National education and union news

Australia lags behind in public school funding

The AEU has welcomed the release of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD)*Education at a Glance 2025* report, warning that its findings show the urgent need to tackle teacher shortages and that full funding of Australia's public schools must remain a government priority.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said the report makes clear that Australia is falling behind on key measures because historically governments have not been investing enough in public education.

The report shows that government investment in non-tertiary education in Australia remains below that of many leading nations, with Australia spending just 1.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on secondary schooling, lower than the OECD average.

Investment in public primary schools is also below the OECD average, while government funding for private schools far exceeds international norms at 29.5 per cent higher than the OECD average.

Early childhood education is another area where Australia lags behind. While OECD countries dedicate on average 0.5 per cent of GDP to preschool education, Australia spends just 0.3 per cent, and parents are forced to shoulder far more of the cost than in comparable nations.

"This report makes clear how important it is that the full funding of Australia's public schools remain a priority for governments," Ms Haythorpe said.

"All governments, state and federal, have committed to full funding in bilateral agreements, which needs to be delivered on the ground to address the inequity the OECD has highlighted.

"The report also shows that more needs to be done to address the growing inequity between Australian public and private schools. Our public schools are carrying the greatest responsibility for educating students from disadvantaged backgrounds, yet they remain the least resourced.

"Every child deserves access to a high-quality education, no matter their background or postcode. The OECD confirms that when we fail to invest properly in public education, it is students and their teachers who suffer the consequences."

The report also confirms Australia has among the worst reported teacher shortages in the OECD, referencing PISA data that shows between 2018 and 2022 the proportion of Australian students in schools where principals reported that learning was hindered by teacher shortages jumped from 26 per cent to 47 per cent.

Australia's above average class sizes and high compulsory instruction hours compound the pressures on teachers. Disappointingly, the report confirms growth in teacher salaries has lagged behind the OECD average.

"It is no surprise that teacher shortages are worsening when Australian teachers are working longer hours in larger classes with fewer resources than their colleagues overseas," Ms Haythorpe said.

"Governments must deliver on their commitments and invest in the teaching workforce through better pay, manageable workloads, and schools that are fully funded and properly resourced.

"The OECD has made it clear that if Australia is serious about equity and excellence, we must invest in our public schools and the teachers who change lives every day."

Seizing the opportunities of AI but protecting the fair go

Australian Unions are continuing to pursue regulatory guardrails to steer the future roll-out of artificial intelligence (AI) in workplaces.

The ACTU last month hosted a symposium on AI in Canberra's Parliament House, with Melbourne University's Centre for Employment and Labour Relations and the Centre for Future Work.

Workers across finance, transport, health, education, creative industries and the tech sector shared how AI was affecting the way they work, how their employers are treating them and how it is changing their industries.

Ride share drivers, actors and performers, retail workers, nurses, bank employees and software developers were at the symposium calling for a pro-job pro-worker agenda to give workers a stake in the gains from AI, while being transparent and fair.

Assistant Minister for Science Technology and the Digital Economy Dr Andrew Charlton and Industry and Innovation Minister Tim Ayres addressed the symposium.

The Assistant Minister for Productivity, Competition and Treasury Dr Andrew Leigh spoke on a panel on making the most of AI as part of a productivity agenda.

Australian Unions are calling for fair safeguards that would require employers to consult with their staff before new AI technologies can be introduced into workplaces.

AI agreements would include guarantees around job security, skills development and retraining, transparency over the use of AI technology, as well as genuine privacy and data collection protections. Workers are also calling for the protection of their creative output from content theft and for regulation of AI through a national artificial intelligence authority.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Joseph Mitchell said: "We want Australia's digital future to be one where working people have a voice in the uptake of AI and get the skills and training needed to seize the opportunities AI can bring."

"What we don't want is Australia following a United States style 'let it rip' approach, where the benefits of the new technology and productivity flow through to multinational tech companies, leaving workers without a say or a meaningful stake in the potential gains.

"Workers showed that AI can bring benefits, if brought in with workers who have a fair say in how AI is used and are trained to work with it.

"As we heard from a broad range of industries today, it won't happen effectively without the knowledge, experience, creativity and skills of workers to drive the process.

"Working people need to know their key concerns, such as job security, are not going to be left unprotected.

"We heard from workers that there are good employers [who] grasp this and are consulting their workforce, but we need protections for all workers. A national regulatory framework will mean that all employers follow their lead and engage in the uptake of AI responsibly and one which protects Australian industries."

Productivity reforms must support teachers

The McKell Institute's Freeing *Teachers to Teach* report, which shows that productivity gains in education come from freeing teachers from unnecessary administration, not from hollowing out their profession, sends a strong message to governments that any productivity reforms must support teachers and not reshape their profession.

This report, in response to the Productivity Commission's inquiry Building a Skilled and Adaptable Workforce, outlines how supporting teachers, particularly when there is a teacher shortage crisis, is critical for national productivity and that any productivity reforms must support teachers, not reshape their profession.

The AEU strongly rejects the Productivity Commission's attempts to frame lesson planning as "administration". This is particularly concerning when this directly contradicts the Productivity Commission's own 2023 review of the National School

Reform Agreement, which argued for teachers' administrative burden to be reduced so they could have more time available for lesson planning.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said lesson planning was at the core of the teaching profession.

"It is intellectual, creative, collaborative and essential to tailoring teaching and learning for students," she said.

"Australia is in the midst of a teacher recruitment and retention crisis, driven by escalating workloads and more than a decade of under funding for public schools. What is needed is investment in better wages and conditions and more resources for public schools."

The McKell Institute report also emphasises that reforms proposed by the Productivity Commission risk reshaping the role of teachers into content deliverers rather than skilled educators, which Ms Haythorpe warns would worsen attrition and demoralise the profession.

"We cannot let 'productivity' become code for deskilling teachers. Teachers are highly skilled professionals, not content deliverers. Removing teaching autonomy from lesson planning would see more teachers leave the profession," she said.

The report explicitly highlights that redeploying genuine administrative and compliance work away from teachers could free up between 67 million and 106 million hours annually for lesson planning, collaboration and teaching. This could restore up to 334 hours a year to each teacher in Australia for planning/collaboration and improved work/life balance.

It also states that supporting teacher wellbeing, reducing workload pressures and creating pathways for long-term careers must be government priorities, as they are essential to student success and broader productivity.

"Genuine solutions to increase productivity include better pay and conditions, reducing administrative load, expanding support staff in schools, respecting teachers as professionals and fully funding our public schools so that teachers can teach in and students can learn in modern, safe environments," Ms Haythorpe said.

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