

Australian families struggle with escalating school costs

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Join the online meeting of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), “Build rank-and-file committees, oppose the accelerating assault on public education!” this Sunday March 23, 11 a.m. AEDT. The speakers will include a US educator speaking about the wholesale attack on public education under the fascist Trump administration. Click here to register.

Australian working-class families are finding it increasingly difficult to send their children to school due to the spiralling costs of education.

Overall, families in 2025 are expected to spend \$13.6 billion on schooling costs, including uniforms, tuition, technology and excursions—up from \$12.9 billion last year.

The Futurity Investment Group recently issued a “Cost of Education in Australia” report that estimated the average cost of putting a child through 13 years of school at \$123,000. This represents a 33 percent increase from 2024, when the average cost was \$92,000.

Futurity Group executive manager Sarah McCadie told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that in an online survey of 2,385 families: “One in four parents told us they’re sacrificing family holidays, nearly 30 percent said they’re going without buying something for themselves, and 22 percent said they’re working more hours than they’d like to.”

Australia has one of the most privatised education systems in the world. A 2024 OECD report revealed that the country has the highest level of expenditure on private educational facilities in the OECD, totalling 0.7 percent of gross domestic product, more than double the OECD average of 0.3 percent.

Approximately 40 percent of all students attend private secondary schools. Many private schools have imposed sharp tuition fee hikes in recent years.

The Futurity Group report estimated that the average cost of sending a student to a Catholic school for 13 years is \$194,000. Attending an independent school (non-Catholic private) for 13 years would cost an average of \$350,000 in 2025, compared to \$317,000 in 2024. Approximately 56

percent of these costs would comprise school fees, and 44 percent would represent ancillary costs.

Costs are even higher at elite private schools, which are inaccessible to the vast majority of the population. Several elite schools now charge more than \$50,000 in annual tuition fees.

While public schools in Australia are supposed to be “free,” parents are regularly “invited” to make voluntary contributions. In 2023, the average annual “voluntary contribution” made by parents to government schools in Victoria was \$570 per student.

Families often receive an official letter from the school at the start of the year presented on official school stationary resembling an itemised bill, according to Professor Emma Rowe in a recent article in the *Conversation*. Rowe recounted that in 2019, children at a government primary school in Sydney received free popcorn if their parents had paid the “voluntary” fees.

While schools cannot legally enforce the payment of these “voluntary contributions,” children can be denied participation in certain activities if their parents do not pay.

Parents from working-class families feel pressured to make these voluntary payments, fearing that otherwise their children will miss out on educational opportunities or suffer social stigmatism.

Damien Ellwood, president of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, told the ABC: “The feedback was that families didn’t feel like it was a voluntary contribution... families felt that if the schools did not receive that money, the children wouldn’t get access to the basic education they needed.”

In parallel research conducted by Compare Club, immediate back-to-school costs for each child returning to a public school was estimated on average to be \$1,555. This included: \$496 for technology and devices, \$229 for uniform, and \$255 for mandatory excursions. The annual cost of transport to and from school (often between \$500 and \$600), as well as the exorbitant cost of textbooks, must also be factored in.

Parents are resorting to desperate measures to try to ensure that their children are adequately equipped for school. These include credit card debt and other forms of personal debt, or assistance from grandparents. Opportunistic lenders are springing up, offering “back-to-school loans.”

Record numbers of families are turning to charities.

One such charity, the Smith Family, told the Melbourne *Herald Sun* that the number of students receiving assistance from its Learning for Life program in 2024 was 14,900—double the number recorded eight years ago in 2016.

In another survey of 359 parents by Finder, nearly a third reported financial difficulties. Two percent of the participating families said their children would be forced to go without basic supplies this year at school. Another 4 percent said their children would have to make do with last year’s supplies, 8 percent said they would have to purchase secondhand items or rely on hand-me-downs, and 15 percent said they would be forced to go into debt.

Cindy Eldridge, a single parent receiving support from the Smith Family, told the *Herald Sun*: “It brings you down. Sometimes I’ve gotta pick between am I getting my son’s school uniform this week or am I going to eat properly this week?”

“It’s hard trying to differ between the kids’ needs. One day I actually had to go to food banks just so the kids could have what they needed for school... I shouldn’t have to decide on whether my kids can eat lunch at the park or have everything they need for school.”

Working-class households should not have to rely on charity to access public education. Public education, like public healthcare and decent housing, is a fundamental social right, fought for by generations of workers and their families.

It is an indictment of the federal Labor government and all state governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, that working-class families are being forced to the financial brink just to try to ensure that their children receive an adequately resourced public education.

Since scraping into office in May 2022, promising a “better future,” the Labor government has pursued a pro-corporate agenda of cuts to both real wages and social spending. At the same time, the Labor government backed repeated interest rate hikes by the Reserve Bank of Australia, driving up home mortgage repayments and rents.

The new funding model for schools recently implemented by the Albanese government, the so-called Better and Fairer Schools Act, will entrench the systemic underfunding of public schools. It allows for only a nominal increase of \$16 billion in federal government spending for public education over the next 10 years. This is a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed to address the years of neglect and under-

resourcing that have devastated the public education system.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has responded to the back-to-school financial crisis by reporting that teachers are feeling compelled to pitch in from their own wages to supply basic equipment or financially assist their students who come from low-income families.

Yet the same AEU bureaucracy has played the most critical role in imposing regressive industrial agreements on teachers’ wages and conditions, while refusing to mount any struggle against the diversion of funding by governments away from public education and into the private sector.

To defeat the betrayals of the Labor and union apparatuses, new organisations must be built, completely independent of the union bureaucrats. School teachers and education support staff need to form rank-and-file committees to unite with supportive parents and students to discuss what needs to be done and develop a program of action.

Most fundamentally, what is needed is the fight for a socialist program to place the vast wealth of society held by the banks and major corporations under the democratic control and ownership of the working class, to make high-quality education in well-resourced public schools available for all children.

The only organisation fighting for this perspective is the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network. We encourage teachers and parents to contact us and discuss the way forward.

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Contact the CFPE:

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