National education and union news

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Budget fails to deliver for public schools

This year's federal budget fails to deliver the funding that public schools need and will widen a $30 billion capital infrastructure divide between public and private schools, according to the AEU.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said it was deeply disappointing that this year's federal budget had failed to increase the Commonwealth share of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) to 25 per cent, despite widespread support across the nation for this increase, from principals, teachers, parents, unions, community groups and six state and territory governments.

"This is a missed opportunity to deliver a nation-building investment for our children and our country. The issue of full funding of public schools is unfinished business for the Albanese Government and must be resolved this year," she said.

"We recognise that funding negotiations between the Albanese Government and state and territory governments are still underway, and we are united in our resolve to campaign to achieve full funding.

"Our members know that fully funding public schools is the only way to ensure that every child gets every opportunity to succeed and that teachers and education support staff are backed with the resources they need to deliver high quality education for all.

“The public knows that there is deep inequity in how public schools are funded when compared with private schools in Australia. If the government can find $2.5 billion to overfund 40 per cent of private schools they can find the money to meet their election commitment to end the underfunding of public schools. This commitment will only be realised when the Albanese Government puts the dollars on the table.

“Right now, only 1.3 per cent of public schools are funded at 100 per cent of the SRS, which is the minimum level governments agreed a decade ago was required to meet the needs of students.”

Ms Haythorpe said the government’s decision to not continue with capital works funding for public schools beyond this year, while giving private schools $1 billion in funding for new buildings and facilities over four years is unacceptable and must be reconsidered.

“By failing to even continue the modest capital funding it is providing this year for public schools, the Albanese Government will only worsen the $30 billion capital spending divide that exists between the sectors,” she said.

“Public schools have had one year of dedicated capital funding since 2017, worth $216 million. For schools which have benefitted from this funding, it has meant new facilities such as toilets and outdoor learning areas.

“At the same time private schools have raked in $1.25 billion, some of which went to the richest schools in the nation. Private schools will now get an additional $1 billion over four years and public schools will get nothing.”

Ms Haythorpe said the positives in the budget were paid practicums for students studying to become teachers, funding for the second round of teaching scholarships and the First Nations Teacher Strategy.

There is also a $600 million investment in skills and training as part of the 2024-2025 federal budget.

“This commitment will be welcomed by our members in TAFE across Australia as it will provide the much-needed funding we have been campaigning for as part of the rebuild of TAFE,” Ms Haythorpe said.

The AEU also welcomed a commitment to provisional funding for increased wages for all early childhood teachers and educators.

“Early Childhood Education and Care has an undervalued and feminised workforce which is providing extraordinary care and education for children in preschools and early learning settings. However, there is unfinished business in the sector and we reiterate our call for funding for two years of universal access to preschool for all three and four year-olds,” Ms Haythorpe said.

Workers should be front and centre of AI regulations

Unions have called for a worker-centred approach to the adoption and regulation of AI across the economy at a Senate Select Committee hearing on Adopting Artificial Intelligence (AI).

AI is already present in every industry from retail, to transport, to education, and will continue to impact workplaces and individuals who are already at risk of having their creative outputs stolen by companies and being subjected to unreasonable surveillance.

The ACTU, the SDA, the Transport Workers’ Union (TWU) and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) gave evidence to Senators last month on the breadth of the impact of AI on workers.

The Senate Select Committee was established to inquire into and report on the opportunities and impacts for Australia arising out of the uptake of AI technologies in Australia, including consideration of:

- Recent trends and opportunities in the development and adoption of AI technologies in Australia and overseas, in particular regarding generative AI.
- Risks and harms arising from the adoption of AI technologies, including bias, discrimination and error.
- Emerging international approaches to mitigating AI risks.
- Opportunities to adopt AI in ways that benefit citizens, the environment and/or economic growth, for example in health and climate management.
- Opportunities to foster a responsible AI industry in Australia.

The committee will present its final report on or before 19 September.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Joseph Mitchell said workers had to be at the centre of decision-making on the future of AI and how it was regulated.

“AI is present in nearly every industry and we need to tackle this problem head-on. We risk a future where the rights fought for over generations by working people are undermined by the adoption of new technologies,” he said.

“The risks are clear: workers are being subjected to unreasonable unblinking surveillance, being hired and fired by algorithm, having their creative output stolen by companies, and being discriminated against by bosses’ bots.

“We need to ensure that these risks are eliminated while encouraging the development of technology that uplifts working people and any productivity benefits from its adoption be shared with working people that enable it.

“There should be no decision about us without us.”

Australian education resource gaps amongst world’s largest

Data published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 show that Australia has one of the most inequitable school systems in the OECD in how resources are allocated between schools and school systems.

There are huge resource gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged schools in Australia that are amongst the largest in the OECD.

Sixty-one per cent of Australian 15-year-old students had their learning hindered by a shortage of teachers in 2022.

This was the 10th largest proportion in the OECD. This compares with 17 per cent in PISA 2018.

The increase of 44 percentage points was the third largest in the OECD. The resource shortage had a large negative impact on average student mathematics achievement, which was the second largest decline in the OECD.

Over one-quarter (27 per cent) of students had their learning hindered by a lack of fully qualified teachers.

This was the 14th largest in the OECD and similar to the OECD average of 25 per cent. However, the negative impact on mathematics achievement was large and Australia had the third biggest decline in the OECD.

Low socio-economic status (SES) schools in Australia are highly disadvantaged in their access to educational staff and other school resources.

Low SES schools face much greater shortages of educational staff than high SES schools. The shortage gap was the largest in the OECD in 2022 as it was in PISA 2015 and PISA 2018. The gap has increased since 2018.

Low SES schools have a much larger shortage of educational materials than high SES schools. The gap is the fifth largest in the OECD.

Over one-fifth (21 per cent) of students in low SES schools lack digital resources compared to only two per cent in high SES schools. The gap is the sixth largest in the OECD.

All OECD countries except the UK and Australia have lower class sizes in low SES schools than in high SES schools.

Low SES schools in Australia have similar class sizes and student-teacher ratios as high SES schools.

While the difference in class size between low and high SES schools are minor in several countries, 20 out of 35 countries had three or more fewer students per class in low SES schools than in high SES schools as a way of addressing disadvantage.

Public schools face greater shortages of educational staff, educational materials and digital resources than do private schools. The gaps are the 10th, ninth and 12th largest in the OECD.

Rural schools face greater shortages than city schools. The gaps were the third, fifth and ninth largest in the OECD.

To read more click here.

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