

Reality check: Labor's education policy

Benjamin Preiss and Jewel Topsfield
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Reality Check

10 regional tech schools: \$125 million

It is ironic that more than two decades after technical colleges were phased out under then education minister Joan Kirner, Opposition leader Daniel Andrews is trumpeting on Twitter: "Labor will bring back Tech Schools across Victoria". Dr Glenn Savage, a researcher and lecturer in education policy, believes Labor is trying to tap into some kind of working class nostalgia for the pre-1980s, with his plan to open tech schools focusing on local industries. "For some people tech schools might have positive connotations but for educationalists they signify a legacy of social and educational exclusion," he says. Labor's message is confusing. "Labor to bring back tech schools" say the headlines. But read the fine print and tech school students will remain at their local secondary school and just spend a "set period of time" at the so-called tech schools. It is unclear how the tech schools will differ from the former federal government's trade training centres in schools program, which has funded 511 projects. And given the uncertainty around the future of local industries - just look at Geelong where one of the tech schools will be based - there are questions around the wisdom of training students to work for companies that could move offshore within 10 years.

Breakfast for students at 500 disadvantaged schools: \$13.5 million

Labor is yet to provide specific details about how it will ensure all 25,000 students get fed. Many schools currently do a pretty good job of working with charities and community groups to provide a decent breakfast, which is also an incentive for children to arrive at school on time. It remains to be seen whether Labor plans to replicate this model or introduce another system altogether.

Northern Bay College principal Fred Clarke says the Australian Red Cross and the local Lion's club help his school feed students at its five campuses. And the volunteer labour helps create a community feeling, which Mr Clarke hopes would continue if a Labor government is elected.

The Smith Family, a charity that helps families with school-related costs, says Labor deserves credit for recognising the challenges facing vulnerable families. But the group's Victorian general manager Anton Leschen says financial support should be accompanied by efforts to close the education gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. "We're never going to close that gap funding bricks and mortar, breakfast clubs and uniforms alone - however important they are," he says.

Free eye tests and glasses for students at 250 disadvantaged schools: \$500,000

Eye checks and glasses could well be a popular policy but providing ongoing support is another matter altogether.

The Australian College of Optometry has worked with three disadvantaged primary schools in recent years and found 30 per cent of children had some sort of vision problem. The college's chief executive Maureen O'Keefe says sometimes learning difficulties can be caused by vision problems. But she says distributing free glasses is insufficient. "Just handing out free glasses may seem a panacea but it's not. It's about providing ongoing care," she said.

Ms O'Keefe says eye conditions can be symptoms of a range of problems. "People from disadvantaged communities often have very complex health needs."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/victoria-state-election-2014/reality-check-labors-education-policy-20141027-11chze.html>