

Struggle for fair funding far from over

On 11 March this year the Federal Minister for Education Alan Tudge declared that he was “pleased the funding wars are now over”.

What a fascinating choice of language. Exactly who does he think the funding wars were between? The states and federal government? State schools and private schools?

Whoever Mr Tudge might have thought were the combatants you can be sure that in wars there are always losers.

So who are the losers here in Mr Tudge’s funding wars?

Probably not the South Australian private school that is fighting the local council for the right to build a second orchestra pit.

Certainly not private schools in Western Australia, which will be funded to 103.3 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard this year – and 104.1 per cent in 2023.

Definitely not private schools across the country, which will be overfunded by one billion dollars between 2020 and 2023.

Looking for the vanquished in the funding wars?

Try Western Australian state schools – funded to 93.8 per cent of their SRS in 2022 and 95 per cent in 2023.

Another set of losers in the funding wars? State schools across the country will be under funded by 19 billion dollars from 2020 to 2023. Yes, 19 BILLION dollars. Now that is a casualty of war.

How about individual students in WA? Do they come out as winners or losers in the funding wars?

Private school students definitely come out on the winning side. In 2023 each student will get \$523 each above the SRS level.

State school students? Losers I’m afraid. The per student payment for them in 2023 will be \$965 below the minimum SRS. In 2022 it’s even worse: \$1,102 below the minimum.

How telling it is when a Federal Education Minister celebrates the end of a ‘war’ which sees the sector that educates the majority of the nation’s students (primary and above) on the losing side.

Of course, the federal government has form for seeing school funding as a war.

Dare to question the endless largesse towards the private school system and the Morrison Government and its media allies will accuse you of waging class warfare.

Meanwhile the private system gets every possible advantage. Despite the federal government justifying its largesse to private schools on the grounds that it is making them more affordable, fees rise to the extent that only half the families with children in private schools can afford them. Hence it is estimated that about 60 per cent of private school students have their fees at least partly paid by their grandparents.

As if this is not enough, the Morrison Government recently nudged the door open for even greater funding of private schools, shifting to the Adjusted Taxable Income model to assess the level of ability families have to contribute to school income.

This ignores aspects such as grandparent contributions to fees, income from capital gains, non-disclosed income in Australia or in overseas bank accounts and tax havens.

This financial chicanery will see a net increase of \$3.5 billion in funding to private schools over the next 10 years. As if they need even more government money in addition to fees, donations, building funds and the like.

No wonder the federal government wants to shut down any discourse about school funding and claim the war is over.

The SSTUWA and the AEU though will not be running up any white flags. Mr Tudge is wrong. The struggle for fair funding is far from over.

As we stood in rain in Canberra in March to launch the Every School. Every Child. campaign (see page 9) I can assure you that union leaders from across the country are absolutely clear that the fight goes on. I urge all members to sign up at everyschooleverychild.org.au

There is no more important campaign in education right now. It is one we have to wage at the state and federal levels. It is one we cannot afford to lose.

Sources: Rorris Report (bit.ly/3vCNLwy); Save Our Schools (sstuwa.org.au/research)

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