier this year, with the AEU hoping for transformative outcomes for ECEC following its conclusion.

"This is an opportunity to re-create the early years system to ensure every child, no matter where they live or their family's circumstances, has the opportunity to start school ready to learn," said AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe.

"The importance of the first 1000 days of a child's life cannot be overstated. Evidence shows the early years are critical for building children's life-long social, emotional and cognitive skills.

"At the moment, too many children are missing out on early learning because of the design of the current system."

The profit-based model of ECEC fails children from regional and remote Australia and children with disability, while the Activity Test excludes many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children whose family experiences disadvantage.

"The best head start we can give Australian children is at least two years of high-quality, play-based learning delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher," Ms Haythorpe said.

"At a minimum, the summit must drive the extension of public funding for preschools for four-year-olds to include three-year-olds as is already underway in Victoria and New South Wales, remove the Activity Test for subsidised early childhood education and care, and address market failures in early learning."

The AEU is also campaigning to have the early years workforce shortage crisis addressed immediately.

"Any ambition for early years reform will fail unless early childhood educators and teachers are appropriately paid and valued," Ms Haythorpe said.

"Last year, a report by the Centre for Future Work warned that the current workforce shortage crisis in the early childhood education and care sector is only set to worsen significantly unless urgent action is taken to improve the pay and working conditions for teachers, educators and staff.

"To meet the growing demand in the sector, we need greater government investment in preschool teachers and staff. The kind of investment that can attract workers, meet their training needs through high quality initial teacher education and provide salaries in line with the enormous value educators and teachers bring to the country."

Narrowing gender pay gap provides little relief

While recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures showing that the gender pay gap is narrowing are welcome,

women still on average receive $255 per week less than men.

The ABS figures revealed that the gender pay gap had narrowed from 14.1 per cent in May 2022 down to 13.3 per cent in November 2022.

This outcome can be attributed in part to a strong decision in last year's annual wage review which has helped to boost the incomes of award-reliant workers, especially in the private sector, most of whom are women.

Further figures from the ABS indicate that women who are members of their union take home on average $1400 per week (median), compared with just over $1,000 for women who were not members of their union, indicating that union membership can play a strong role in lifting wages for women.

ACTU President Michele O'Neil welcomed the narrowing of the gender pay gap but said the reality was that women still earnt a lot less on an average weekly basis than men.

"If women are to have justice in their workplaces, governments and industry must continue to make every effort to eliminate the unacceptable pay gap which unfairly disadvantages women and devalues and discourages their participation in the workplace," she said.

"With spiralling inflation driven by corporate greed, rapid interest rate rises driven by an out-of-touch Reserve Bank and over a decade of stagnant wage growth, the unfortunate fact is that Australian women and their families have little to celebrate."

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