



The National Voice for Government, Catholic and Independent Primary Principals

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## **Position Paper** (effective June 2008)

## Foreword

Dear Colleague,

On behalf of the National Executive Council of the Australian Primary Principals Association, I am delighted to be able to present to you **APPA's Position Paper**. These statements were unanimously endorsed by your National Executive Council at their May 2008 meeting in Canberra.

This is the first time APPA has developed a comprehensive position paper to address current educational issues at the national level. The paper is based on the findings of our research project "*In The Balance: The future of Australia's primary schools*", and "*The Charter on Primary Schooling*". These documents are available on the APPA website [www.appa.asn.au](http://www.appa.asn.au)

The **Position Paper** is another excellent example of the strength of our 3 sectors working together, nationally.

Should you require clarification or assistance please do not hesitate to contact us through the Canberra Office.

Kind regards,

Leonie Trimper  
APPA President

1 June 2008

APPA welcomes our new business partner Wooldridges and acknowledges them for their generous support and assistance in the printing of this document.



# Contents

<b>Recognising the importance of the primary years .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The primary curriculum .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Movement towards a national primary school curriculum	
Defining the core of the primary curriculum	
Managing changes to the primary curriculum	
<b>Using student assessment results wisely .....</b>	<b>5</b>
National sample testing	
National whole-cohort testing	
Assessment in the early years of primary school	
Individual Learning Plans	
Reporting to parents	
<b>Supporting teachers perform at the highest level .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Sustained Interventions	
Specialist support	
<b>Staffing schools that serve disadvantaged communities .....</b>	<b>8</b>
The supply of primary teachers	
<b>Performance Pay .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Leadership in Primary Schools .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Principal Wellbeing .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Student behaviour in primary schools .....</b>	<b>10</b>
Problems of inclusivity	
Extreme behaviour	
Problems that have socio-economic origins	
<b>Funding mechanisms .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Discretionary use of funds	
Competitive, submission-based funding	
<b>Funding formulae .....</b>	<b>12</b>
The importance of resources	
Resource standards	
Funding Anomaly for Government Primary Schools	
<b>Delivering Better Educational Outcomes in Australian Primary Schools .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Transparency .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Recognising the importance of the primary years

APPA seeks the recognition from governments and education authorities that Australian primary schools have been extraordinarily successful over the past two centuries in providing the educational foundation for Australian society. This success must be protected and the capacity of primary schools enhanced if they are to meet the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century.

APPA strongly urges education authorities to see primary education as a totality from kindergarten through to the students' transition to high school. Primary schools have enjoyed their success because they have been able to consider the needs of the whole child rather than concentrate on narrow objectives identified by policy makers remote from schools and the dynamic complexity of primary school life.

## The primary curriculum

### Movement towards a national primary school curriculum

The development of a national curriculum is supported in principle by APPA, with important provisos.

First, the experience of the last decade has shown that central curriculum designers consistently overestimate what can be covered in a school week in a typical primary school. A national curriculum for primary schools must specify only the minimum essential content.

Second, some schools, because of their more fortunate circumstances, will be able to provide a comprehensive and rich curriculum, whereas within the current resource constraints, other schools will of necessity offer a more limited curriculum built around Literacy and Numeracy. There is a great diversity among Australian primary schools and a national curriculum must provide scope for considerable adaptation to suit local circumstances.

Third, it is important to note that the discussion of a national curriculum has begun with a consideration of what is appropriate for the senior secondary years. The needs of primary students, rather than secondary students, must provide the starting point for designing a national curriculum.

Fourth, if any subjects other than literacy and numeracy were to be mandated, education authorities should undertake an audit of schools in their jurisdiction to ensure that schools are staffed with teachers who have the expertise to teach in the mandated area of the curriculum.

Finally, it is important to ensure that the concept of a national curriculum occurs with the active involvement of leading primary school teachers and principals who have had experience in a cross-section of Australian primary schools. This involvement should commence at the very beginning of the curriculum design process.

## Defining the core of the primary curriculum

The crowded curriculum constitutes a significant problem facing teachers and principals in primary schools. APPA research has shown that large numbers of schools have found that there is too much to teach within the available instructional time.

Education authorities continue to approve the incorporation of additional activities into the curriculum, yet are reluctant to prioritise among the eight key learning areas, even though there are many primary schools unable to successfully meet all of the expectations contained in the official curriculum documents.

**The needs of primary students, rather than secondary students, must provide the starting point for designing a national curriculum.**

To assist with the resolution of the overcrowded curriculum APPA has adopted a Charter containing a core set of learning areas: Literacy, Numeracy, Science and Social Education. The Charter is strongly supported by the majority of primary principals. It identifies as a first priority that all Australian schools should teach the core of the curriculum and then broaden the curriculum to include the other important learning areas.

APPA recommends that the Charter become the basis for extended discussions with curriculum authorities about the form and content of the national curriculum.

## **Managing changes to the primary curriculum**

State governments have established central education authorities to control the curriculum in their jurisdictions. Federal governments have mandated curriculum content and tied funding to the mandate. Decisions about the form and content of the primary curriculum are the result of a political process in which governments consult with a large number of interest groups. This process, unless carefully managed, encourages the crowding of the curriculum as well as its fragmentation.

Advances in digital communications technologies have enabled curriculum authorities to quickly produce curriculum documents and circulate them to schools. It is now much easier to modify curriculum documents than in the past. APPA believes that this is one of the factors contributing to the rapidity of curriculum change.

National meetings of officials that rarely include practising primary educators occur frequently and act as a stimulus for curriculum change.

APPA believes there should be a moratorium on change until there has been appropriate consultation with primary school educators about the key parameters of a national primary curriculum. To assist with this process MCEETYA should establish a national primary curriculum and assessment advisory group with the majority membership consisting of practising primary school educators.

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## **Using student assessment results wisely**

### **National sample testing**

APPA supports the adoption of high academic standards. It recognises the importance of routinely acquiring evidence in regard to the performance of students in key areas of the primary curriculum. APPA therefore supports the national sample testing of students on a cyclical basis that is currently being undertaken under the auspices of MCEETYA.

APPA also supports the participation of primary schools in the TIMSS assessment program as a way of benchmarking the performance of Australian children against international benchmarks.

However, APPA urges governments and their education officials to exercise caution when commenting on the results of international testing programs, as the factors that contribute to differences among nations, and among the jurisdictions in Australia, are extremely complex; explanations of differences are therefore largely speculative.

### **National whole-cohort testing**

APPA notes that all Australian governments have supported the annual assessment of Literacy and Numeracy of all children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. This policy raises some important issues in regard to the use of the results from this testing program, since they are aggregated and reported on a school-by-school basis.

School principals find the use of the results of these tests to be a useful indicator of their performance. However, APPA is concerned about a growing tendency to use school performance data as the only indicator of educational excellence. Summarising the whole of the educational program of a primary school in terms of literacy and numeracy, average test scores grossly understate the broad achievements of primary schools.

Principals know that the performance of schools on national tests is generally associated with the socio-economic background of the school's student intake. The performance is also related to the level of resources available to the school. There are many additional factors that could explain a school's exceptional performance. Public reporting of results can therefore lead to unfair inferences about the work of primary school staff members.

Excessive emphasis on test results, published in league tables can also narrow the curriculum so that undue emphasis is given to those aspects that are tested while neglecting the less tangible aspects of primary education that are not measured.

Experience from overseas indicates that where serious consequences are attached to performance on high stakes tests, a large part of the school year has been allocated to preparing students to perform well on the results. This is because teacher and principal employment contracts, salary increases, and promotional opportunities are tied to the school's performance.

For these reasons APPA seeks representation on the body charged by governments to have carriage of the national assessment in primary schools. Such a body should monitor the impact of the assessment programs and have oversight of the release of results.

APPA opposes for three reasons the public release of *league tables* of individual school results that show purportedly 'good' schools and 'failing' schools.

First, *league tables* tend to assign sole responsibility for the performance of schools to school staff members even though education authorities and governments also share responsibility since they control the policy and resourcing levers. The league tables therefore lead to a form of school scapegoating by attributing blame to the school level.

Second, *league tables* do not fairly report the performance of schools. Many factors contribute to a school's relatively good or bad performance - the contribution of staff members is obviously important but so are other factors, particularly the background of students. Though there is talk of 'value-added' reporting, there is no available model that fairly attributes responsibility to schools for their performance.

Third, insofar as student performance data is used to hold schools accountable, control of the data should rest with authorities that have operational responsibility for the schools. They are in the best position to use the data judiciously. A blanket release though a published *league table* can have a negative impact on the morale of an underperforming school in which staff and community members are working hard to turn the situation around.

Though opposed to league tables, APPA supports national assessments of literacy and numeracy and sample assessments of other outcomes. Principals find the data useful. APPA has no objection, however, to individual schools releasing performance data to members of their school's community.

In addition, APPA encourages the use of national data sets to monitor the performance of groups of students who are educationally disadvantaged. The monitoring of the chronic underperformance of Indigenous children has led to concerted efforts on the part of governments to redress the problem. The Australian Government's intention to require that

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results for literacy and numeracy assessments are systematically reported in the Annual National Report on Schooling in Australia according to student background characteristics, including SES is supported.

## **Assessment in the early years of primary school**

There have been numbers of discussions reported in the media of an extension of the national testing program into the early years of primary school. The proposals have suggested that children in Year 1 should be assessed so that resources can be targeted as soon as possible to those students struggling with their literacy development.

APPA would prefer a model in which normed assessment instruments are developed and made available to primary schools for use at the discretion of principals rather than the implementation of a new mandatory testing program.

APPA believes that much more discussion among primary principals and early years teachers is required before the idea is taken further.

## **Individual Learning Plans**

Prior to the 2007 election, the Federal Labor Party was committed to the development of individual learning plans for all students to ensure they are progressing in the acquisition of reading, writing and numeracy skills.

Currently many schools use Individual Learning Plans for students with special needs. APPA has serious concerns about the wisdom of mandating Individual Learning Plans for *all* students. Such a policy would require teachers to commit considerable amounts of time to the completion of Individual Learning Plans for many students for whom there would be little benefit. APPA urges the Minister to hold discussions with it if this proposal is to be implemented.

## **Reporting to parents**

There has been considerable public controversy in recent years over the reporting of student performance grades to parents.

APPA supports the principle of reporting to parents in everyday language that can be understood by laypersons. Jargon should be avoided. However, many schools use various methods to keep parents informed of their child's progress at school. One form of reporting does not suit all situations.

Teachers, on the other hand, for their own professional purposes may use a more technical language. Further, they must have regard for the impact of the grades on the child's self esteem and motivation.

APPA does not therefore support the adoption of a single, mandatory method of reporting. Schools will take all of the considerations into account and have the autonomy to adopt the procedures suitable for their community.

**APPA supports the principle of reporting to parents in everyday language**

## **Supporting teachers perform at the highest level Sustained Interventions**

APPA recognises the importance of enabling all children to get off to a good start in school and welcomes the provision of extra support in recent years for the early years of primary education. However, there is a mistaken view that once the child has completed the first two or three years of schooling the resources can be cut back because the teachers should have been able to get every child off to a good start.

This view has led to an acceptance by education authorities that larger classes in the middle and upper primary years can be tolerated as there should be fewer challenging students. It also explains why most intensive intervention programs are targeted at those early years and are unavailable in the middle and later primary years.

APPA supports policies that aim to address as early as possible the problems faced by children struggling to master the foundations of literacy and numeracy. However, many of the problems that challenge students in their first year of school persist and are not amenable to a 'quick fix'. Further, some children develop problems later in their primary years. The idea that all children should be competent learners by the time they complete Year 1 is an attractive prospect but unfortunately constitutes a widely held myth.

APPA urges governments to review their school resourcing policies with a view to extending support to teachers in the middle and upper primary years.

## Specialist support

APPA's research has shown that most primary teachers believe that they have sufficient expertise to achieve high standards in Literacy and Numeracy. In addition, on most school staffs there are teachers with outstanding levels of expertise and interest in other areas of the curriculum. Even so, not every primary teacher is an expert in every subject area and not all schools can cover every key learning area as well as they would like.

This is one reason why policies that imply that 'one size fits all' will not work across all of Australia's primary schools. Another reason is that the communities served by schools are not all the same. Hence, there will of necessity be considerable diversity among the curriculum strengths of primary schools and each school is likely to have a distinctive profile.

Policies that imply that 'one size fits all' will not work across all of Australia's primary schools.

However, every primary school should have at least one curriculum area, in addition to Literacy and Numeracy, that forms an area of excellence for which the school can be proud. Schools should have sufficient resources to develop at least one chosen curriculum area as an area of specialisation. The area(s) selected will depend on an assessment of the needs of students, the availability of staff members with the expertise to teach the subject, support from the local community, the tradition and profile of the school, and the competing interest in the remaining non-core 'subjects'.

## Staffing schools that serve disadvantaged communities

### The supply of primary teachers

The staffing of Australian primary schools is emerging as a major challenge for the next decade. APPA research shows that about a third of primary school principals have been unable to appoint suitable teachers to fill vacant positions. The problem is more acute in schools in less preferred locations and in schools with significant proportions of children with special needs.

Principals of less preferred schools are reliant on governments providing incentives and working conditions that provide a reasonable compensation for the extra pressures that usually arise from working in such schools.

### Performance Pay

APPA strongly supports building a profession in which outstanding teacher commitment and performance are appropriately recognised.

However, the design of such systems of recognition must be undertaken with considerable care in order to ensure that its overall impact is positive.

First, APPA is opposed to the development of a performance pay system based principally on performance in test scores. National tests can provide reasonably reliable estimates of the performance of large samples of students, but are notoriously unreliable when it comes to estimating the performance of small groups. Further, there are many factors that contribute to the performance of students, home background is one such factor. The use of tests results for this purpose has been shown in other countries to lead teachers to 'teach to the test' in unhelpful ways, and consumes large portions of the school year in preparing students to take the tests.

Second, APPA is also concerned that the use of a performance pay system has the potential to undermine the teamwork that is a key feature of successful schools. The performance of students, however assessed, is the product not only of a class teacher but also of the school's administrative staff, ancillary staff, parent helpers and colleagues. Teacher quality depends not only on individual effort but also on the contribution of the whole staff contributing to the environment in which individual teachers work. A new performance pay system must take account of this fact.

Third, APPA expects that the introduction of a performance pay would be accompanied by additional funding so that any costs associated with the system are not met by stripping funds from other hardworking teachers. APPA would support a comprehensive review of current pay structures and pathways for all teachers.

Finally, APPA recognises that whatever model is proposed, there should be ample opportunity for trials and critique by members of the profession. If a new system is to work, then it is essential that it is perceived by members as a positive rather than punitive intervention.

To view APPA's full report on *Performance Pay – An Issues Paper* click on the following link <http://www.appa.asn.au/cms/uploads/news/appa-performancepaypaper.doc>

## Leadership in Primary Schools

Our research, *In The Balance: The future of Australia's primary schools*, did not set out to investigate leadership, however during interviews many principals reported that they were under enormous pressure.

The leadership model for primary schools is very lean and based on an outmoded view of primary education.

There is a huge diversity in school size and leadership in primary schools. On average, primary school leadership (if large enough) consists of a principal (some with a teaching component), a deputy (usually with a teaching component as well) and there may be one other leadership position such as a coordinator or counsellor, etc.

In comparison to secondary schools, primary schools are allocated significantly fewer leadership positions.

For primary schools to effectively address the current challenge as identified in *In The Balance*, the present leadership infrastructure is inadequate and needs to be increased. The time spent on administrative tasks also needs to be reduced by increasing access to skilled, trained administrative personnel.

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## Principal Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of school principals has developed as an issue at an international, national and state level over a number of years. As reported in *In The Balance*, some principals doubted if they would continue in the job, even though they were not yet of retirement age. They expressed dismay at the quality of their personal lives and the transmission of these pressures onto their families.

In a study conducted by APPA which provided an overview of current services and resources on leader wellbeing in the primary school sector, the following recommendations were identified for action:

- **Awareness**
  - Build proactive wellbeing strategies into all aspects of leadership development.
- **Proactive organisational strategies**
  - Provide access to high-level, personally challenging professional learning programs for principals at all stages of their leadership career; leadership aspirants, induction, experienced principals in new settings; and principals in ongoing appointments.
  - Provide access to sabbatical leave following each principal contract period.
  - Provide access to work shadowing and 'job swap' programs.
  - Ensure that employer-based pastoral care is performed by non-line managers.
  - Professional associations to continue to take an active role in the provision of pastoral support.
- **Reactive organisation strategies**
  - Provide paid access to skilled, qualified counselling support that is absolutely confidential.
  - Provide paid access to principal-specific advice service.
  - Provide access to skilled, trained mentors and / or coaches. The pool of approved mentors and coaches should include current principals, retired principals and educational consultants.
- **Workload**
  - Reduce the time that principals spend on administrative tasks by increasing access to, and the skill levels of, administrative personnel.
  - Increase leadership support time for Assistant Principals by reducing the teaching load.
- **Leadership Models**
  - Systemic leadership models to be broadened to include both personal and organisational health and wellbeing.
  - Provide access to a wider range of flexible work options, such as part-time and co-principal positions.

There are not enough resources to provide adequate levels of assistance to teachers who have children with disabilities

## Student behaviour in primary schools Problems of inclusivity

There has been a sharp increase in the numbers of children diagnosed with disabilities who are now in regular classrooms. This development is having a huge impact on the capacity of teachers to ensure all their students achieve the national literacy and numeracy standards.

APPA believes that there are three issues that must be addressed:

- First, there are not enough resources to provide adequate levels of assistance to teachers who have children with disabilities in their classroom. As a consequence, schools have to find the extra support from their regular funding in order to supplement the allocation for the child with a disability.
- Second, it takes too long to have children assessed and decisions made about eligibility for assistance. This means that often teachers must have a child with a severe disability in the classroom for up to a year before a diagnosis is made and assistance provided.
- Third, the criteria for determining whether a child with a disability is eligible for assistance are too restrictive. This means that many children with moderate levels of a disability are in regular classrooms without any additional assistance for the teachers or the school.

There is an assessment and funding system in place to provide schools with support for these children. APPA believes that the resources allocated by governments for this purpose are plainly insufficient, unfair to the children and their teachers. A substantial increase in the level of funding available for disbursement to schools with students with disabilities is urgently needed.

APPA urges governments to increase the recurrent grants of all primary schools so that principals can best decide how to support students with special needs (smaller class sizes, extra support staff.)

## **Extreme behaviour**

In a number of cases, children can have violent episodes, be aggressive and bullying, and display temper tantrums. The impact these children have on a school is enormous and they can fully occupy the time of staff members and prevent others from learning.

Schools with such children need immediate access to dedicated support so that the school can continue with its regular work and maintain an orderly environment. Currently that support is not available in most systems. APPA urges governments to set up a dedicated fund to provide support to schools with students who exhibit extreme behaviour.

**There is a need to set up a dedicated fund to provide support to schools with students who exhibit extreme behaviour.**

## **Problems that have socio-economic origins**

Increasing numbers of children are attending school who are inattentive, disruptive, under-motivated and disengaged. This is evident from the earliest years of primary schools. Disproportionate numbers of these children come from disadvantaged backgrounds where often there is a high level of dysfunction in the household.

Most of these children do not have a medical disability and so they are ineligible for disability funding.

Systems generally support schools with concentrations of such children through SES funding mechanisms. However, the amounts of additional funding that are made available to low SES schools are too small to have a practical impact.

As a result these schools struggle to achieve the standards expected of them. Staff are at risk of burn-out working under such constantly demanding circumstances.

APPA does not believe that there is a single strategy that can be used to transform the behaviour and academic performance of children in such schools. The maintenance of a school climate conducive to the achievement of high literacy and numeracy standards, requires a continuing effort from dedicated staff members who have the resources at their disposal to undertake the intensive, hard work. APPA urges governments to review their SES funding so that the allocations to disadvantaged schools enable their students to achieve at national standards in literacy and numeracy.

## **Funding mechanisms**

### **Discretionary use of funds**

APPA supports the adoption of funding mechanisms that maximise the discretionary use of funds at the school level. Principals are best placed to get 'value for money' from government grants.

Hence, except in exceptional circumstances, APPA is opposed to tied grants that restrict the use of funds to purposes that have been tightly specified in funding agreements.

**APPA supports the adoption of funding mechanisms that maximise the discretionary use of the funds at the school level.**

### **Competitive, submission-based funding**

APPA observes an increasing application by governments of limited pools of funding for which schools can compete by making written submissions. Primary schools are not set up like small businesses and generally the schools with the greatest educational needs have the least administrative capacity to produce high quality applications.

APPA believes that this form of funding should be restricted to non-essential activities and that the application and acquittal processes should be kept as simple as possible.

Competitive funding should not be used for core infrastructure projects. Need should be the pre-eminent funding criterion and education authorities should have a transparent method of establishing the need.

## **Funding formulae**

### **The importance of resources**

APPA is aware of commentary in which it is claimed that more resources will not address the challenges faced by schools. Such claims are typically made by commentators who have had little contact with schools, especially schools struggling under difficult circumstances..

This is a dangerous myth since it encourages the extension of the role of schools and the enhancement of the curriculum without properly assessing the resourcing implications of their actions. Instead, staff in schools are often urged to work harder and smarter, or to attend more professional development courses to improve their expertise.

Not all schools have the same need for additional government funding. Some schools have strong community support and are able to accumulate funds from private sources. They are likely to have intakes of students who are mainly motivated and engaged with schoolwork. The students themselves constitute a resource by helping each other and by setting productive school norms. Other schools are situated in communities with very limited community support and with large numbers of enrolled students who have special needs.

## Resource standards

Governments have used as their basic resource standard the average recurrent cost of educating a child in a government school, known as the AGSRC. It is calculated by dividing government allocations to government schools by the number of students attending those schools. This figure is used by governments in various funding formulae.

The AGSRC statistic masks the huge variation in the level of funding received by individual schools. APPA's research has shown that current funding formulae do not adequately target school need; some schools enrolling students in low socio-economic communities receive less per student than schools serving high socio-economic communities.

Yet, all schools are expected to reach the same high standards set by government authorities. Research has shown that schools with large numbers of students who are at risk of failing to perform satisfactorily at school for socio-economic reasons require approximately twice the per student level of funding for each student attending the school – in other words twice the AGSRC.

APPA therefore urges that governments as a matter of priority increase the level of funding to low SES schools beginning with those in the lowest decile of the SES index used by system authorities. Such schools from 2009 should receive a total government income of twice the AGSRC. Schools with a SES index that falls in deciles 6-9 should also have their funding appropriately scaled above the AGSRC.

**APPA therefore urges that governments as a matter of priority increase the level of funding to low SES schools**

## Funding Anomaly for Government Primary Schools

Commonwealth general recurrent grants for government and non-government schools are calculated as proportions of the primary and secondary AGSRC, which as indicated above is a mechanism that strongly favours secondary schooling.

The bias is more pronounced for government primary schools. For reasons that are not justified, the unfair ratio of primary to secondary per student funding was compounded by stipulating that there would be different per student rates. Primary schools received 8.9 per cent of the primary AGSRC whereas secondary schools would be allocated 10 per cent of the secondary AGSRC. In 2007, this formula yielded a rate of \$643 per primary student and \$932 per secondary student. This ratio of 0.69 is lower than the comparable to the primary / secondary ratio of 1980 and well below the current ratio of 0.77 that is based on total government funding.

The Rudd Government should act quickly to eliminate this penalty on primary schools and act on the findings of distinguished economists, namely that it is a more efficient use of resources to tackle educational problems earlier rather than later during a child's schooling.

## Delivering Better Educational Outcomes in Australian Primary Schools

In March 2008, APPA presented to the Minister a submission for primary education regarding Quadrennial Funding for 2009 – 2012.

The Australian Government is urged to adopt the following courses of action in regard to primary school funding:

1. Wherever possible, funding streams should be consolidated into a global general recurrent grant.

2. Recurrent funding for primary schools in all sectors should be indexed to a common SES measure.
3. The minimum recurrent grants to government school systems for primary education should be increased from 8.9 per cent to 10 per cent of the AGSRC to take effect in 2009.
4. The weightings for the SES index should be adjusted so that government and non-government schools in the lowest quintile of the SES distribution receive a per student recurrent income twice the amount of that allocated to schools at the median.
5. The recurrent block grant for government primary schools should be composed of individual school grants, that are indexed according to the SES model used to calculate non-government recurrent school grants.
6. The individual amounts for each government school recurrent grant should be published using the same protocols as those currently in place for reporting non-government recurrent school grants.
7. The Australian Government's primary general recurrent grant should be progressively increased so as to achieve parity with the secondary AGSRC by 2012.
8. All funding for infrastructure and capital works should be allocated on the basis of need so that the schools with the most inadequate facilities are able to reach a national standard.
9. Targeted programs should more adequately reflect the importance of primary education.
10. The level of support for schools enrolling students with disabilities should be increased.
11. Targeted programs should address the problem of extreme student behaviour.
12. A new targeted program should provide for schools to develop their capacity to work collaboratively with other agencies and community groups in order to alleviate educational disadvantages.

To view the full report *Delivering Better Educational Outcomes in Australian Primary Schools* click on the following link [Delivering Better Educational Outcomes in Australian Primary Schools](#)

## Transparency

Currently it is impossible for members of the profession and the public to ascertain the total level of government funding received by a school relative to other schools. As a consequence it is not possible to engage in a factual debate about the equity, efficiency or effectiveness of primary school funding.

APPA's research has shown that because of the complex funding mechanisms used governments and the multiple sources of school income the intentions of governments are not always realised in practice.

It is time for governments to agree in principle that school funding will be reviewed in order to simplify the process and to make transparent the amounts of funding received by individual schools.