

HON TANYA PLIBERSEK MP

ISCA & AHISA National Education Forum

20 AUGUST 2018

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting and I pay respects to elders both past and present.

I extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in attendance today.

I would also like to acknowledge:

- Mr Steven Bowers - Chair of the Independent Schools Council of Australia
- Dr Mark Merry and - Chair of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools
- Ms Colette Colman - Executive Director of ISCA
- Ms Beth Blackwood – CEO AHISA.
- Dr Michele Bruniges - Secretary of the Australian Department of Education and Training.

And I acknowledge that the Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten, will be joining you later today.

During the last year there has been considerable national debate on schools.

Firstly, there were changes to schools funding, then a review into educational outcomes and more recently the SES Review.

This has been a period of a many proposed changes and also great uncertainty.

Value of education

I know that everyone in this room values education.

That is why you have devoted your life to working in this field.

Working in education is not an easy path – the workloads are considerable and the job is demanding.

But the rewards can be great.

Inspiring young people, helping shape their values, their goals and their life path.

I believe education is the greatest gift we can give our young people.

Education offers kids the best chance to find their passion, make use of their gifts, and to use those talents to serve our broader community.

A strong and well-performing school system is the best opportunity we have to tackle disadvantage and give all young people a solid foundation for the future.

Labor wants every school to be a great school – where all kids have the best opportunity to reach their potential.

Importance of Independent schools

Independent schools are an important part of Australia's school system.

You currently educate more than half a million young Australians, or some 15.2 per cent of all Australian students.

Labor recognises the contribution of independent schools to educating young Australians.

You work hard delivering world-class learning, and developing creative, innovative and collaborative young Australians.

Labor believes it is important for parents to have choice about the school they would like their child to attend.

Labor supports all non-government schools receiving a fair level of government funding.

As we all know, there are a variety of reasons why parents choose independent schools.

Some for their faith based education, some for the pastoral care environment, some for the music and sporting programs offered.

Sometimes it is just a better fit for their child.

I want to acknowledge that there is a great diversity across independent schools and that not all are “elite”.

The majority of independent schools are accessible to a much broader group of Australians and play a critical role in supporting school choice.

As the recent ISCA report *the Changing Face of Australian Schools* has shown the profile of the independent sector has changed over time.

In 1996 45 per cent of independent school students were from low or middle income families.

That share has increased to 58 per cent today. And the median school fee of an Australian independent school is \$5,100.

There are really diverse examples of independent schools.

One I visited was Minimbah Primary school, an independent school in Armidale NSW.

The students are almost all Aboriginal and they’ve hired Aboriginal teachers because they think it’s important for their kids to have Aboriginal role models.

In fact, there are 38 independent schools that have Indigenous enrolments over 50%, and independent schools are the largest provider of boarding schools for Indigenous students.

Funding

I know that school funding is an issue of great importance.

Labor supports a fair funding system, where all schools receive the funding they need to deliver a great education.

Labor has committed to restoring the \$17 billion that the Turnbull Government has cut from schools over the next decade.

Those cuts have fallen hardest on public schools – we estimate that 85 per cent of the cut in funding is to the public school system.

However, independent schools have also suffered under these cuts.

The \$17 billion the Liberals' have cut from education is the same money that are handing to the big banks in tax cuts.

Labor will prioritise schools over tax cuts to the big banks.

Labor supports parental choice in education – no matter what school you send your child to, whether government, independent or catholic, we believe your school should receive a level of government funding.

Parents have a reasonable expectation that some of their tax money goes towards supporting their children's education no matter where that occurs. That is why we will invest in a truly needs based, sector blind model of school funding.

Our aim remains to get all schools and sectors to their fair funding level.

Labor fundamentally believes that schools serving disadvantaged communities should get the biggest funding increases.

The biggest funding increases will go to the schools with the greatest need, whether those schools are government schools, independent or catholic.

With an extra \$17 billion in the system it is our expectation that funding to independent schools in need will be higher under Labor than under the Liberals.

And under Labor, schools will receive funding increases in a faster timeframe that under the Government's plan – we don't think it is fair that schools have to wait six years, until 2023, to get to a funding level which is less than promised by Labor.

We will look to implement shorter term funding arrangements with all school sectors based on Labor's previous funding arrangements whilst we work with you to set in place long term arrangements.

Ultimately those will be long term arrangements so that your sector has the certainty you need to be able to make long term plans yourselves.

It is simply not good enough that under this current government you do not know what will happen to your funding after 2019.

That lack of certainty makes it much more difficult to make necessary long term investments in your school.

As we enter into long term funding arrangements I can guarantee you that this will be done in consultation with you and other school sectors.

If elected, as Federal Minister my door will always be open to you as it will to representatives of the other sectors.

Unlike the current Minister, I don't believe it is appropriate to rip up national school funding arrangements, and spring new arrangements on the sector without consultation.

I want to return to the consultative relationships we had in place under the previous Labor Government.

Transparency and accountability will be key planks of our funding arrangements – particularly for systems that receive funds that they redistribute across their schools.

In the *Australian Education Act 2013* that Labor introduced there were clear transparency requirements that systems had to publicly disclose how their funding was distributed, and put in place needs-based funding.

A report by the Australian National Audit Office late last year found that “the department has not effectively monitored the requirement for system authorities to have in place needs-based funding arrangements.”

Of course, that is very disappointing.

If Labor is elected we will have strong transparency and accountability provisions across all schools and sectors that will be enforced.

SES review

Initial shorter term funding commitments will also give proper time for the recommendations of the SES review to be properly considered and investigated, before potential implementation.

Labor supported a review into the way the SES score is calculated.

We committed to reviewing the SES mechanism back in 2013, when it was a recommendation that came out of the first Gonski Report.

All measures of need that underlie calculations for government funding should be periodically reviewed, and that had not been done in a substantial way since the SES method was introduced back in 2001.

We believe it is important that the SES measure that determines funding for independent and catholic schools should be as accurate as possible.

In-principle we believe the personal income measure outlined by the National Schools Resourcing Board review has merit.

On face value, a more direct measure perhaps utilising tax office data would give a better indication of parents' capacity to contribute than an area based measure.

When assessing the new measure for determining SES Labor will consider the following factors:

- *Accuracy* – if the new measure is a more accurate way of determining the true capacity for parents to contribute to their children's education.
- *Fairness* – is the new measure fair? Does it mean that Government funding will be better targeted to those that need it most?
- *Accessibility* – does the new measure support school choice and accessibility to schools, that is, does it better support low and middle-income fee schools?
- *Transparency* – is the new measure transparent and does it therefore provide confidence from the broader community about the strength of the measure?
- *Administrative burden* – can the new measure be implemented and introduced without an undue administrative burden on schools and families?
- *Stability* – is the new measure relatively stable so as not to have big changes in individual school funding from year to year?

We recognise that no system for determining need is perfect.

Every system will have its good points and its flaws.

Any changes that we do decide to adopt will be gradually introduced, to give schools and school systems time to adjust.

One of the problems is that the Government has not publicly released any of the underlying data about how individual schools or systems would be impacted by the proposed changes.

I understand that some of representative groups have seen their school by school data but were forced to sign confidentiality agreements.

None of the data has been released publicly or provided to the Opposition for us to evaluate.

Stakeholders cannot even discuss it openly with us because of the gag orders.

We can't have a debate which would involve substantial changes in school funding in the dark.

We must have an open discussion so we can properly whether the new method stacks up.

The Government should immediately release the data and establish a clear forward process for interrogating the data and considering whether it is fit for purpose.

If Labor is elected, we will release all data and work through the issues, discussing the benefits and risks with all stakeholders.

Closing

In closing, Labor believes independent schools are an important part of Australia's school system.

We will work closely with the independent sector as we develop our new schools funding model going forward.

And most importantly every decision we make will be in the best interests of Australian children.