

Education Forum

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Program host Chris Reason moderates a discussion on education.

Chris Reason, Program Host: John Howard and Mark Latham's views on education mean that the issue will be a key point of difference for the parties at the next election. With that in mind, we wanted to discuss funding, standards and values with both the Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, his Opposition number and various stakeholders. Dr Nelson declined our invitation. Shadow Minister Jenny Macklin accepted. She joins us from our studio in Melbourne. Also taking part - from Canberra, Pat Byrne from the Australian Education Union; and with me in Sydney, I'm joined by Dick Shearman from the Independent Education Union and Terry Chapman from the Independent Schools Association. Thank you all for being part of Sunday Sunrise. Jenny Macklin in Melbourne, I want to start with you, if we can. How much do you think voters care about this issue? Will it bite at the next federal election?

Jenny Macklin, Shadow Education Minister: There's no doubt it's a very big issue because, of course, parents know that a great education is what gives their children a terrific start in life. So the funding of our schools, whether they're government schools or non-government schools, will be a key issue in the upcoming election.

Chris Reason: Well, you have debated and argued quite forcefully that the funding formula has to change. Why?

Jenny Macklin: Because the current funding formula is just unfair. I will just give you one example, and it's about the way the current government, the Howard Government, is funding both non-government schools and government schools. Geelong Grammar down here in Melbourne has received a 240 per cent increase - 240 per cent increase for that school. They have funded a new soundproof film studio down at that school. A little Catholic school in my own electorate, St Pious X, doesn't have any green playing space. They got a 30 per cent increase. Government schools only got a 20 per cent increase. That just shows, when it comes to funding, this government has got it wrong. And the system is unfair.

Chris Reason: We should point out at this stage, though - isn't this a misleading statistic to throw around? Essentially the State schools are funded by the States and that private schools do manage to get some considerable funding from the Commonwealth?

Jenny Macklin: Well, that's not actually right. The Commonwealth and the States both contribute to government and non-government schools. The State

Governments do contribute the majority to our government schools, but the figures I just gave you are the comparisons between the increases going to different sorts of non-government schools. So a 240 per cent increase from the Howard Government to a very wealthy non-government school, a 30 per cent increase to a struggling Catholic school, and a 20 per cent increase from the Federal Government, from the Howard Government, to our government schools. That's this government's priorities, and from Labor's point of view, they have got it wrong. What we want to do, on the Labor side of politics, is fund on the basis of need, whether it's government or non-government.

Chris Reason: Alright. Jenny, we'll get to the new Latham policy in just a moment. I want to bring Pat Byrne in quickly. Today your organisation has released the commercial we just saw before the break, Pat. Parents who send their children to private schools would probably argue that they're taxpayers too. Shouldn't they have the right to some of the funding pie?

Pat Byrne, Australian Education Union: Well, our concern is that a government's first priority should be to ensure a well-resourced public system. We think that the current funding is unfair, because it means that while 70 per cent of students are attending public schools, only one third of government funding, Federal Government funding, is going into that sector. The remainder is going to the private sector. As Jenny has just pointed out, some of the biggest increases in respect of that are going to some of the wealthiest schools. Parents in the public sector have a right to ensure that their children go to a well-resourced public school. They're taxpayers too.

Chris Reason: Terry Chapman, let's bring you in here. You say that most private schools aren't rolling in cash. There has been a huge surge in what we might call the struggle-street private schools. By denying funding to those schools, to those students, would you be discriminating against those kids?

Terry Chapman, Independent Schools Association: Well, government has the responsibility to make sure all children are educated and well educated, but they don't have the responsibility to actually carry it out itself. Government, in funding non-government schools, is funding them at about half the rate - when we add Commonwealth and State funding together, at about half the rate they're funding State schools. We're certainly not saying State schools don't need more money. If government schools are currently underfunded, that's a judgment I can't make, but if they are, then they should be funded further, and non-government schools or the parents who choose them are funded as a percentage of what is funded to the government sector. I think that's fair.

Chris Reason: Dick Shearman, Mark Latham has come up with the plan that Jenny just referred to, about funding on a needs basis. What do you say to a plan like that?

Dick Shearman, Independent Education Union: Well, that's always been our union's policy. We believe that governments do have a responsibility to educate all kids, regardless of where they're enrolled - government or non-government

schools. But there has to be fairness in that. I think one of the problems we've got now is there's not only a perception of it being unfair but there's the reality of it being unfair, because a lot of parents simply can't afford to pay high fees and a lot of communities can't afford to raise a lot of funds, and every child deserves the maximum opportunities we can give them. So we think that if you emphasise need in terms of government policy, then that's the responsibility of government, to ensure that everyone has decent health, decent education. A needs-based funding system, provided that it doesn't distinguish between government and non-government and it looks at the education system as a whole - we think that's a breath of fresh air, really, that we don't have that division. But we look at need regardless of where you are enrolled.

Chris Reason: Pat Byrne- Dick is saying there that private schools should have access to funding. What do you say?

Pat Byrne: Well, the research quite clearly shows that the majority of children from poor families - whether they are Catholic, Anglican or Muslim - go to government schools. Add to that that the majority of students with disabilities are also educated in government schools and we would say that the primary need is in the government sector.

Chris Reason: I can throw another stat in there. From the official figures, one in five families earning less than \$21,000 a year send their children to private schools as well. There's no denying that there is a huge base of, as we're calling them, struggle-street private schools.

Pat Byrne: We don't deny that there are needy students in some private schools, and we want to see a fairer system that actually takes into account that need and makes sure that children are properly provided for.

Chris Reason: I want to talk about values as well. Jenny Macklin, there's something about these small public schools, isn't there? If you look at the figures again - in the 10 years to 2002, the enrolments at those schools have jumped by some 21 per cent. Why are parents choosing these schools?

Jenny Macklin: There's no question that parents do want to determine the values in some cases - particularly the religious values - that their children are going to receive, but where the Prime Minister got it wrong was when he said there are no values or public education is values-free. That's just not the case. I think we have had an outburst from parents and teachers and students at these government schools showing the great values that are taught in these schools. From our point of view, the real issue is: there are problems in government schools, in some government schools; there are other problems, sometimes similar discipline problems, in some non-government schools. The job of any government, State or federal, is to address these problems, whether they're funding issues, whether they're discipline problems, whether it's about the quality of teaching. Our job is not to sit on the sidelines, like the Prime Minister, and just throw pot shots at government schools. Our job is to fix the problems.

Chris Reason: Pat Byrne, Jenny mentioned it there - John Howard claims it's because public schools are values-neutral. What was your response to that?

Pat Byrne: Well, I think it's a nonsense to say that any school, for that matter, is values-free. All schools, both public and private, teach values, and they generally teach within the same framework, if you like, that is consistent across the country. There's also an element of parental involvement in some decisions or a lot of decisions that are made in public schools. I think possibly what John Howard is saying is that the community values that are being expressed through public schools don't reflect his own. But the other thing I want to say about this is that it's actually a diversion. It's no coincidence that the Prime Minister made this comment about values in public schools on the same day that the AEU announced its campaign in this election around the issue of funding. I think it's a classic diversionary strategy to direct attention away from the fundamental issue, which is the values that are being expressed by this government to support elite and wealthy institutions rather than the parents and students in public schools.

Chris Reason: Terry Chapman, what do you say to that? Why has there been a sudden surge towards schools that you represent?

Terry Chapman: Well, it's a multicultural society - multi-valued, multilingual, multi-religious. Education is very much a part of child raising. That's the parental responsibility, and it's quite valid for parents to make the choice as to who is going to help them educate their child. There will be a great range of schools there for the people that they're looking for and are needed in the community. Pat brought us back to the funding. It's very important to think about not only needs - and, by the way, the needs policy is not new. That was introduced by the Whitlam Government back in 1972 or thereabouts and it has been part of the policy of every government of all different persuasions ever since then. What is at issue is whether those needs are clearly in addition to entitlement. Do parents who change schools from one independent to another or government to independent or vice versa have an entitlement? What is the entitlement? I noticed that Jenny Macklin the other day mentioned support for a basic grant. In 1982 it was 40 per cent, if we combine Commonwealth and State, and today it's about 21 per cent. I would be interested - and I think the public will - in the run-up to the election, to see what each party thinks about the right of a parent, irrespective of school chosen, to a basic grant, in addition to which I think we all support additional needs funding.

Chris Reason: Jenny Macklin, your response there?

Jenny Macklin: We do support providing a basic level of support to all children in all schools. We think that is a reasonable way to approach funding of schools. But what we really recognise is that, after that, need has to be the driving force for how much goes to each school, and there's no way you could justify an extra \$2 million going to a very wealthy school - Geelong Grammar - against \$145,000 going to a very needy Catholic school. That is just not fair.

Terry Chapman: I just want to say something about the values there, Chris. I think from the point of view of teachers - and I'm sure many parents - in the non-

government sector, they felt it was quite unfair of the Prime Minister to single out public schools, because there are many Catholic schools and religious schools who don't share the values of the Prime Minister either. The values of tolerance, the values towards a multicultural Australia, values of fairness are values that are embedded in our school system. So to single out public schools and say that public schools are politically correct - which means that they've got I think more Australian values - a lot of non-government schools share those values. We would like to be included in the Prime Minister's criticism!

Chris Reason: Well, let's move on from the issue of values to teachers. Jenny Macklin, I want to ask you: like every profession, there are good and bad practitioners. Mark Latham said recently that teachers should be rewarded, good teachers should be rewarded. How so?

Jenny Macklin: One of the things we really want to see is additional incentives being given to get the best teachers into the toughest schools. We know there are some schools that really are doing it hard in this country, and we want to see those great teachers get into those schools. So we're looking at a range of different incentives...

Chris Reason: He specifically spoke about financial rewards, though, didn't he?

Jenny Macklin: That's right. Well, "incentives" - I do mean money. That's what we're talking about - providing additional funding to the States and to the non-government systems to get the best teachers in those schools.

Chris Reason: Pat Byrne, how would you punish or penalise the bad ones?

Pat Byrne: Well, there are already processes in place across the country, basically, to deal with what are seen to be underperforming teachers. But in response to what Jenny has just said, I would say that in a lot of States and Territories there are provisions for exemplary teachers, where teachers who demonstrate exemplary practice are in fact paid more. So it currently does exist in the system. It's a misunderstanding that that's not the case.

Chris Reason: Let's just move quickly on to universities. I wanted to ask you, Dick - the Australia Institute recently found that families who want to send their kids to universities should save all of their money, not send their kids to independent schools like yours, and basically just buy themselves a full-fee-paying position at university - save them a hell of a lot of money. What was your response to that?

Dick Shearman: Well, there was a time - and it wasn't all that long ago - when parents in Australia had an expectation that their children could go through school and could, in fact, go to University and they could afford to go to university. Most fees are not high. There's only a small proportion of schools that have very high fees. Most parents struggle with the fees that they have, either voluntary fees in the government system or in the Catholic system. I think there has to be greater government expenditure generally in the university sector and in the school sector to ensure that there's access for more students, rather than cutting it off and

making money and wealth and the capacity to pay rather than the future of our children, the future of our nation. Those are the things that we should be looking at. There just has to be more government expenditure on universities.

Chris Reason: We have moved on to this issue of universities. Jenny Macklin, there has been a lot of debate in recent months, particularly about the government's new higher education package and particularly the 25 per cent hike in fees. Why should taxpayers subsidise university places when only 17 per cent of high school leavers go on to university?

Jenny Macklin: But in fact, over a person's life, about 50 per cent of Australians will go to university. I think we have to recognise that increasing the level of education is great for our country. We all rely on terrific doctors and nurses and teachers who are educated in our universities. So there's a great societal benefit to university education. We do believe in students making a contribution, but it's got to be reasonable. What we don't agree with is these \$100,000 degrees. We don't think you should be able to buy your way into university, jump the queue if you've got the money, ahead of those students with better marks. We just don't think that's right. That's not the way to operate a university system. So Labor will actually add 20,000 additional university places, and another 20,000 TAFE places so that students can get into university and get into TAFE, and having that increased number of well-educated people will be great for Australia.

Chris Reason: We're unfortunately out of time. Jenny Macklin, thank you for your time this morning. Pat Byrne, thanks to you as well. Terry Chapman, Dick Shearman, thank you for joining the panel.