



Education evolution

THE PM WANTS THE 'BIGGEST SCHOOL REFORM AGENDA IN HISTORY' AND EXPECTS SOME ARGY BARGY. STEVE HOLDEN REPORTS.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced the 'biggest school reform agenda in history' in August to improve the quality of teaching, require schools to report on performance and lift achievement in disadvantaged school communities. 'Right now, we do not have accurate, comprehensive information to allow rigorous analysis of what schools and students are achieving,' the PM said.

His solution? 'We will be making agreement on individual school performance reporting a condition of the new national education agreement to come into effect from 1 January, 2009,' he told the National Press Club of Australia. 'Within a year, we want to see increased information available to Australian parents and, within three years, a report that shows not just how their child is doing, but how their child's school is performing compared to similar schools. Knowing where there is underperformance will help us to target additional resources.'

The PM's 'biggest school reform agenda in history' aims to recruit the highest-performing graduates as teachers; to recognise and reward top teachers; to measure student and school performance and make this available to parents in a clear and simple format as well as through 'public reporting by schools of their performance on key measures including national test results'; and to use 'national data to target funding to underachieving schools.' The PM also wants school principals to have more autonomy when it comes to staffing and salary decisions.

Expecting some resistance, the PM will use a carrot and stick approach, but admits that 'boosting the quality of education in Australia's 9,581 schools' won't come cheap. 'We anticipate that governments will need to commit to additional investments of

around \$500,000 per year for an average sized school.' That's, roughly, an additional \$4.8 billion, although that's not a figure the PM quoted anywhere in his agenda-setting speech.

The fact that the agenda in his agenda-setting speech was a carbon copy of the 2004 agenda of the previous Howard government didn't go unnoticed.

Here's the former PM in June, 2004: 'The payment of...Commonwealth money will be conditional on government schools and independent schools and Catholic schools meeting certain requirements.' And here's Brendan Nelson, when Minister for Education, also in 2004: 'It's time that as parents we received much more information, meaningful information about the performance of schools.'

The Howard-Nelson plan was for a national curriculum and testing, better reporting to parents, including plain-language reports, and meaningful comparative information on school quality – aka league tables – and overall student outcomes.

As one journalist asked the PM, 'How is it an education revolution when you're following Coalition policies to threaten the states and territories' education funding unless they introduce performance pay, principal autonomy, school comparisons, not to mention the fact that you're following the Coalition policy to dock welfare payments to truanting families? I mean it's hardly original, let alone revolutionary.'

'Well,' the PM answered, 'what would be revolutionary is for someone to actually do this, as opposed to just talk about it.'

The rhetoric in the PM's agenda-setting speech emphasised cooperation. 'By working together with the states and territories, the (Commonwealth) government aims to

improve the quality of education delivered in Australian schools,' he said. Don't be fooled. Such cooperation, if he gets it, will be no less the product of coercion than any previous Coalition plan. 'Reporting on performance *will* be a requirement of any new school funding agreement,' the PM said.

'I know some will resist these changes,' he told the National Press Club. 'There is little doubt that greater transparency will reveal some schools in Australia may be seriously underperforming.... Tough action is necessary if we are to achieve real change.'

Optimists with the rosiest of tinted glasses who expect Labor ministers in the states and territories to embrace the PM's national performance partnerships with open arms should think again.

'It will be a matter for them to accept or reject,' the PM told Kerry O'Brien on ABC TV's *7:30 Report*. 'I believe that any state or territory concerned about whether they are going to have enough money in the system long-term to deal with these education challenges will have to have a very good excuse to turn their back on the national performance partnerships that we are about to offer.'

Like the previous Howard government, when it comes to school reform and especially league tables the Rudd government knows it has a fight on its hands, and with a Labor minister in every seat at the table for meetings of the Council of Australian Governments and the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, the fight is likely to be more, not less, intense.

According to Peter Hartcher, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the PM's 'truculent declaration that he wants some "argy bargy" on "hard principles" of school standards is a good fight to pick.'