Federal ALP Policy on School Education

The ALP announced an ‘education revolution’ in January 2007 with publication of the first of its New Directions policy papers, linking education to productivity growth and Australia’s long-term prosperity.

To achieve its economic goals Labor advocates: increased government expenditure on education, including targeted funding of ICT in schools; increasing participation rates in early childhood education; improvements in retention rates in secondary schooling; improved educational outcomes in Maths, Science and literacy; measures to address skill shortages; increased public investment in tertiary education; and increased investment in research infrastructure.

There has been a significant shift in federal ALP schools funding policy in relation to independent schools. ALP leader Kevin Rudd and Labor Shadow Minister for Education, Stephen Smith, have said there will be no funding cuts to independent schools if a Labor government is elected, the SES model will be retained for the 2009-12 quadrennium and that general recurrent grants will continue to be indexed to the AGSRC.

Further evidence of the move to a more inclusive schools policy is the announcement that capital funding for ‘trades training centres’ will be available to secondary schools irrespective of sector.

The ALP’s ICT plan for schools, which also embraces independent schools, is a welcome announcement. The AIS has advocated for a targeted program of ICT funding for schools as a priority for the independent sector.

Early childhood education
- Legislation of a federal Early Childhood Education Act to give a universal right to access to early play-based learning and development programs for four year olds delivered by both public and private providers
- Programs funded for 15 hours per week
- 1500 new fully funded university places in early childhood education
- Development of Early Years Learning Framework
- Responsibility for early childhood transferred to Commonwealth Department of Education

Maths and Science
- Young Australians encouraged to study Maths and Science at university by reducing HECS contributions and halving HECS repayments if graduates move into relevant occupations, particularly teaching
- The number of qualified teachers in Maths and Science to be increased by enhancing the skills of current Maths and Science teachers
- Suitably qualified professionals encouraged to make a career change to maths and science teaching

National curriculum
- A National Curriculum Board to be established to develop and implement, by 2010, a national K-12 curriculum in the priority areas of Maths, Science, English and History
- To be implemented through mutual agreement of key stakeholders
- Non-government sector to be represented on the Board
Shared infrastructure
- Collaboration encouraged among government, Catholic and independent schools to share ‘state of the art’ infrastructure, facilities and resources
- Capital funding of $62.5 million to be provided for an estimated 25 pilot projects

Literacy and numeracy
- A National Action Plan on Literacy and Numeracy targeting schools, teacher training and individual student support to be developed in partnership with government, Catholic and independent school sectors
- Funding for the current Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program to be continued
- The current Reading Assistance Voucher Program to be reviewed
- Support for national Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 benchmark testing and publication of results at school level

Vocational education and training
- Focus on school retention
- Capital funding of $0.5 million to $1.5 million for individual secondary schools, irrespective of sector, for ‘trades training centres’
- Up to $10,000 for individual schools to broker on-the-job training or work experience for students in Years 9 to 12
- Established Australian Technical Colleges maintained
- Job Ready Certificate for school leavers
- Independent statutory body, Skills Australia, to be established to advise government on skills needs and priorities

Schools funding
- SES system retained for 2009-12 quadrennium, with a public review early in the quadrennium
- Current indexation arrangements of general recurrent funding retained
- $16 million of additional general recurrent funding for Orthodox Jewish day schools over 4 years

Education Tax Refund
- Families who receive Family Tax Benefit (Part A) will be eligible for a 50 per cent tax refund on specified education expenses up to $750 per year for each child in primary school and up to $1,500 for each child in secondary school

Digital schools
- All schools to be provided with ‘fibre to the premises’ or best available broadband connections to enable connection speeds of up to 100 Mb
- Through a National Secondary Schools Computer Fund, provide $1 billion over four years to enable all students in Years 9 to 12 to have access to their own school computer
- Schools in all sectors will be able to apply for capital grants of up to $1 million to acquire new or upgrade existing infrastructure (grants will depend on the number of students enrolled and existing ICT capacity, and will be conditional on the use of internet filtering technology)
- Schools will be able to reapply for grants every three years to update and upgrade their equipment
- Core material developed by the proposed National Curriculum Board to be available to all schools online, and dedicated online curriculum applications for Board subjects to be developed
- Language conferencing and online classes to assist in language learning
Other

- Individual learning plans for Indigenous students
- $29.5 million for three new boarding colleges for Indigenous students in the Northern Territory
- $68.6 million for a National Asian Language and Studies in Schools Programme
- $20 million for special security needs of schools deemed at risk
- Up to $20,000 for each school for solar panels and up to $30,000 for energy and water efficiency improvements

ALP POLICY STATEMENTS

Stephen Smith to Parliament, 7 May 2007
“Labor will not cut funding to any government or non-government schools.”

Stephen Smith to ABC Radio, 13 June 2007
“There is a particular provision in the [Labor Party] Platform which makes reference to income from private sources and people are worried about that. My reading of that is that it simply reflects a measure of the capacity of parents to contribute to their children’s education, which includes their occupation, their income, etcetera. That’s already taken into account by the current SES funding model.”

Stephen Smith, in response to questions posed at a meeting with AISNSW senior executives in Sydney, 27 September 2007
“We intend to recognise quality teachers by paying teachers more for what they teach, where they teach and for their specialist skills and accreditation.”

[In regard to the possible reintroduction of a New Schools Policy]  “The status quo in this area will remain. I have no plans to disturb the current State based registration arrangements.”

Kevin Rudd, as reported in The Weekend Australian, 6-7 October 2007
Kevin Rudd “has promised to impose on schools a level of rigour not yet seen in Australia by linking funding to improved standards rather than handing state governments or private schools ‘a blank cheque’.”

Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith, joint media release, 9 October 2007
“Federal Labor understands the importance of providing funding certainty to all Australian schools . . . For school systems, Federal Labor’s commitment [to retaining the SES model for the 2009-12 quadrennium] means that the base funding position will be the same in real terms. For schools, Federal Labor’s commitment means it will not be possible for any individual school to be worse off. Put simply, Federal Labor will only make additions to schools funding, not subtractions.”