15 October 2008

The Hon Verity Firth, BA, LLB, MP
Minister for Education & Training
Level 31, Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Farrer Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Firth

Re: Removal of Priority Action Schools from the Program

The NSW Teachers Federation is greatly concerned that you have accepted the advice of Department officers in the removal of 27 Priority Action Schools (PAS) from this highly successful equity program.

The Federation regards this action as symptomatic of a Department of Education and Training bureaucracy with little or no direct experience with and understanding of the complexities and challenges of our most disadvantaged public school communities.

The equity programs area of the Department for many years has been characterised by cooperation and collaborative endeavour from the key public education stakeholder groups. It now appears a deliberate decision has been made by senior Department officers to by-pass the role of the Director-General’s Advisory Group on equity programs and cast aside established philosophy and practice in the Priority Action Schools program.

In determining the new list of Priority Action Schools, the Department imposed a fundamental change in the criteria and methodology by excluding factors previously considered. In addition to socio-economic status, previous PAS criteria included student behaviour and attendance data, student turnover and retention data, student learning outcomes, and the proportion of early career teachers.

The Federation believes the resultant PAS list excludes schools that would have been included under previously agreed criteria. Teachers in these schools are dismayed that the needs of their students have been ignored and are now campaigning to retain their school’s place on the PAS program.

The Department states that the factor which has limited the PAS program to 74 schools is the fixed quantum of funding available, rather than the needs of school communities. Given that PAS funding has been frozen at $16 million per annum since first announced in 2002, the Federation calls on the NSW Labor Government as a minimum to immediately increase this funding by the ABS Education CPI index since 2002.
The Federation believes the success of this program warrants an expansion of funding beyond this CPI adjusted amount, to provide additional support for an even greater number of schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

This request is clearly appropriate at a time when proportionate funding for public schools from state and federal governments has decreased, and the proportion of public school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds has increased.

The Federation requests a meeting with you as soon as possible to discuss this matter. Gary Zadkovich, Senior Vice President, is the Federation's contact person.

Yours sincerely

John Irving
General Secretary