

Schools funding

hotly debated

Education funding was the focus of heated parliamentary debate during the Spring sittings when the States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Bill 2000 was considered by the House of Representatives. The bill, which deals with Commonwealth funding for primary and secondary education for the 2001 to 2004 quadrennium, implements a number of decisions made in the 1999-2000 Budget.

Significant measures in the legislation are:

- introduction of the new socioeconomic status (SES)-based funding arrangements for non-government schools;
- additional funding and consequent changes to funding arrangements under the renamed School Transitional Emergency Assistance program;
- introduction of a revised structure for Commonwealth programs for targeted assistance for schools; and
- improved accountability arrangements for Commonwealth schools programs.

Much of the debate in the House focused on the degree of funding that would go to the richest 62 schools in Australia. The Opposition insisted on being given figures showing how much extra funding will be going to non-government schools.

"It is an insult to this Parliament to expect us to debate a \$22 billion school funding bill without first knowing what the consequences will be for schools across the country," said Shadow Education Minister, Michael Lee. "We are entitled to ask who are the winners under this new funding system."



Shadow Education Minister, Michael Lee (left) and the Minister for Education, David Kemp (right) debated Commonwealth education funding.

Mr Lee also asked why the Government was refusing to release the figures the Opposition had requested if the new funding system was as simple and transparent as the Government claimed.

"We make the point that only the Minister for Education would argue that a fair education system would allocate the biggest increases to the wealthiest schools," added Mr Lee.

In response, the Minister for Education, David Kemp, argued that the bill "provides the mechanisms for distributing funding according to need and that schools serving the neediest communities will receive the greatest financial support under this legislation".

The bill passed the House of Representatives on 6 September 2000 and is likely to face further vigorous debate in the Senate.

Changes on the way for overseas students

The Federal Government is hoping for a more effective regulatory framework for the education and training export industry after Education Minister, David Kemp, introduced the following five bills into the House on 30 August 2000:

- Education Services for Overseas Students Bill 2000;
- Education Services for Overseas Students (Consequential and Transitional) Bill 2000;
- Education Services for Overseas Students (Assurance Fund Contributions) Bill 2000;
- Education Services for Overseas Students (Registration Charges) Amendment Bill 2000; and
- Migration Legislation Amendment (Overseas Students) Bill 2000.

Australia's education industry earns \$3.7 billion a year in export dollars. This year over 180,000 international students are enrolled with Australian institutions. However, the industry faces a number of problems, including uncertain financial protection for students' pre-paid course fees; the emergence of a small minority of unscrupulous providers; nationally inconsistent

quality assurance; and less than full confidence in the integrity of the student visa program.

The new package of laws is aimed at addressing those problems by establishing a national code for the registration and conduct of providers and enabling the Commonwealth to investigate and impose sanctions on providers who breach the Act or the national code. The migration amendments are aimed at improving monitoring of and compliance in the overseas student industry and streamlining the process for student visa cancellation.

The legislation is expected to be debated in the House of Representatives before the end of this year.

For details of legislation

- The progress of bills can be checked from the Daily Bills List on the Internet at: www.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/billsnet/blist.pdf
- The text of bills and the explanatory memoranda which explain them are available on the Internet at: www.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/billsnet/bills.htm
- The debates on the legislation can be found on the Internet at: www.aph.gov.au/hansard