



# Australian Secondary Principals Association

## **Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment - Inquiry into the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017**

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The Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) is a professional body that represents the interests of principals, deputy principals and assistant principals from government secondary schools across Australia. ASPA works with the profession to shape a paradigm of leadership and learning to create a better, preferred future for all students in Australia's government secondary schools. We are committed to ensuring that high quality government secondary education is provided to young people no matter what their geographic, social or personal circumstances.

A thriving public school system is essential to nation building. Australia's public schools cater for the majority of students including those students who experience disadvantage. At a time when the myriad of socioeconomic and related health impacts on children are being discovered, and uncovered, Australian governments have an opportunity to lead and support their communities by setting and maintaining funding levels that facilitate a thriving public education system filled with excited children at the heart of families proud to send their children to public schools. The Gonski Review (2011) concluded that Australia was under investing in education and that the existing funding was not going to where it was most needed.

### **Equity of educational outcomes**

Universal access to education does not currently translate to a nationally consistent minimum standard of education provision for all students. The national goal that all students achieve their potential requires a powerful funding response that closes the gaps that exist in the universal, yet imbalanced education provision that prevails today. There is also evidence from state jurisdictions that the

proportion of students with higher and more complex learning and social needs is growing in public secondary schools compared to other sectors.

In a country where the government has a public, moral and human rights obligation to every child, any funding model must have equity as a foundation. The OECD has described our education provision as high quality but low equity.

This disparity in income distribution is acknowledged internationally (OECD reports) as an indicator of student performance on any measure – that is, that students from families with higher income are more likely to achieve at higher levels than students whose families' incomes are lower. Low income is not a guarantee of low levels of achievement, but the data comparisons are compelling and deeply concerning.

### **As a nation, for what purpose do we provide education for young Australians?**

It is the position of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association that federal, state and territory governments have an obligation to ensure that high quality public secondary education is provided to every young person no matter what their geographic, social or personal circumstances.

Education in our nation is a democratic and human right. In contemporary Australia, the provision of education also comes with an expectation of a minimum standard that ranks highly when international comparisons are made. Australia has slipped in this area in recent years. Over many years funding models for school education have not targeted school performance and need, but relied on a distribution of resources that did not best nurture the prospects of the young Australian community Australia's future.

The adolescent years are **high stakes years** as they are significant predictors for life success and wellbeing. It is during these years that exposure to adult and community problems have the potential to change the lives of young people. The opportunity to fund and support the needs of each adolescent is essential. The inclusive priorities of our public school system should be the centrepiece of a fair and productive school funding model. Further, there must be recognition that the core purpose of all schools is education and that funding and additional resources should be targeted to ensure that all schools can focus on the key work of teaching and learning.

Only government can ensure that there is a quality schooling option for everyone and only government, working with the profession (public school leaders), can require achievement benchmarks that reflect the quality of that schooling. Transparent, consistent and equitable funding of secondary public education will be the measure by which the young people of this country, their parents, teachers and principals will judge the commitment of governments to the education of all Australians.

Australia's national challenge is to redress disadvantage through investment in public education, where the greatest challenges demonstrably lie. The review of Funding for Schooling Final Report (2011) provided more than sufficient evidence to suggest that Australian education was not meeting the needs of the most vulnerable. The comprehensive Report outlines the findings by a highly credentialed independent review body.

### **A non-political approach to Education:**

It would be reasonable to assert that our educational leaders are best placed to make strategic decisions about the educational future of schools and systems but it appears unfortunately, that many decisions concerning education are made for political reasons and not necessarily sound educational reasons.

Something as important as education should not be dependent upon political funding or election cycles. There is general agreement from all sides of politics on the aims for education and goals for our students. There is much common ground but we get tangled up in political cycles and trying to solve the same problems in different ways.

It is time for agreement from all political parties around education to secure the future for our students. The proposed funding agreement is a positive step where we now have agreement around the model for education funding into the future. Education needs our political leaders and our education leaders to commit to a long term plan and a structure for regular review. The further challenge then is to commit to its sustainability by ensuring adequate funding. Finland made a conscious decision in the recent past to adopt a non political approach to education; making universal decisions about key factors that would not change with election outcomes. Australia **MUST** take this path if we are to achieve the outcomes desired by all Australians.

We must get commitment from all parties to national initiatives and transparent long term planning and funding which will enable the systematic achievement of common goals. The education of our children is too important to let politics get in the way!

Poor engagement and low school attainment result in poor educational and social outcomes including increased risk of mental illness. A lack of education results in diminished employment opportunities and the social issues and impacts of unemployment. School retention reduces youth unemployment, which improves outcomes and contributes to the national productivity.

Funding must be sufficient to ensure that all schools can offer the breadth and depth of curriculum to cater for the diverse needs of the students in their school. Since public education must cater for all students (including over 80% of the most disadvantaged students, disengaged students and students with disabilities), diversity of curriculum and therefore appropriate resourcing to support it is essential.

### **An agreed funding model:**

Agreement on the funding model is positive step. The remaining discussion on the quantum of the funding should not detract from an agreed model. Whilst we would like to see the full Gonski funding, the essential element is that the future funding is targeted to where it is needed the most.

### **Impact on students**

Since public education must cater for all students, diversity is essential and this places heavy demand on human, physical and financial resources. Funding must recognise the breadth and depth of diversity

and ensure that funding is sufficient to provide equal opportunity for all. The Gonski Report concluded that too many children were missing out on the education they needed due to insufficient resourcing and this must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Transition period:**

According to AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION AMENDMENT BILL 2017 EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM the Bill will – “ensure that all schools will transition to their relevant share of the SRS by 2027. A starting Commonwealth share percentage will be established for all Australian schools based on funding received by approved authorities for schools in 2017. This share will be adjusted each year from 2018 to 2027 until the relevant Commonwealth share is reached”.

Schools need the additional funding “sooner rather than later” and the transition timeframe of 10 years is too long for our most disadvantaged schools. A child starting Kindergarten in 2018 in an underfunded disadvantaged school deserves a greater level of resourcing for their education before they complete Primary school. The same can be said for many Year 6 students today as they prepare for six years of schooling in disadvantaged and underfunded secondary education settings.

We would like to see the timeframe halved for those schools that are significantly “underfunded” whilst maintaining the longer timeframe for “overfunded” schools that can demonstrate severe hardship from shortened timelines.

**Accountability measures:**

According to AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION AMENDMENT BILL 2017 EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM – “In addition to changes to the school funding model the Commonwealth is seeking to strengthen the linkage between Commonwealth financial assistance and the implementation of evidence based reforms to improve student outcomes. The Commonwealth will work with the states and territories to develop and deliver a new national schooling agreement that will drive reform and help to address declining student performance”.

The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, to be led by Mr David Gonski AC, has been commissioned to build the evidence base needed to ensure the additional funding provided by the Australian Government is spent on proven initiatives that make a difference to student outcomes. Whilst we welcome this review we do so with great trepidation. We have around 9500 schools in Australia; each one is different and presents different challenges for school leaders and their community. For this reason, we cannot have prescriptive initiatives to “implement” in a school. Initiatives must be tailored to meet the needs of the school and community and this highlights the essential nature of good leadership and school community governance.

Measures of “improved performance” must be more than improved NAPLAN, PISA and TIMSS results and ASPA advocates for research on how we can best measure “value add” in our schools.

Finally, every school is government funded therefore accountability must be the same for all schools.

### **State / Territory funding levels:**

According to AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION AMENDMENT BILL 2017 EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM the Bill will – “leave the setting of state and territory funding to the states and territories, however, to avoid cost shifting to the Commonwealth, the states and territories will be required to at least maintain their 2017 per student funding levels as a condition of Commonwealth funding”.

Whilst this will set ground rules for the initial funding period (2018), if federal share is indexed will states then be able to cost shift post 2018 if they only maintain 2017 levels? Something must be put in place to ensure that this does not happen.

### **Need for good leadership:**

The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools has been commissioned to build the evidence base needed to ensure the additional funding provided by the Australian Government is spent on proven initiatives that make a difference to student outcomes.

We must cultivate a proactive, intelligent and responsive educational eco system with new leadership in and of autonomous schools to drive improvement in educational outcomes for Australian students. Without school leaders with the necessary skills and capabilities to identify and implement appropriate initiatives the impact of additional funding will be diminished.

Under the Education Act 2013 “Leaders in schools will have the resources, the skills, and greater power, to make decisions and implement strategies at the local level to obtain the best outcomes for their schools and school students”. The reality is however that across many of our systems and sectors the process used to select Principals reinforces a past paradigm and therefore there has been little or no change in leadership practice over recent years; the role has changed but we haven’t kept up with the change.

Current and aspiring school leaders, federal and state policy makers, and education stakeholders must understand how policy, research and practice come together to transform schools and school systems. Principals need to know what works and why it works; practice and policy must be informed by high quality contemporary research.

School improvement efforts rely heavily on quality leadership. Educational leaders are tasked with establishing a collective vision, initiating change to spur innovation, ensure student learning, and increase achievement. Good leaders develop a culture of improvement – good leaders develop good teachers who increase outcomes for their students.

School leaders and aspirant school leaders need appropriate and timely professional development to guarantee that the right person is in the right place at the right time, and with the right capacity to be a principal leading an autonomous school community. Quality leadership is the key to transforming schooling and learning.

Describing the attributes of a highly effective principal and the links between those attributes and key policies including Australian Principal Standard and Principals Performance and Development Framework, is essential to progressing the new construct of leadership. When these elements come together they represent the framework for the future.

In the OECD Report 2012 *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21stC*, Andreas Schleicher said “School leaders can make a difference in school and student performance if they are granted the autonomy to make important decisions “. There is a positive link between autonomy and student outcomes if the focus is correct. Principal Autonomy Research Project; Educational Transformations 2007 confirms the links between autonomy and student outcomes where the focus is on learning, capacity building and the effective use of data.

The principal is pivotal to the success of increased autonomy. Research indicates that, in itself, autonomy will not create positive improvement and there are other important factors that also need to be addresses. “Factors that appear to affect the influence of autonomy on school outcomes include principal professionalism, flexibility in governance, a systemic understanding of leadership, levels of choice and competition, funding arrangements, and accountability practices”. Without addressing these other factors, we are in danger of decreasing educational outcomes in some schools.

### **Concluding remarks – Equity and Excellence:**

An OECD Report *Low-Performing Students - Why They Fall Behind and How To Help Them* (10<sup>th</sup> February 2016) shows that a socio economically disadvantaged student in Australia is six times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. After taking account of several other factors influencing school performance such as gender, immigrant and language background, family structure, urban or rural location, pre primary education and grade repetition, a socio economically disadvantaged student is still five times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student.

The socio economic gap in the probability of low performance is much larger in Australia than the average for OECD countries. The average gap for the OECD increases by only 7 percentage points compared with 22 in Australia. This indicates that the risk factors have a much stronger effect on the performance of disadvantaged students in Australia than the average for the OECD.

While the conversation continues about funding for education, the gap between those for whom demography determines destiny, and those for whom there is real choice, continues to widen. The Australian Secondary Principals’ Association (ASPA) advocates for the full implementation of the needs based funding model to enable school leaders to put in place sustainable interventions to address the needs of students in their communities. Our public education system must be based on both equity and excellence.