

SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON SCHOOL FUNDING

SUBMISSION

I thank the Select Committee for the invitation to make a submission to its Inquiry into school funding arrangements. As a member of the former Gonski Review Panel, I hope that the Select Committee Inquiry might assist the Commonwealth Government to appreciate that the solution to Australia's declining performance in education is at hand, that it is fully capable of implementation, and that it is better to make a start with the strategic funding of educational need than to maintain a failed alternative, especially in a time of financial constraint.

I make five points.

1. The Gonski Report is far more than a funding proposal. It is a fundamental re-imagining of Australian education. It proposes a shift from sector-based needs-neutral funding supplemented by post-hoc specific purpose programs, to sector-neutral needs-based funding with equity funding as part of the main stream. It is based on analysis of the needs of each individual school regardless of sector: the amount eventually spent in each sector will be the sum of the needs of the schools in that sector, not the result of a prior political settlement.

2. Gonski will create a meritocracy. It envisages all children receiving the support required to address the personal circumstances that might otherwise prevent them from receiving a high quality education. It foresees the level of attainment in education as being a function of ability and hard work, rather than a partial reflection of relative advantage or disadvantage.

3. Funding is not an end in itself. The final chapter of the Gonski Report describes the priorities for expenditure, all of which impact on the quality of education in the classroom. The priorities are consistent with the Commonwealth Government's 'Students First' program and its four pillars for school improvement, and with the recommendations from the Grattan Institute on turning schools around. But all of the most important of these reforms cost money, and if they are to achieve an impact they must be targeted strategically at areas of greatest need. Sector-neutral needs-based funding is the essential foundation for reform.

4. The previous Commonwealth Government failed to deliver Gonski because it failed to establish, through the Ministerial Council, the proposed Commonwealth/State national schools resourcing body (NSRB). The Gonski Review regarded this body as critical to implementation of its reforms. Advised by a panel representing the three education sectors, the NSRB was to be appointed by and responsible to the Ministerial Council rather than the Commonwealth Government. Within the framework of the Gonski model, and using the most recent and detailed state and territory data, its task was to reach agreement on the per capita level of funding, the specific loadings for the various categories of disadvantage, and the minimum private and minimum public contributions. On that basis, it was then to recommend to the Ministerial Council on the school

resourcing standard and its annual indexation factor. This was to be done within the framework of available funding from the Commonwealth and State Governments.

Instead, the Government chose to negotiate with each of the individual states and territories, bilaterally. This threw into question the consensus that had been built by the Gonski process on the basis of protracted and patient negotiation over nineteen months, with independent, Catholic and government school authorities at local, state and national levels; with student, parent and community organisations; with principal associations and teacher unions; and with business and industry, universities, special interest groups and the community generally. The bilateral negotiations were not a public and open process, as would have been achieved by the NSRB: they dragged on for 21 months until the September 2013 election, and ended in a scramble to secure an agreement to deals in which the fundamental Gonski principles became a secondary consideration. The result is thoroughly unsatisfactory: agreements with some states and not with others, and - amongst participating states - different agreements and indexation arrangements.

5. This problem can be resolved, without maintaining the flawed funding arrangements that have brought about the decline in Australian education. The solution is for the Commonwealth Government to do what its predecessor failed to do: implement the Gonski reforms properly and with shared ownership by the states and territories, by setting up the NSRB to operate within the framework of the total pool of available funding. Clearly, some temporary bridging arrangements are now necessary until the NSRB completes its work. But there is no solution to our deteriorating national performance other than a system of sector-neutral needs-based funding, to support the strategic delivery of classroom and school reforms about which there is little disagreement.

I am available to give evidence before the Select Committee should that be requested.

Ken Boston AO

17 March 2014