



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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ELECTORATE TALK

The Minister for Education recently announced Commonwealth education funding for 1983 of almost \$3,000 million. Since this announcement there has been some discussion about the Commonwealth Government's education policy, and it is important to look at some of the key questions, especially about school funding, in a broader context.

There has been a tremendous increase in the allocation of the nation's resources to education over the last ten years -- such that \$7,000 million was spent by Commonwealth and State governments on education in 1980-81. The very large sums of money provided for the education of Australians underlines the Government's continuing support for education as a priority commitment. Within this total allocation, the level of support by the Commonwealth and the States for schools has expanded substantially. The latest available figures, for 1979/80, show that just under \$5,000 million was spent by both Commonwealth and State governments on all schools, an amount almost two-thirds higher in real terms than that recorded in 1971/72.

Since 1979/80, Commonwealth and State expenditure has continued to increase. While the States provide about 90% of funds for government schools and have total responsibility for their administration, the Commonwealth also has a significant role in supplementing State efforts.

Commonwealth Government expenditure directed towards schools has expanded over recent years. It is over 7% higher in real terms this year than it was in 1976. It is worth noting that for 1983, the Commonwealth Government's allocation to education includes a real increase of 2% in general recurrent funding for government schools, and almost 95% increase for non-government schools will be directed to those with the greatest need.

To put a proper perspective on the levels of government support for education, it is worth looking at the earlier findings of a special committee, known as the Karmel Committee, set up in 1972 to recommend appropriate target funding levels for all schools to be achieved by 1979. These targets were met for government schools in most States three years earlier than had been anticipated.

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I would like to reflect for a moment on the significance of this commitment by government and what it means at the student level. Total Commonwealth and State recurrent expenditure in 1979/80 on government schools amounted to over \$1,700 per pupil, having steadily increased by 68% in real terms since 1971/72. And average class sizes have fallen. In 1971, for example, in government schools there were about 22 students for every teacher. By 1981, these ratios had fallen so that there were about 16 students on average for every teacher.

Despite the improved student ratios, despite the fact that on average government schools have better student teacher ratios than non-government schools, despite more dollars on average going into government schools per student; there has been a marked shift in enrolments away from government schools in recent times.

In the three years to 1981, total enrolments at government schools fell by 2.5% while total enrolments at non-government schools rose by 7.5%. Indeed, except for a small decline in primary enrolments at non-government schools between 1971 and 1976, there has been a steady overall increase in enrolments totalling almost 12% at non-government schools over the last decade.

The shift in preference to non-government schools has been particularly marked at the secondary level, where enrolments at government schools fell by over 4% between 1977 and 1980, in contrast to nearly 6% increase in non-government secondary school enrolments. Everyone interested in the well being of government schools - governments themselves, parents, teachers and students - must be concerned at these declining enrolments at government schools. Why have these shifts in preference taken place?

In the early 1970s, many people thought that big spending on education was all that was needed to provide the kind of education that parents wanted for their children. Some sectional interests in the community have suggested that the shift in enrolments away from government schools has been caused by a squeeze in funding for those schools and increasing funding for non-government schools.

It is plainly obvious that that just is not so. Despite increasing Commonwealth assistance to non-government schools, combined State and Commonwealth grants are still a long way below expenditure levels for government schools. Total grants for non-government schools amount to only 45% of expenditure on government schools on a per pupil basis, and even when school fees are taken into account, the resources available in most non-government schools are about 30% below those available in government schools.

The argument should not be about the level of funding for schools. Rather the concern should be about providing the right kind of education to meet the communities' requirements. The Government, for its part, has a responsibility to take action in the face of its concerns about the direction of school education in Australia - and it has faced that responsibility. For example, the Commonwealth has introduced the school-to-work transition programme which is proving particularly successful in helping those less academically inclined. We are providing \$150 million over a 5 year period for transition activities in schools and technical and further education colleges. These grants are being adjusted for inflation.

More generally, the Government recognises the requirements of the community in respect of a balanced education system - one that caters for those who are aiming at tertiary education but equally for those who are less academically inclined; one that acknowledges the right of freedom of choice in education; one that promotes an effective school system which meets the educational aspirations of the whole community.

The Government's approach to education reflects its broader philosophy that Australian families have the right and the freedom to decide for themselves their own needs, their own way of life.

Governments have acted responsibly in providing the resources to allow all schools to move to a position where they can provide the kind of education system that the community desires. I believe that all young Australians deserve an education system that is flexible enough to give its students the skills and training appropriate to their individual abilities and ambitions. The great challenge facing educators in the 1980s is to ensure that the education system works to ensure that this is achieved.