

MEDIA RELEASE

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“OUR FUTURE” Report of a Survey of Australian Government Primary School Principals

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) represents over 7,000 government, catholic and independent primary principals from all parts of Australia. The Association is a unique professional body in that all sectors work collaboratively to benefit primary education. No other professional organisation can claim such a coherent and powerfully comprehensive body of national educators. The professional associations that make up APPA are universally vocal in their belief that primary education in Australia can only remain healthy if all education sectors are also healthy. This is particularly so of the government sector which comprises some two thirds of all primary schools. It is for this reason that the APPA National Executive Council, made up of government and non-government principals from every Australian State and Territory, has lent its full support to this national survey and report by Australian government primary principals.

APPA congratulates its government school affiliates for having the courage to publicly share the challenges of their educational landscape and propose actions to meet current and future needs, many of which ultimately impact upon all sectors. “Our Future” is not about pointing the finger of blame. Rather, it is about painting the real landscape, as perceived by primary principals. It is about raising issues of need, equity and ethos that must be addressed and actioned over the years to come. It is not about “quick fix” or “quick top up” remedies, but rather long term investment into the most vital of all education areas – that of primary education.

When such a significant report shares collective perceptions then we need to take stock as a nation and look deeper at what is being signalled. And these concern issues including:

- Resourcing needs – (e.g. 87% of respondents believe there is not enough money allocated to the early years in education);

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- The capacity to deliver desired outcomes effectively – (e.g. while outcomes based education and technology are prime focus areas, schools feel they have not been afforded the required investment levels to do so effectively and “rob Peter to pay Paul” as they rationalise internally to compensate);
- Socio-economic challenges - (e.g. over 90% of principals expect more government school children will come from families experiencing social problems);
- Primary education funding models – (e.g. as needs and challenges are diverse, principals also believe that funding models need to be correspondingly differential, addressing local needs and the inequities between primary – secondary student funding policies);
- Narrow policies – (e.g. policies need to balance the interests of local schools as well as those of systems, especially enabling principals more discretion in regard to students who threaten the welfare of others);
- Need for more flexibility – (e.g. many principals believed system constraints interfered with their capacity to be flexible and responsive to their students and communities);
- Impact of competition and marketing – (e.g. principals lend little support to school funding based on a competitive basis and view government roles as ensuring funds are distributed fairly and matched to student learning needs. They are not opposed to parental choice in education but rather support choice without the negative consequences of competition); and
- A high degree of pessimism with regard to making inroads to these challenges – (e.g. principals feel they do not have the capacity to meet all these growing demands and as a consequence, the job for principals and teachers will get harder).

These are but a few issues highlighted in the report where they are in more detail. However, given the enormity of the challenges perceived by government school principals and their general view they are powerless to address them all, they remain optimistic that government schools will be successful and perform well on national and state/territory surveys of student performance.

The issues raised in “Our Future” tell it as it is, in the view of over 2,500, or some 50%, of all government primary principals. This is a significant statement and necessitates we take on board the actions proposed:

- The establishment of resource standards than ensure effective delivery of modern curriculum and learning for the 21st Century;
- A national review of school resources needs – (the Report sets new benchmarks for primary resourcing and funding that need to match and near those of secondary schools and the more affluent schools);
- Independent monitoring of school funding – (transparently balancing the interests and funding needs of government and non-government sectors); and

- Regulation of competition – (a review of current practices to establish an agreed code of conduct).

While this survey has been undertaken by the Australian government school primary principals, with support and under the auspices of the Australian Primary Principals Association, some of the issues cited are also synonymous with some non-government schools and as such it has a much broader scope. APPA regards “Our Future” as a watershed for refocusing upon real and differential needs, the health of education sectors and a need for greater investment into primary education.

Over the past decade we have seen billions of dollars invested into secondary education through Vocational Education Training programs, also into Middle Schooling and most recently the Tertiary sector with the Prime Minister’s release of Backing Australia’s Ability. All these investments were necessary and are to be applauded. However, now it is time to make the billion dollar investments into primary education, particularly the early years. This investment will not only address the significant challenges raised in the Report, but also lessen the current levels of costly corrective educational, social and judicial strategies required in later life. As research constantly reminds us, a dollar invested in the early years saves eight times that in later years.

The Australian Primary Principals Association fully supports and endorses the Report, not only as a way forward for the government school sector, but also as spearheading an initiative for a better deal for primary education, across the board. In the light of current negotiations between APPA and the Commonwealth, this Report will provide the necessary concrete data in supporting APPA’s proposals for:

- additional support to address urgent local needs, as highlighted in the Report; and
- greater equity for primary education funding.

Negotiations to date have been optimistic and creative. “Our Future” delivers the necessary catalyst for positive outcomes from the negotiations. It is time for a national body, representative of all states and territories, to take stock of these issues and develop a blue print for the future over the coming decade.

I commend the report to the Commonwealth Government, to all state and territory governments and education systems, to all school leaders and their school communities across Australia and to the general public. The Australian Primary Principals Association is committed in its support for the actions defined in “Our Future” and for a better deal for primary education. We thank the Australian Government Primary Principals Association for its leadership and initiative as an active member of APPA.

(“Our Future” may be accessed on the APPA Web Site: www.appa.asn.au)