

Public Education Party Response

Labor's Amendments to the Education Act Fail to Ensure Full Funding of Public Schools

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare has introduced a Bill to amend the Australian Education Act, promising "a pathway to full and fair funding for all schools." However, the Bill falls short for public schools, which will remain severely underfunded, even if all states and territories sign up for the Better Fairer School Funding agreements. The proposed amendments fail to address critical issues that have led to significant financial shortfalls in public education and introduce potential risks that could further delay or reduce funding in the future.

Blockages to Full Funding of Public Schools

The amendment primarily changes the current limit on the Commonwealth's contribution to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) from a 20% cap to a floor of no less than 20% for all jurisdictions, except for the Northern Territory, where it will be no less than 40%. This change, however, **replaces a ceiling with a floor** and does not guarantee an increase in Commonwealth funding for public schools. It simply allows for the possibility but does not secure full funding.

In addition, the Bill does not eliminate "accounting tricks" that allow states and territories to inflate their share of public school funding by including items that are excluded from how the SRS is calculated, such as capital depreciation, school transport, and regulatory agency costs. These tricks have defrauded public schools of billions of dollars, making it nearly impossible for them to receive the full funding they need.

Potential Pitfalls for Future Commonwealth Funding

The Bill also creates a potential **risk for future funding delays**. It allows the Commonwealth's share of funding to be set by regulation, with no requirement for Parliament to approve any reductions. While the Bill includes safeguards to ensure the share cannot be reduced from one year to the next, it leaves open the possibility that a future government could freeze or delay planned increases, creating funding uncertainty. For example, in the current agreement, the Commonwealth is set to increase its funding for public schools in Tasmania and the Northern Territory by 2029. A new government could postpone these increases without public scrutiny, stalling necessary improvements in student outcomes.

Impact of Underfunding on Public School Students

Underfunding has **severe consequences for students** in public schools, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The following are some of the most significant effects:

- **Maximum Class Sizes:** Schools often cannot hire enough teachers, including those with subject specific qualifications, resulting in overcrowded classrooms. Larger class sizes mean less individual attention for students, negatively impacting their academic performance.
- **Lack of Resources:** Underfunded schools lack updated resources, technology, and learning materials. Students are left at a disadvantage, especially compared to their peers in better-funded schools who have access to more advanced educational tools.

- **Deteriorating Infrastructure:** Many schools cannot afford repairs and upgrades, forcing students to learn in inadequate conditions, which can affect their health, safety, and ability to focus.
- **Insufficient Support Services:** Schools struggle to provide counselling, special education, and mental health resources, depriving students—especially those with learning disabilities or emotional needs—of critical support.
- **Inadequate Professional Learning:** Teachers are often unable to access professional learning, leading to high turnover and burnout. This instability disrupts students' learning and reduces the overall quality of education.
- **Limited Extracurricular Opportunities:** Funding cuts often force schools to eliminate extracurricular programs, which are crucial for students' personal growth and development beyond academics.
- **Widening Educational Inequality:** Students from low-income families and marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by underfunding, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility. Without adequate resources, these students face barriers to academic success, which limits their future opportunities.

Recommended Amendments to Secure Full Funding

To remove these blockages, **the Public Education Party** proposes two key amendments:

1. **Increase the Commonwealth's Share of Funding:** The Commonwealth should raise its minimum share of public school funding to at least 25% of their SRS. This increase would help meet national goals for educational equity, close the gap for Indigenous and migrant students, and boost Australia's economic prospects by ensuring a well-educated workforce.
2. **Prohibit States from Inflating Their Contributions:** Amend the Bill to prevent states and territories from including non-SRS items in their funding share, which artificially boosts their contributions while shortchanging public schools.

Additionally, the Party recommends making any changes to the Commonwealth's funding share subject to parliamentary disallowance to ensure transparency and public scrutiny of future funding decisions.

Conclusion

While the Bill claims to provide a pathway to full funding, public schools will continue to suffer from underfunding as long as accounting tricks and low Commonwealth contributions remain unaddressed. These shortfalls, which have defrauded public schools of an estimated \$13.1 billion between 2019 and 2024, perpetuate inequity in Australia's education system.

Ensuring full funding for public schools is not only a matter of fairness but also a **critical investment in Australia's future**. Proper funding is essential to support all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to meet the nation's educational, social, and economic goals.