

Submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding

Summary

The Gonski review reported to government over two years ago. The research which informed its findings and recommendations goes back further. Some people have seen this time lag as an opportunity to question the currency and accuracy of the review. By using very recent data this submission shows that the equity issues that so concerned the Gonski panel aren't going away, and in some cases have worsened.

This submission:

- states the current context, particularly as it relates to public education
- highlights findings of the Gonski review relevant to the Committee's inquiry, especially (a)(iv), (b) and (e)
- explains why implementing the Gonski recommendations should be a priority
- introduces new findings since the Gonski panel reported to government, findings which point to a growing gap between schools
- explains reasons for what is an increasing equity problem
- poses some consequences of not taking action to resolve these problems

Introduction

No child is ever disadvantaged through any of their own doing. They are only disadvantaged because they have been born to parents who have been less successful at negotiating their way in the world than some other children's parents. The purpose of an excellent, appropriately funded public education system is to help ameliorate the inevitable inequalities that result from the lottery of birth. No better mechanism for creating a well-educated general population has so far been discovered.

A well-educated general population is one of the major markers between a first world and a third world country. A highly educated elite is easy to create; any tin pot dictatorship can manage that. The challenge is to educate everyone. That is hard and demanding but it is vitally important.

In terms of prosperity and stability, strong, well-funded and supported public education systems are indispensable. In sheer economic terms, the fact that other nations are more equitably educating all their available talent will inevitably rebound on our international competitiveness in the future.

We are at a crossroads. We can ignore the warnings and the research and decide to become the first democracy in history to residualise our public education system and blindly hope for the best. Or we can grasp the nettle, embrace the principles and the full cost of Gonski and begin to improve educational outcomes for all our kids.

We believe it is the latter that will save us paying a much higher price –both in dollars and lost human potential – in the future.

What Gonski heard and found

The Gonski panel received a large number of submissions, especially responding to the equity needs of Australian students and schools. It found that all Australian students should be allowed to achieve their very best regardless of their background or circumstances – hence the need for a funding model that enables resources to be directed to where they are needed most.

The review identified the key dimensions of disadvantage that are having a significant impact on educational performance in Australia: socioeconomic status, Indigeneity, English language proficiency, disability and school remoteness. Students who experience multiple factors are at a higher risk of poor performance.

It significantly showed that increased concentration of disadvantaged students in certain schools is having a significant impact on educational outcomes, particularly, but not only, in the government sector. Concentrations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous students have the most significant impact.¹

Advantage, as well as disadvantage, can compound in this way. In the words of PISA, 2009:

Regardless of their own socio-economic background, students attending schools with a socio-economically advantaged intake tend to perform better than those attending schools with more disadvantaged peers.²

The framework of schools in Australia is characterised by a significant separation of advantaged and disadvantaged students into different schools and sectors. This increasing separation is certainly impacting on student opportunities and achievement, something confirmed by research findings and in submissions provided to the Gonski panel by the Department of Education and Training (DET) in New South Wales. The DET explored the impact of student and school SES on achievement and found:

“... there is a considerable ‘neighbourhood effect’ with regard to SES which impacts on student performance in government schools in NSW. That is, the SES of the other students in a school impacts on the performance of any other student, adding to the already significant impact of the student’s own SES on their performance.³

This effect has also been identified in Victoria.⁴ As Professor Richard Teese explains, it derives from the qualities of students themselves as intellectual and cultural resources for schools and how this impacts on school organisation, curriculum and resources.

The collective impact of students on the SES of a school, and subsequent levels of achievement, has now been factored into the calculation of the ICSEA index for the 2014 My School website. The ICSEA index is critical to understanding levels of student achievement and, according to ACARA, enables schools to be compared. It now “explicitly accounts for the effect of any clustering of student educational advantage in a school.”⁵

The equity implications of school SES are considerable. Not only are individual students advantaged or disadvantaged by their own background but the impact of this can be reduced or magnified in the schools they attend.

The distribution of students between schools is substantially determined by the way in which school choice is exercised in Australia, favouring those with resources for choice – while reducing opportunities for disadvantaged students who are increasingly sitting in classrooms alongside their own peers.

How the Gonski recommendations would help

The equity findings of the Gonski review were unequivocal: New funding arrangements for schooling should aim to ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. All students should have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances. The review drew attention to the groups which are disadvantaged, the interactions between factors of disadvantage and the problems created by concentrated disadvantage.

As one Gonski panellist explains:

The essential thrust of Gonski is to target strategically our investment in schooling, from both commonwealth and state sources, in order to reduce the impact of aggregated social disadvantage on educational outcomes.⁶

The proposal to increasingly distribute funding according to need would potentially have two impacts on lower SES schools. Firstly it would properly resource those schools which disproportionately serve the most needy students. The second impact would be on those families who might lack confidence in apparently underachieving schools. If they can exercise choice they go elsewhere. If properly targeted, increased funding of those schools would make a difference to the profile and image of the school as well as to student achievement. They would once again become attractive to those families who currently send their children, along with the social and cultural capital of the family, elsewhere.

It is now well known that the current ‘Gonski’ funding of schools falls short of the levels recommended, may not extend beyond four years – with the states no longer obliged to meet their share of increases.

Without the additional resource support for low SES schools, Australia will face what David Gillespie describes as a “self-fulfilling, rolling disaster” in which everyone is forced to look out for themselves, often at the expense of everyone else. We will just continue “streaming our entire education system... creating a multi-tiered system that not only entrenches disadvantage at the bottom but weakens the entire system.”⁷

In the light of this it might seem superfluous to restate the need for change and produce new evidence which points to this disaster. But the need to restate the case and update the evidence arises because the Gonski recommendations are already being questioned by vested interests and avoided by successive governments.

They want the problem to go away. There are no signs that it will.

What new data shows

The social and academic gaps between schools have continued to widen over the very same time that we have contemplated, submitted to and discussed the findings of the Gonski review.

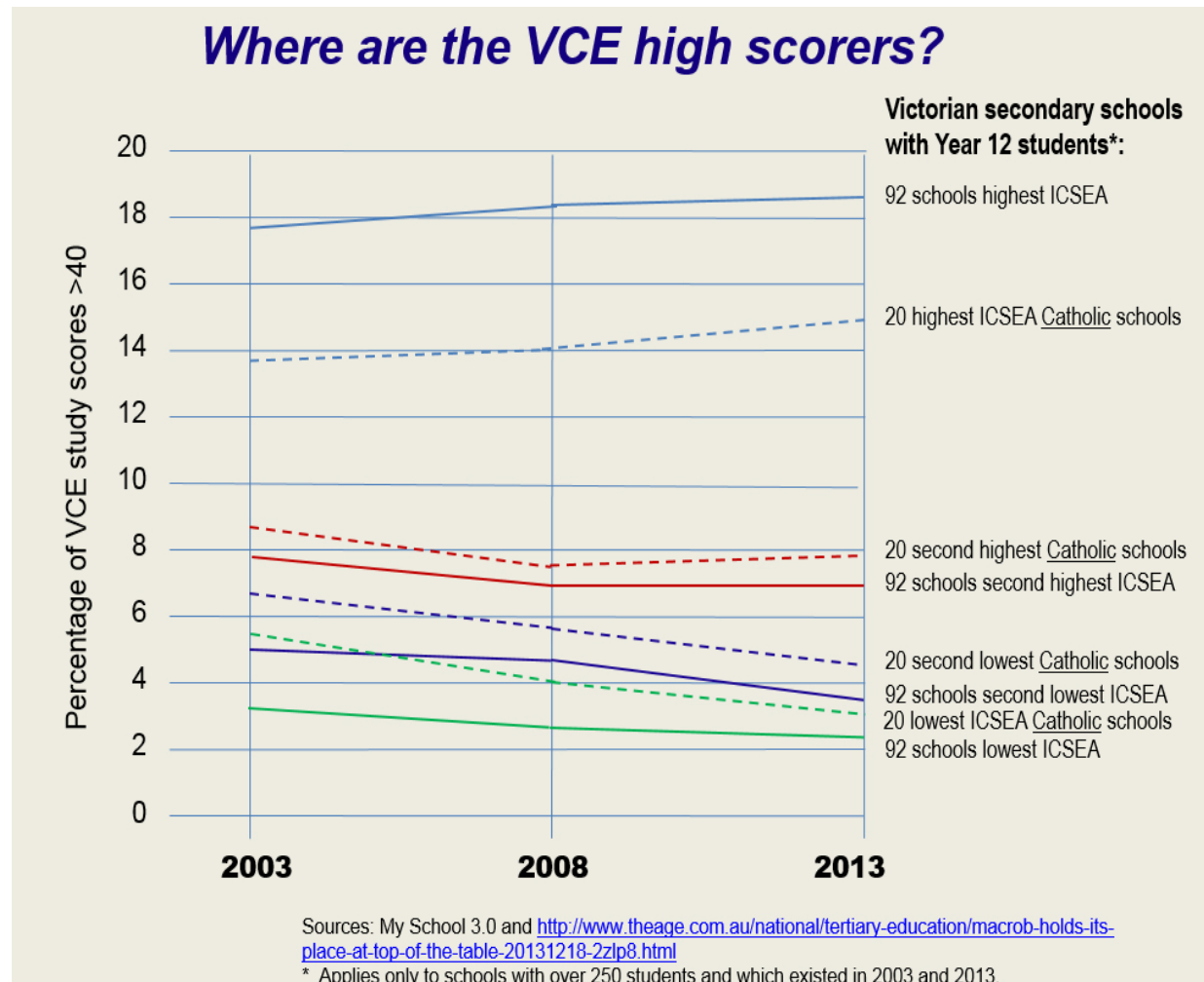
One way to show this is to chart shifting patterns of student achievement in different schools. Is it the case that higher SES schools are displaying an even higher achievement profile? Is the social and academic residualisation of lower SES schools, often the subject of commentary and hand-wringing, continuing? Is the SES of the student and the school continuing to have an impact – and is this impact increasing to the detriment of students in lower SES schools?

The data to answer these questions isn’t easy to find. NAPLAN data has only been published for a few years. Consistent long-term information about student achievement in their final year is not readily available. The best information seems to come from Victoria, where for some years *The Age* has published comprehensive Victorian Certificate of Education, or VCE, results. The data spanning 2003–13 shows the school-by-school distribution of high-end academic results, represented by VCE study scores over forty.

How have Victorian secondary schools, grouped according to My School’s ICSEA measure and tracked using VCE data, fared since 2003? Across the state, 368 larger secondary schools ran VCE classes in both 2003 and 2013, a span of eleven years. (Additional schools opened and a handful closed over this time.) To reduce the impact of year-by-year fluctuations on this analysis schools (fewer than 250 students) are not included.

For this analysis the schools are divided into four groups, based on their 2012 ICSEA values. The reasonably safe assumption is that the socioeconomic profile of each school’s enrolment won’t have changed significantly over the previous eight years.

As the chart below shows, only the highest ICSEA schools, the ones with the most advantaged students, increased their percentage of high scores – by just under two per cent – over the eleven years 2003 to 2013. In the other three groups of schools, the percentage of high scores fell between those years, with the larger falls experienced in the lower ICSEA schools. The percentage of high VCE scores in the lowest ICSEA schools, already low in 2003, fell by around 30 per cent over this period.



When measured year-by-year some of these changes might seem small, but they are certainly noticeable over eleven years. There is not only a strong association between socioeconomic status and school achievement – nothing new in that – but it's also the case that the higher achievers are increasingly found in the higher socioeconomic status schools. It seems the students have moved and taken their scores with them. The hollowing out effect on lower ICSEA schools is very obvious over time.

There are some variations if the changes are considered in two stages, 2003–08 and 2009–13. The second-lowest ICSEA group of schools lost some ground in the first period but the decline rapidly increased in the second. These schools may have initially held ground by picking up achievers from lower socioeconomic status schools, but such gains have apparently been fewer in recent years.

The trend since 2008 is significant because this is the period in which the Gonski review was promised, set up, completed its work and had its recommendations belatedly considered by government. In this same period the gap between the two lowest and the two highest ICSEA groups of Victorian schools noticeably widened. The equity problems created by such gaps, problems which occupied the attention of the Gonski panel, would have worsened in this time.

Why is this happening?

How can we explain the widening gaps between high and low SES schools and the significant loss of high scores in schools with more disadvantaged students in just eight years? The explanations are important; a carefully considered explanation can inform a sound policy response. Flawed explanations simply fuel useless or distracting responses.

School sector

Some point to who owns and manages the school as the explanation for changing levels of student achievement – they commonly attribute perceived school underperformance to government schools alone. But as the graph indicates, lower SES Catholic schools have also fallen behind in the VCE stakes. The sample is smaller (eighty schools divided into four ICSEA groups) but these schools reflect the general trend: the gap between high and low SES Catholic schools clearly widened.

Independent schools are not shown on the chart. The number of lower ICSEA independent schools in Victoria is far too small to allow meaningful conclusions, beyond the fact that advantaged students have gravitated to these schools wherever they are located.

On average, government schools lost more ground than did other sectors, but there are many more government schools in the lower ICSEA ranges. With some exceptions, they are the only schools obliged to enrol all students, regardless of family background and level of prior achievement. A casual glance at the My School website shows that, even in poor communities, the more advantaged students are rarely numerous in government schools.

The fact that there seem to be parallel trends amongst Catholic schools serves to support the sector-blind approach taken to funding solutions by the Gonski panel. What it also strongly suggests is that policies to make schools more autonomous, along the lines of Catholic and Independent schools, certainly won't solve this problem. Indeed, the fact that government schools in Victoria have been relatively autonomous for some time might help explain why the gaps between high and low SES schools are growing.

School quality

For decades the easiest explanations point to the quality of the school as being the make or break factor: credit or blame is apportioned to teachers and principals, sometimes followed by a mix of carrot and stick policies to lift performance. This response explains a myriad of policies which come - and often go - over a period of time: performance pay, reward funding, a centralised curriculum with more mandates, testing regimes, comparing schools and shaming those labelled as poorly performing.

School quality is always important and can be affected by shifting enrolments. These might impact – positively or negatively - on school culture, organisation, curriculum and resources. Schools always need to focus on improvement – many do show that better teachers, pedagogy and leadership improve student outcomes. There are also disadvantaged schools where students have achieved, seemingly against the odds and highly advantaged schools which don't seem to have lifted their achievement much at all.

But such exceptions invite closer scrutiny than they often get. Between 2003 and 2013 a significant number of rural schools in Victoria showed continuing healthy VCE scores, but these schools were mainly located some distance from competing schools. They may be good schools, but they also had the rare advantage that their high-achieving students couldn't go elsewhere. Other schools, including some government schools, have achieved apparent success through selective enrolment practices.

The fact remains that schools serving more disadvantaged students have not been able to sustain or increase previous levels of high VCE study scores. Clearly this is not just about school and teacher quality, unless – as is hardly likely – all the teachers and leaders of those schools have somehow collectively dropped the ball and become less successful.

Student movement

The differences between the schools is far more likely to be created by shifting enrolments. Enrolment trends show that more advantaged students tend to shift out of schools dealing with higher levels of disadvantage. The shift to non-government schools is well known, and illustrated in research completed by Barbara Preston⁸ – but also evident is the shift of enrolments from lower to higher SES government schools.⁹ My School shows that high-disadvantage schools with Year 12 students in Victoria are twenty per cent smaller than high-advantage schools. Similar trends are evident in New South Wales over a longer period of time. For years we have known that student movement has residualised low SES schools, increasing their density of disadvantaged students¹⁰ - it is hardly surprising that test scores such as NAPLAN, VCE or HSC are continuing to reveal the impact of this movement.

Distracting solutions – or decisive action?

All the indications at the moment are that the Abbott Government is backing away from implementing Labor's already weak interpretation of Gonski. Events and initiatives around school education since the election suggest that an industry of distractions is being rolled out to mask the government's staged withdrawal from taking action on school equity.

In doing this the Abbott government is hardly a pioneer; the Rudd, Gillard and Abbott Governments have worked equally hard to create distracting agendas. Labor did (eventually) initiate the Gonski review, but (also eventually) reshaped its recommendations and added a number of 'feel good' initiatives.

The current school autonomy initiatives and reviews of curriculum and teacher training, while flagged before the election, are just more of the same.

Submissions to the current Senate Inquiry will suggest a number of scenarios and future options. Some will question the equity concerns recognised by the Gonski review and the relevance and necessity of its recommendations. Others will support what the Gonski panel sought to achieve - or support the various watered-down approaches of both the Gillard and Abbott Governments.

This submission argues that the aggregated social disadvantage being created by our framework of schools has not only continued unabated but may have worsened. The best alternative is to implement the Gonski recommendations in full. In doing so we can improve opportunities for our poorest students and families by boosting their schools – and national achievement levels.

We can do this by investing in all our schools in a way which has been supported, in an unprecedented manner, by schools, educators and most education peak bodies. The Gonski recommendations achieved a consensus in a policy area characterised by ongoing conflict amongst schools, sectors and even families.

All that is placed at risk if little is done. The Gonski review set out to achieve greater equity by supporting all our schools. To achieve greater equity without the required investment would mean substantial redistribution of funding between schools, something which would reignite the battles of the past. Few want to go there, least of all the families and children most at risk if we don't seize the opportunity created by the Gonski review.

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¹ <http://foi.deewr.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf> Page

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² http://www.oecd.org/document/24/0,3343,en_2649_35845621_46609752_1_1_1_1,00.html

³ https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/news-at-det/announcements/discussion-paper_australian-school-funding-review.pdf

⁴ <http://resources.news.com.au/files/2012/01/31/1226258/621517-aus-news-file-public-schools-in-australia-report.pdf>

⁵ http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/About_ICSEA_2014.pdf

⁶ <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/christopher-pynes-review-is-just-a-diversion-from-gonski-reforms-20140116-30xs0.html>

⁷ http://www.panmacmillan.com.au/display_title.asp?ISBN=9781742612195&Author=Gillespie,%20David

⁸ Barbara Preston, *The social make-up of schools: Family income, Indigenous status, family type, religion and broadband access of students in government, Catholic and other nongovernment schools*, Barbara Preston Research, April 2013 <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/2013/BPrestonApril13.pdf>

⁹ Daniel Edwards, 'The hidden trend in school enrolment', paper presented at the TASA & SAANZ Joint Conference 2007, Auckland, 4-7 December 2007, <http://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers07/papers/201.pdf>

10 Stephen Lamb, 'School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia – A case of Residualising the Poor' in Richard Teese, Stephen Lamn and Marie Duru-Bellat, *International Studies in Educational Inequality, Theory and Policy*, vol. 3, Dordrecht, Springer, ²⁰⁰⁷, pp. 1-38, <http://www.findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/individual/publication84719>