

Submission to the Senate Education Committee's inquiry into the 'Better and Fairer Schools' Bill

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Purpose of Submission

I write to make a short submission to the Senate Education Committee's Inquiry into the 'Better and Fairer Schools (Funding Reform Bill)' which was established last week. The major intent of my submission is to argue that a number of aspects of the Bill are seriously deficient, and if the Bill is passed in its current form, it can only result in a continuation of the gross underfunding of public schools in this country.

Personal Background

My career in education has spanned teaching in public schools and Universities. For over three decades I have researched and published books and articles on curriculum, the history and politics of public education, education policy and social justice in education. My recent book '*Changing Australian Education* (Routledge 2020) explores how education policy over the past 30 years has intensified teachers' work, deskilled educators, stratified schooling on the basis of socio-economic status, and residualised public education. A key factor has been the chronic underfunding of public schools.

Education and Democracy

One of the constant themes in my work has been the contribution that education makes to a healthy democracy. As democracies around the world continue to atrophy, it has become even clearer that education must play a central role in protecting those elements that are crucial to democracy's survival. Apart from teaching young people the knowledge and skills required to become active citizens, schools are places where people learn to understand, appreciate and respect differences in culture, beliefs, and socio-economic status. This is fundamental to building a respectful and tolerant democratic culture.

If access to such important knowledge and dispositions is unfairly distributed, then democracy suffers. The starting point for ensuring that ALL young people have the opportunity to develop democratic capabilities must be equally resourced schools. And yet Australia has over the past half century not only developed one of the most socially stratified schooling systems in the OECD, but has also created an education system where there are huge disparities in resources. Despite educating the vast majority of socially disadvantaged children and young people in our community, it is public schools which have borne the brunt of this resource inequality. It will be a danger to our democracy if this situation continues.

The deficiencies of the Bill for ‘Better and Fairer Schools (Funding Reform Bill)’.

The current Bill is deficient in at least three major respects.

First, the proposed floor of 20% Commonwealth share of funding the SRS for public schools is totally inadequate. Given the role that the Commonwealth has assumed in the education of First Nations people and newly arrived immigrants in this country, and the fact that the Commonwealth sets National Goals for Schooling, surely in the 21st century we can no longer rely on the old excuse that education is almost solely a state responsibility. New economic and social demands in the 21st century have meant that the Commonwealth must play a greater role in funding the major education system in Australia. Whilst under the current proposal of 20% funding could be increased, it is not guaranteed. I urge the Parliament to replace the floor of 20% of Commonwealth share of funding for public schools with a minimum of 25%.

Second, the Bill continues the accounting sleight of hand in which the States have indulged over the past five years (2019 – 2024). State governments have artificially boosted their SRS share by claiming non-SRS funding items, such as funding for capital depreciation and school transport; and for regulatory agencies such as Curriculum authorities and teacher registration authorities. This has meant ensuring that their funding totals have fallen well below the 75% that they should have contributed to public schools. As a result, public education has been deprived of billions of dollars of funding. The Bill should be amended to prohibit the inclusion of non-SRS funding items.

Third, the Bill states that the Commonwealth’s funding share in any single year is a percentage to be prescribed by regulation, and that the Parliament cannot disallow the regulation. Certainly it requires that funding in a current year should not be less than the previous year and that the Minister must consult with the Ministerial Council. Nonetheless, it gives the Minister significant power to delay funding within a funding agreement without any Parliamentary scrutiny. Not only would this create uncertainty for public schools, but it is undemocratic. In my view, the Bill must be amended to give the Parliament the capacity to scrutinize and debate any regulation.

Conclusion

I urge the Senate Education Committee to consider the above proposed three amendments to the Better and Fairer Schools (Funding Reform Bill). For the sake of our democracy, Australia must move quickly to ensure that our public schools are properly funded and resourced.

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