



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

*Senate Finance and Public
Administration References Committee
Inquiry: The outcomes of the 42nd meeting
of the Council of Australian Governments
held on 1 April 2016*

April 2016

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Submission by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee

Terms of Reference

On 19 April 2016, the following matter was referred to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee for inquiry and report by the **4 May 2016**:
The outcomes of the 42nd meeting of the Council of Australian Governments held on 1 April 2016, with particular reference to:

- a. schools funding;
- b. hospitals funding; and
- c. taxation; and

2. That the Senate directs the responsible ministers to ensure that relevant officials of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Treasury appear before the committee to answer questions.

Submission

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the voice for parents of young people in our nation's public schools. We are recognised as the peak national body representing parents of children in public schools

As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee.

The outcomes from this committee's deliberations will provide an opportunity for a responsive government to support a funding system that will not only deliver learning opportunities for every young Australian but will put Australia's economy on a firm and competitive footing. In every state and territory public schools must be well-resourced and appropriately funded providing access to a free, high quality and secular education for all Australian students, irrespective of postcode or parental capacity to pay.

Schools funding in Australia could be said to be unique in the world in offering funding to every schooling sector and system, both public and private – from both Federal and State Governments. This is overlaid with schools charging a variety of fees and levies to the parents of students in all sectors. In short, every schooling sector receives financial support from government and every school in Australia charges fees and levies – it's just a question of how much. The level of funding to each sector is supposedly subject to a needs based evaluation. However, it is instantly apparent that the implication of any proposed refinement highlights the extreme complexity of the problem that is fairer funding for schooling. In the following pages there are various points of discussion that it

is hoped will inform the inquiry and point to a process that may allow an objective evaluation of the current position – with a weather eye to the needs of our children’s education and Australia’s future.

In an ideal world it could be hoped that a new and truly needs based funding model, such as that outlined in David Gonski’s review, could offer a starting point for discussion – and one that was unencumbered by the requirement that no school would lose a dollar per student as a result of the reform. It should ideally apply the normal elements of needs based models such as defining a needs funding threshold, additional loadings for specific disadvantage and an appropriate level of indexing. Overarching this would ideally see a rebalancing of the Federal versus State and Territory funding and acquittal responsibilities to ensure each level of government was responsible for an equal proportional input into the public and private sectors. The current distribution model sees the majority of funding for private school paid directly from the commonwealth and the remainder from states and territories. This is in direct contrast to the public system where the majority of schools funding comes from those same states and territories – funding that is in direct competition with other vital interests such as health, housing and social services. The recent Victorian review of that state’s Government Schools Funding Review could offer an example of a recent process that may inform a national overview, and possibly as an initial partnership to refine the planning of a national process.

In terms of initiating such a review of the currently highly complex web of agreements, additional models and special deals then it could be of value to consider the inherent value of a national education system as a true partnership between national and state governments. Much seems to be made of the point that public education is a matter for the States and Territories alone with the Federal government having a bystander role. I have to ponder what the implications for Australia’s future where it be if we were to apply that perspective to a subject such as defence or international relations? I cannot believe that that responsibility for a matter of national importance such education should be discarded by the Federal Government.

In this case we are considering the ongoing future of Australia’s 3.6 million school age students – two thirds of which are in the public education system. A figure that is not stationary as it is a rolling population that responds to the natural demographics of our society. It could be argued that the current Liberal government sees its role as a hands off government with a particular enthusiasm for the principles of subsidiarity. Principles that seem to be indicated by the proposition, made to the 42nd meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held on 1 April 2016, whereby public education would be the sole responsibility of the States and Territories. A responsibility contingent on a move to devolve the control of a section of income tax in terms of rates and distribution to the same authorities. COAG’s response to this appeared to be unequivocal and determined – with the indication that there would be interest in exploring the potential of controlling the disbursement of a section of income tax - without a responsibility for its collection.

What the implications will be for public education are still unclear other than it will be work in progress. However, the Federal Government's expressed desire to retain funding control for private sector schools as part of this stoush belies its apparent subsidiarity desires - subsidiarity for some - with an overarching model that was only one of four possible education funding options described in the federation reform discussion paper. The Government argues that it is applying record levels of needs based funding overlaid with an indexing model as a response to what it describes as an unsustainable alternative. An alternative that is popularly known as the Gonski model. It goes on to argue that record levels of funding are being made to education with no indication of outcome improvements. ACSSO contends that perhaps the funding is going into a sector that already has sufficient resourcing therefore showing no advantage.

The Government's response appears to focus attention on school autonomy, teacher quality, parent engagement and curriculum. ACSSO argues that school autonomy has variable outcomes and wider implications for regional systems in terms of staffing and funding. It will be interesting to see the result of the WA select committee investigation into its autonomous schools – so to some extent the jury is still out.

The remaining points of students first such as teacher quality and parent engagement can be taken to be points of consensus in most cases. However, ACSSO would argue that the quality of school leadership has a greater impact. A point reinforced in David Gillespie's book - Free Schools - following his investigations into what matters in education as a personal response to choosing a sector for his own children's education.

Mixed into this are quoted examples of schools that have bucked the disadvantage trend. Schools that often have inspiring stories of revolution in outcomes, parent engagement and inspiring community engagement partnerships. Stories that are often coupled with Principals and teachers that have gone above and beyond in pursuit of excellence, whilst not spending any more than the current funding allocation.

There is no denying the extraordinary achievements of such professional educators, but it has to be considered that this is in spite of the current funding agreement system that is highly complex with at least 27 separate agreements overlaid with partisan models, special deals and clauses that are largely impossible to define in terms of quantity, duration, accountability and acquittal – we have asked this question of many levels of Government and have yet to receive a conclusive response.

Before any fair, simple and transparent needs based funding model can be implemented it must be based on an objective foundation that looks to Australia's future. ACSSO contends that the current system needs the application of the three R's – Review - to see what is currently in place, Rebalancing - to ensure joint and equal responsibility to the sectors from federal and state governments, and Reform - to start again with the future in mind as a foundation to a fair, simple and transparent needs based funding system for all sectors. ACSSO hopes that this inquiry into the outcomes of the 42nd meeting of the

Council of Australian Governments held on 1 April 2016, with a particular interest in schools funding, will offer a starting point for vital reform.

As the national education reform agenda transcends the various party political aspirations, and is an ongoing responsibility of all Australians, there has to be an expectation that every layer of government is fully supportive of the future of our children. Truly fair, simple and transparent needs based funding agreements, with provision for additional disadvantage, and no special deals are vital for the future of our children. Children that are constantly progressing through the system that will have to do the heavy lifting for the future of the economy and Australia as a whole.

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