Inquiry into the Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024

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Submitted to: **Senate Education and Employment Committee**

The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) thanks the Senate Education and Employment Committee for the opportunity to contribute to its Inquiry into the *Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024*.

The IEUA is a federally registered union representing our state and territory IEU branches, who in turn represent teachers, support staff and school leaders employed in faith-based schools, community colleges, early childhood education centres, preschools and kindergartens and post-secondary services in the non-government sector. We are the only union with coverage of principals, educational leaders, teachers, school support staff and early childhood education professionals.

The IEUA has approximately 74,800 members. This submission is informed by our extensive stakeholder engagement and the priorities and expertise of our diverse membership.

We wish the Senate Education and Employment Committee well in the consideration of these important matters.

Introductory comments

To fully consider the *Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024*, it is necessary to also reference the associated *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034* that will enact the provisions of the funding Bill as bilateral agreements are made between the Federal Government, States and Territories.

The IEUA commends the purpose and objectives of the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* (Paragraph 65, page 13):

1. *Equity and excellence – schools and education systems are equipped to provide all students with highly effective evidence-based teaching and equitable learning opportunities and support them to maximise their learning.*

2. *Wellbeing for learning and engagement – schools take a structured approach to wellbeing for learning in a way which reflects their school and learning environment, and students have a sense of belonging, safety and engagement with their learning.*

3. *A strong and sustainable workforce – the workforce is respected and continues to grow, and teachers and non-teaching school staff are supported to innovate and be at their best to ensure young Australians thrive in their education. A sustainable workforce means that the Australian community recognises the value teachers and school leaders bring to students, communities and the economy.*

The achievement of these worthy objectives rests on not just the commitment of all stakeholders within the education system, but also on governments providing the full level of funding and resources needed to operationalise the reforms crucial for the schooling sector.

A core value of our union, and our near 75,000 members, is that school funding must centre on student need. Needs-based funding is the cornerstone of a fair and equitable system. It is vital to close the achievement gaps between students of different backgrounds.

While the IEUA represents education workers in the non-government sector, our union has a long history of advocating for equitable educational opportunities for all Australian children - regardless of their schooling sector. Consistent with this commitment, our union has repeatedly called for increased government funding for public schools, most recently in our submissions and representations to the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) Expert Panel and our contributions at the NSRA Ministerial Reference Group.[1]

A fully funded public-school sector is essential in contemporary Australian society. The work of our members and schools in the non-government sector must be complemented by a world class public education system that is accessible to all children in all communities.

True choice and equality in educational opportunity requires public schools to be fully funded according to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Full SRS funding must be delivered by the Federal and State and Territory governments as a matter of urgency if the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* objectives are to be honoured for every student, regardless of their school, location or their family background.

The *Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024* and associated Agreement provide an opportunity to directly target the core drivers behind current school workforce shortages and unprecedented rates of teacher burnout. While many of the initiatives proposed in the reform program are to be commended, the reality is that teacher workload pressures and staff shortages will likely frustrate the implementation of many measures at the school level.

The reform program has, in part, been a missed opportunity. While school employers ultimately have the ability, and responsibility, to manage workload pressures, government action and funding commitments can be used to drive meaningful interventions on workload by requiring specific commitments from employers.

Government funding to target educational disadvantage

Throughout the development of the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement*, an overarching objective has been to tackle education inequality and the unacceptable gaps that persist in educational outcomes in many parts of the country.[2]

To achieve these gains, it's imperative that all schools are adequately funded based on need. Accordingly, the IEUA calls on all levels of government to ensure the full funding of every public school as soon as possible.

While the Federal Government has recognised the need to increase their contribution to the states from 20% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) to 22.5% [3], this change still falls short of the full funding needed for the vast majority of state schools across the country.

[1] IEUA Submission, 2 August 2023, *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System National School Reform Agreement*
[2] Grattan Institute, 29 January 2023, *Analysis of 2022 NAPLAN Data* (Reading and Numeracy)
[3] Hon Jason Clare MP Minister for Education, Joint Media Release, 3 September 2024

The Federal Government's own *Improving Outcomes for All (Summary Report),* developed by their NSRA Expert Panel to inform the funding agreement, highlights on page 8:

> *It is crucial that all governments and school systems aim to achieve 100 per cent of the SRS for every school as soon as possible. The Panel noted in the Report that this is the priority for all governments. The Commonwealth Government is committed to working with state and territory governments to get every school to 100 per cent of its fair funding level.*

As at the date of this submission, the funding Bill and Federal Government offer to the states does not guarantee full funding for public schools in NSW, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia[4]. Such an outcome would be a demonstrable failure in public policy.

Public school funding arrangements must be reviewed as follows:

- The Federal Government's proposed *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* will operate for a decade from 2025 to 2034. It's therefore essential that the agreement delivers the best possible outcome for students and teachers. A genuine pathway for all public schools to achieve the minimum 100% of the SRS must be guaranteed as soon as possible.

- Legislation to develop 'a floor' for the Federal Government's share of the SRS contribution is a positive development that brings greater certainty to school funding; however, the proposed floor of 20% is inadequate. The minimum floor amount should be reviewed to ensure it will deliver 100% of SRS funding once all states have finalised their bilateral agreements. It's likely that a 25% floor will be required.

- The status of the 4% depreciation allowance[5] should be amended to ensure it no longer artificially inflates public sector funding. The 4% depreciation calculation, originally introduced by the Federal Coalition, should be removed from bilateral agreements to provide more accurate SRS funding commitments.

Implications for teacher workload and staffing shortages

The IEUA notes the appropriateness of the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement*'s inclusion of the education workforce as one of the National Reform Directions:

84.c. A strong and sustainable workforce

I. Initiatives to develop, recognise, reward and/or deploy highly expert teachers, particularly in schools which need additional support, for example Highly Accomplished or Lead Teachers or equivalents

II. Access to high-quality and evidence-based professional learning for teachers and school leaders and the provision of quality-assured curriculum resources that have been developed in partnership with the teaching profession

[4] AEU Federal Media Release, 20 August 2024, *United Stand for Public School Funding*
[5] Centre for Future Work, August 2023, *The Case for Investing in Public Schools: The Economic and Social Benefits of Public Schooling in Australia*

III. *Initiatives to strengthen teacher and school leader wellbeing, for example actions to support safe and respectful schools, strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety, and reduce teacher and school leader workload*

IV. *Initiatives to increase teacher attraction and retention including those that encourage students to take up a career in teaching and increase the diversity of the teacher workforce, for example initiatives focused on increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, or through implementing actions under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and/or recommendations of Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel*

Teaching and learning outcomes are directly related to a stable and high-quality education workforce. Current staffing shortages in schools and endemic teacher workload pressures can undermine efforts to lift student achievement and close educational gaps.[6]

Our union welcomes the acknowledgement of school staff wellbeing and teacher workload in the Agreement, and consideration of how reforms might impact schools already overburdened with excessive compliance, data collection and administrative reporting. We note that:

- The collaboratively developed Teacher Workload Impact Assessment Tool that will apply to each national policy initiative arising from the Agreement is vital. The IEUA has long-called for similar workload impact tests to apply to all new policies or initiatives before they are imposed on school leaders and classroom teachers (90).

- The Agreement recognises the importance of professional learning and provision of curriculum resources developed in consultation with the profession (84.c).

- Access to specialist school support staff such as dedicated wellbeing coordinators, school counsellors, psychologists or mental health workers (84.b).

- An acknowledgement of the administrative burden that data collection places on school staff, and the need to avoid the imposition of new data collection on schools where possible (88.d).

- The need to continually evaluate teacher workload and explore initiatives that can reduce school leader and teacher work demands (84.c).

These inclusions are positive; however, as thousands of teachers, support staff and school leaders will tell you, they are not nearly enough.

Unsustainable workloads and work intensification are the most pressing workplace issues confronting education employees across the country. The problem is complex and has many dimensions that will not be solved by the Federal Government alone, or within a single area of reform. School employers have the most immediate ability, and responsibility, to make a real difference to teacher workload and excessive work expectations at the school level.

[6] Gavin et al, 30 November 2021 *Teacher Workload in Australia: National reports of intensification and its threats to democracy*

Yet government policy, such as funding and reform programs, can play a crucial role as part of a broader response to excessive workloads. It is on this basis that our union submitted to the NSRA Expert Panel the following proposals that would see concrete outcomes linked to the Agreement:

- We need school employers to genuinely engage with staff and unions to reduce workload pressures. Employers should be required to do more than simply acknowledge the issue of workload or provide vague reports on existing, and often inadequate, workload measures.

  The Agreement should include specific new workload interventions required of employers and a more rigorous reporting regime whereby employers must evidence quantifiable workload improvements in their schools.

- An issue canvassed with the NSRA Expert Panel and Ministerial Reference Group related to concerns with excessive compliance and the overlay of duplicative administrative tasks. Such demands are often imposed on staff in excess of what was envisaged by education authorities, as many employers (at a system or local level) add extra requirements.

  Teachers and school leaders are drowning in this paperwork and red tape. Funding agreements should enforce minimum compliance requirements to ensure employers do not exceed streamlined national standards.

- The Federal Government's *Improving Outcomes for All (Summary Report)* stressed the need to consider "… *additional time to plan and collaborate and access to mentoring and specialised training …*" (section 4.a). However, the final Agreement has no requirement for school employers to action such specific time at the school level.

  In the absence of the Agreement providing enforceable consequences on school employers, such recommendations will remain out of reach for the vast majority of school staff, and in reality, will only occur following action and advocacy by unions and their members.

The IEUA welcomes the many positive aspects of the Agreement, and we acknowledge the diverse and competing challenges that need to be managed through a complex national policy framework. Our 75,000 members ask that the issue of unsustainable workloads be elevated to the highest priority in all areas of education policy, including funding arrangements.

In the absence of a meaningful intervention on workloads, and genuine commitment by employers to refrain from exceeding compliance requirements, many worthy reforms may remain unfulfilled as teachers continue to leave the profession in record numbers, and schools are unable to fully commit to new student programs due to competing demands and already overburdened teachers and school leaders.

IEUA Recommendations

The IEUA provides the following recommendations to the Senate Education and Employment Committee for inclusion in its report to government:

1. That the *Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024* provide the framework by which all state schools reach 100% of the SRS as soon as possible:

    a) The Federal Government should revise their offer to the states - the current offer of 22.5% of the SRS would fail to deliver full funding to the vast majority of Australian public schools.

    b) The Federal Government should review and increase the legislated SRS floor to a rate higher than 20% to ensure that all bilateral agreements reach full funding of 100% of the SRS.

2. That the issue of unsustainable teacher and school leader workloads be elevated to the highest priority in all areas of education policy, including funding arrangements.

3. That teacher workload assessment tools be considered for broader application across all areas of education policy and proposed reform. The Federal Government is to be commended for developing the NSRA Teacher Workload Assessment Tool in collaboration with the IEUA and other education unions. Applicable to Project Plans on each National Enabling Initiative, the tool sets an important precedent for the adoption of similar workload protections across all areas of education policy.