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Dear Colleague,

With the 2010 federal election just weeks away this newsletter is devoted to the various parties' policy positions in education based on the information currently available.

Firstly, to put the situation in context, we must acknowledge the government's school funding record since it was elected in 2007. Funding for recurrent, capital and targeted programs has been allocated as agreed and the sector has been closely involved in implementing the Trade Training Centres program, the Digital Education Revolution (DER) and National Partnerships (NPs) - although the model used to implement NPs is extremely bureaucratic and is not suitable for our sector.

The independent schools sector was also included in the Building the Education Revolution (BER) and is achieving the aims of the program. The BER is being administered by the AIS, is competently managed by individual independent schools, has provided the economic stimulus sought and provided excellent value for taxpayer dollars. It has been a wonderful boost to the development of infrastructure in independent schools.

While this has been something of a revolution for education, the question that must be asked is whether a re-elected Labor government will continue to treat non-government schools and parents as essential partners in the delivery of quality education in this country - or will it bow to pressure from anti-non-government school unions and lobby groups and revert to divisive policies which will remove much of the innovation and progressive competition that non-government schools provide?

Are we going forward in a constructive, positive and united way as the Prime Minister suggests or, in education, is this the beginning of a journey backward? While it is not surprising for the government to say *"I cannot tell you in which direction we are going because we have set up a funding review process which won't report until well after the election"*, this does not provide the sector with any certainty.

The National Catholic Education Commission has also publicly stated its concerns about the uncertainty of future funding arrangements, particularly the failure to guarantee indexation (funding in real terms) and the uncertainty around the funding maintenance provisions that currently apply to many schools.

An examination of the current policy positions of the major parties sheds some light on the possible future funding environment for the non-government schools sector.

Australian Greens education policy

The Australian Greens current position, in short, is to end the current SES funding arrangements by the end of 2010; to revert to 2003-04 funding levels to determine a gross allocation for low SES 'private' schools; to remove existing exemptions under anti-discrimination legislation; to remove funding from so-called 'wealthy' schools; and to remove indexation and its link to government school costs.

Federal election and education policies (cont...)

While the Greens' policy position has not changed significantly over the last few years, it is largely unknown to parent communities across the non-government schools sector since the media focus is more often on their environmental, social and human rights policies.

The risk to the independent schools sector is not a probable implementation of these policies as the Greens will not govern in their own right, but, as Kenneth Wiltshire from the University of Queensland Business School stated in an opinion piece in *The Australian* newspaper on 23rd July: *"these are dangerous hands to be holding the balance of power."*

Wiltshire argues that the Greens are likely to be part of the next government through their influence in the Senate, and questions whether they can be trusted since they have not articulated how they would wield their power if they hold the balance of power in the Senate.

If this scenario eventuates it appears clear, from their current education policies, in which direction the Greens would push the Government with regard to the funding of non-government schools.

Wiltshire makes a very interesting and sobering point in relation to exercising the balance of power. He reflects that in the past the Australian Democrats in this situation applied a principle that they would never 'trade off between issues, but would negotiate on each issue separately'. To date the Greens have not articulated such a principle.

To assist schools to appropriately inform their parents on the Greens' education policy in relation to 'private' schools, some extracts are reproduced in this newsletter (see opposite page).

Coalition education policy

The Coalition's education policy has so far focused mainly on a 'School Cost Tax Rebate' policy than on their school funding position.

However, discussions with the Coalition indicate that they would continue to fund non-government schools under the current SES funding model with 'some minor adjustments'. The Shadow Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, has publicly stated this position on several occasions.

It is clear that under the Coalition indexation would continue under the existing arrangements, ensuring that funding would be retained in real terms.

It is unclear, however, whether there is an intention to address the issue of Funding Maintenance. There appears to be no change in their approach to capital or targeted program funding and the BER will continue in its present form for the non-government sector (due to the efficiency with which the program has been delivered). It appears, however, that the Digital Education Revolution (DER) program would be at risk.

This latter program is proving extremely valuable for schools, particularly with the additional infrastructure support funding, and the sector will push for a guarantee that this program will continue.

We will also push for increased capital funding, possibly through a national interest subsidy scheme or similar, to assist schools to extend their capacity to account for future enrolment increases.

ALP education policy

Some of the ALP education policy positions have been clearly articulated over the past couple of years and are not expected to change substantially as a result of the election.

Trade Training Centres, DER and the BER will continue in their current form. However, the unknown ALP policy positions are the most significant for the independent schools sector. At this point in time the picture is a little confusing and uncertain, and potentially very worrying.

On 6th July, in an interview with *The Australian*, the Minister for Education, Simon Crean, said that following the funding review: *"No school will be worse off. Not a dollar will be taken away."*

However, when asked to guarantee funding in real terms (appropriately indexed) he declined on the grounds that this would pre-empt the findings of the review. A failure by government to guarantee future funding in real terms would mean increases in school fees of at least 8-9% per annum would be required just to keep pace with the costs of current education provision.

In addition, for the first time in over 20 years the government has refused to guarantee capital funding to non-government schools beyond the current funding period (i.e. beyond 2012). With predicted significant increases in enrolments for the sector this would mean the expanded capacity in existing schools and the building of new independent schools will add a significant financial burden to the parent communities of these schools.

This failure to commit to future capital funding may have serious implications for the right of parents to choose a school for their child. Again, the reason given is that a commitment would also pre-empt the funding review. It appears from these statements that a guarantee that no school will lose a dollar of capital funding is considered to be pre-empting the review findings, while such a guarantee for recurrent funding is not.

Federal election and education policies (cont...)

This situation - in the middle of an 'education revolution' focused on increasing education resources for all students, immediately prior to a federal election and on the back of the Prime Minister's comment (at the National Press Club on 15th July 2010) that "*it is difficult to think of any investment that will generate returns as enduring as our investment in a child's education*" - is problematic.

No-one expects the government to pre-empt the findings of its Review of Funding. Surely, however, the Review is about targeting additional expenditure to areas of greatest disadvantage and educational need.

This includes developing a better process for identifying areas of educational need that require additional resourcing; determining an accurate measure of the cost to governments of educating each child to a high standard; developing an index to accurately measure annual increases in education costs; developing a fairer and more appropriate method of funding children with special needs; and developing a capital funding program to plan for future infrastructure needs in both the government and non-government schooling sectors.

The Review should not be about reducing funding in real terms to any school or setting up a funding mechanism that penalises parents who choose to make significant sacrifices in spending their after-tax dollars on educating their child.

The Prime Minister has stated she is "*committed to moving Australia forward by providing responsible, far-sighted economic management...*" It is hoped that the significant contribution that independent schools make – both financially and in providing the highest possible quality of education – will be part of that plan. The retention of funding levels to the non-government sector, in real terms, is an essential element if the education sector is also to move forward.

What are the education policies of the main parties?

The Australian Greens believe that:

- federal schools funding policy should prioritise the public education system to ensure that public schools are able to provide the highest quality educational experiences and set the educational standards for the nation.

The Australian Greens want:

- schools funding to be placed on an equitable footing by reversing the excessive increases in Commonwealth funding to non-government schools in recent years.
- increased funding to public education through funding models for all sectors of the education system to prioritise public education.

The Australian Greens will:

- introduce the same accountability and transparency frameworks for government funding to non-government schools as applies to public schools and extend the anti-discrimination measures that apply in public schools to private schools.
- ensure the viability and diversity of existing public schools is not endangered by the development of new private schools.
- end the current arrangement for recurrent funding to non-government schools by no later than the end of 2010.
- implement a new model for recurrent funding to non-government schools based on the following:
 - proper consideration of the resource levels of non-government schools and their financial capacity, including fees and other parent contributions;

- an appropriate measure for indexation of the funding of non-government schools that decouples it from spending on public schools; and
- non-government schools to be fully accountable to the parliament and therefore transparent to the public on their use of government funds and their financial situation, including all income and assets.
- ensure that non-government schools in receipt of government funding:
 - do not discriminate in hiring of staff or selection of students;
 - have an admissions and expulsions policy similar to public schools including an obligation to enrol; and
 - demonstrate social and community engagement and benefit by offering community access to facilities and/or a fee waiver for a percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or with special needs.
- invest the money saved from ending public subsidies to the very wealthiest private schools into a national equity funding programme for public schools.
- support the maintenance of the total level of Commonwealth funding for private schools at 2003-04 levels (excluding that re-allocated under previous clauses), indexed for inflation.

The above points are taken from the Australian Greens Education Policy which can be found at: <http://greens.org.au/policies/care-for-people/education>

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The AIS leadership team invites you to contact them on (02) 9299 2845 or via email to discuss any of the issues raised in this newsletter or other schooling matters.

ALP Policies

To date there have been just two education policy announcements made by the Gillard government so far - an extension of the Education Tax Rebate (ETR) to include the cost of school uniforms, and the availability of National Trade Cadetships for students in Years 9 - 12 who wish to undertake a trade.

The ETR is certainly helpful to most parents of independent school students while the National Trade Cadetships broaden the options for students who may not plan to go onto tertiary study.

As noted previously, there is no ironclad guarantee that independent schools will not be worse off as a result of the Review of Funding sometime during the next term of government.

Further information about the ALP's policies is available at www.alp.org.au/agenda/

Coalition policies

The Coalition's education policy includes a guarantee that the SES funding model will be continued in its current form, including indexation linked to the AGSRC (Average Government School Running Cost). The future of Funding Maintenance is unclear.

In addition, the School Cost Tax Rebate is an extension of the current ALP policy to provide a tax refund to parents for a portion of school-related costs. The Coalition's policy extends the rebate to incorporate an element of school fees, for both government and non-government schools, and is clearly of benefit to parents.

More information about the Coalition's policies is available from:
www.liberal.org.au/policies

AIS Election 2010 website

The AIS has developed a new section of its website for use by independent schools and members of their school communities. Called '*Election 2010*', it provides a wealth of information about a range of issues for independent schools, with a particular focus on funding and the impact that current and future decisions might have on the education of independent school students.

Independent school principals are encouraged to use the material on the *Election 2010* website, including a range of downloads, simple facts and figures, and information about how parents and other members of the school community can engage with local members of parliament and election candidates and seek commitments around future funding for independent schools.

It is critical that between now and the 21st August federal election, independent school supporters make clear to politicians from all parties that they expect the needs of all students to be appropriately catered for under any future funding arrangements.

Election 2010 can be accessed from the AIS website at www.aisnsw.edu.au

If you would like any further information or assistance on how you and your school community can become involved, or if you require copies of any election-related material of relevance to independent schools, please contact Malcolm Hunt at mhunt@aisnsw.edu.au or on (02) 9299 2845.

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