

National education and union news



Funding gap grows as public schools ignored

A new report calls for an end to the school funding crisis that has left public schools in every state and the NT underfunded while private schools are overfunded by hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

The report by education economist Adam Rorris found:

- Public schools will remain underfunded by between \$6.2 billion and \$6.5 billion a year unless the Commonwealth and state and territory governments significantly lift their investment in new funding agreements due next year.
- Private schools will be overfunded by almost \$3 billion in the next five years. At an aggregate level, private schools receive more than their public funding entitlement in every state and territory except the NT.
- The richest schools in the nation are among the ones that will be the most overfunded by the federal government in the next five years including Haileybury in Melbourne (\$19.1 million), Trinity Grammar in Sydney (\$14 million) Ivanhoe Grammar in Melbourne (\$11.5 million), Newington College in Sydney (\$11.2 million), Brisbane Grammar (\$11 million), Loreto Kirribilli in Sydney (\$10 million), Hale School in Perth (\$9.3 million) and Pembroke School in South Australia (\$8.8 million).

The report calls for all public schools to be funded by 2028 to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) which is the minimum level governments agreed more than a decade ago was required to meet the needs of students.

“Public school systems have been working from a position of extreme underfunding for more than two decades. What is urgently needed is a commitment from governments to end the funding crisis and move Australian public schools to the point where they have the resources needed so they can realistically deliver on the goals for schooling as expected by the Australian community,” the report concludes.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said the report exposed the shocking inequity of school funding with only 1.3 per

cent of public schools resourced to the SRS compared to 98 per cent of private schools.

“If governments can afford to overfund private schools by hundreds of millions each year, they can afford to fund every public school to their own minimum standard,” she said.

“Full funding of public schools is the only way to ensure every child gets every opportunity to succeed. That investment will give teachers more time and support to meet the diverse and complex needs of their students. It will also give them the confidence that they can make a real difference without burning out with unsustainable workloads.

“Public school principals and teachers are doing an amazing job, but they are being asked to do too much with too little. The Albanese Government must honour its commitment to full funding and sign bilateral agreements with state and territory governments next year that put an end to the underfunding of public schools by 2028.

“Only public schools in the ACT are resourced at 100 per cent of the SRS and only the NSW Government has pledged to fully fund public schools within the next five year bilateral agreement with the Albanese Government.

“The Rorris report makes clear there are few countries in the developed world that have a more inequitable distribution of resources to schools than Australia.

“Closing the resources gap is an essential part of closing the achievement gaps between children from different backgrounds and it is public schools who educate the vast majority of children with higher needs.

“Full funding will help attract and retain teachers at a time of a critical shortage. It will also have huge benefits for the nation with a recent report concluding that the economic payoff of fully funding public schools would be two to four times the annual cost.”

Premier faces public workforce on pay

Over 400 union members from the WA public sector workforce heard from and posed questions of Premier Roger Cook on Friday 10 November on WA's State Wages Policy and the pay cap at a mass meeting at Perth Town Hall. Owen Whittle, UnionsWA secretary, said: “No one can remember the last time a premier addressed and responded to questions from public sector unionists at a mass meeting.”

“For WA's public sector workforce, it gives hope that we're under new management that listens,” he said.

“Public sector workers spoke to the premier directly and told their stories of struggling to cope with rising costs of living in the face of poor, capped pay outcomes.

“All working people have skin in the game on this issue.

“Improving public sector pay will help those working in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors to get better pay.

“First, we need to defeat WA's public sector pay cap which is rigged against working people in much the same way that federal industrial relations laws are rigged in favour of employers.

“In the face of this decline, a joint Public Sector Alliance claim of seven per cent and five per cent is needed to ensure that those we trust to deliver key services in our community receive the investment and recognition for the important role they play in our community.”

Cheryl Hamill, Health Services Union WA president said: “The public relies on a capable and well-resourced public sector to keep services running and our community safe.”

“We've seen what happens with excessive reliance on consultants and contractors,” she said.

“The WA public sector needs to recruit and retain quality, independent public sector workers.”

Safe Work Australia's recommendation will save lives, says ACTU

The ACTU welcomes the report released by Safe Work Australia recommending a complete prohibition on the use of engineered stone in Australia.

The report followed broad consultation with business groups, engineered stone manufacturers and fabricators, unions and

health experts. It also included detailed economic evaluation and an analysis of evidence from the best available science when developing its recommendation.

Safe Work Australia endorsed the medical and scientific evidence that lung diseases caused by engineered stone dust take less time to develop, are more severe and become worse quickly.

There were three options considered by Safe Work Australia:

- Option 1: Prohibition on the use of all engineered stone.
- Option 2: Prohibition on the use of engineered stone containing 40 per cent or more crystalline silica.
- Option 3: As per option 2, with an accompanying licensing scheme for persons conducting a business or undertaking working with engineered stone containing less than 40 per cent crystalline silica.

Given that scientific evidence found that even engineered stone with lower silica content posed unmanageable risks to the health and safety of workers, Safe Work Australia recommended a blanket ban of the product.

The report noted that engineered stone dust is very fine – nano scale – meaning it penetrates deep into the lungs of workers, with the dust containing resins, metals, pigments, and other forms of silica dust. Thus, even when workers cut and fabricate low-silica stone products, the very fine dust particles of silica that enter the lungs of workers cause diseases including silicosis.

Current laws have not protected workers – one in four engineered stone workers have contracted silicosis under the current framework. The report made clear that the costs to the community from the continued use of engineered stone far outweighed any benefits, and that the only way to protect future workers was to prohibit the use of engineered stone entirely.

The ACTU Executive has joined the CFMEU in outlining the union movement's intention to ban this deadly product, commonly used for kitchen and bathroom benchtops, if state governments had not acted by July next year.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien said the recommendation by Safe Work Australia would save lives and urged all governments to introduce it at the earliest opportunity.

"Silicosis and silica-related diseases pose an unacceptable health risk to workers. This report shows that there is no type of engineered stone that is safe for workers," he said.

"No worker in Australia should have to plan their funeral and farewell their loved ones, all because of a lung disease they got from working with this deadly stone.

"The report made clear that there is no other option than an outright ban on engineered stone. Keeping this deadly product legal means more workers getting health problems and more workers dying.

"We welcome the decision earlier this year of WHS ministers to introduce stronger silica rules covering all work. However, this report makes clear that to truly protect the health and wellbeing of workers, we must ban this deadly fashion product once and for all."