

Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment – Inquiry in the Australian Education Bill 2012

This submission is made by me as an individual. I write this submission as a former teacher, current teacher educator and academic, and a parent of four school aged children that have had education in both New South Wales and Queensland.

The Australian Education Bill 2012 was introduced into Parliament as a response to the discussions emerging from the recommendations of the Gonski Review into funding of education, but also attempts to enshrine the current governments intent for improved educational outcomes for all students in Australia. Such is evident in the Explanatory Memorandum that begins, 'the Bill provides the foundation for a legislative framework that puts an excellent education for every child at the heart of how Australia delivers and funds schooling.'

The underlying principle of the Bill is a difficult concept to argue against. Inherent to our society is a desire of all people to have the opportunity for an excellent education for all students. Similarly it is just as commonly held that we desire for Australia to be a world leader in education, providing the best possible outcomes for all our citizens. However, how the concept of 'excellence' is understood and ascertained is where there is a point of concern that should be considered by the Committee.

In recent times it can be argued that there has been a gradual, yet significant, shift towards a valuing of numerical quantitative data as a measure of achievement. Within educational policy and practice a central push towards the use of NAPLAN data as an instrument to indicate school achievement has been implemented and further exacerbated with the advent of the MySchools website. I would argue that NAPLAN data does not in anyway represent the success of schools in education children. Much has been written by those more expert than me about how this data is statistically flawed and how the use of NAPLAN results as measures of achievement is contrary to the design of the test. The inclusion of more data elements on the MySchool website does nothing to alleviate this flaw, and instead merely provides demographic data. These practices have planted the seed to an expanding market for the selling of resources and support for success in NAPLAN. Therefore, in a short time, if no change is made to this current system, there will be a large financial concern in the provision of tests and resources that will challenge any government to change direction.

In the explanatory memorandum there are identified three objects of the Bill. Firstly an aspiration for excellence, secondly, desire for equity and thirdly, 'for Australia to be placed in the top five countries in reading, science and mathematics, quality and equity in recognised international testing by 2025'. It is this third object that I find of particular concern in the current discourse of educational policy and I feel sits contrary to the first two objects. There is growing evidence that national testing regimes, of that which NAPLAN and MySchools is evolving into, limit the creativity of education, reduce the professionalism of teachers and stifle student success; contradictory to the desired outcomes. I have experienced this decline away from a holistic and engaging education for students to exam driven, abstracted and disenfranchised practices in the classroom first hand. These observations have been made as a researcher in classrooms as well as a parent of school-age children. Slowly, due to the prevalence given to NAPLAN results, there has been a progressive prioritization of numeracy and literacy study, removed from any context or embedding within other disciplines, at the expense of a number of more educative processes, such as creative arts. I have witnessed heightened levels of stress amongst my children, who, although being informed that performance in NAPLAN does not matter, are drawn into the general anxiety of completing examinations that they wish to have as a positive reflection of themselves. Likewise, there is a subsequent pressure placed on teachers who have removed time dedicated to creative enterprises in the classroom in favour of test preparation and exam discipline.

If the desire of the Bill is in fact to establish an excellent and equitable education for all students then it must respond to the negative effects coming as a consequence from the implementation of the NAPLAN / MySchools regime. Caching this conversation within a discourse of transparency fails to acknowledge the many other ways that teachers and schools express what they do, and how students learn, to parents and the community. Schools, particularly those that actively engage with the parent body and wider community, are already highly transparent. It is through encouraging meaningful engagement with parents that we can begin to work towards greater excellence. However, this cannot be

reduced to a simple test or quantitative measure, but is witnessed in the myriad of interactions and conversations in the life of a school.

Along a similar line of argument is the reform direction within the Bill concerned with teacher quality. Discourses of teacher quality within Australia have often resulted in a reductionist approach in being able to list competencies and observable behaviours and then working towards these. They are also premised on a belief that there is a deficit in the quality of teachers. Even within the Quality Teaching Framework, which has been widely accepted in NSW schools, there is a limit to realisation of quality by teachers merely quantifying activities against a framework or measure. The ingredient lacking in these reductionist movements is a proper acknowledgment of the professionalism and professional qualities of teachers. Teachers are highly qualified professionals. The expectations of an education degree is demanding and rigorous, and is comparable to any other profession. Professional teachers readily engage in ongoing professional development and large numbers, incurring costs to themselves, go on to postgraduate study. It is in the support of the professional teacher, and encouragement to engage in ongoing learning, that success around notions of quality can be better realised. There is a need to actively engage teachers in their own learning and to reinforce through this legislation the professional nature of each teacher. In many iterations of education policy there is an absence of the voice of teachers, yet they are the ones that are left with the consequences and outcomes. Just as we do with medical practitioners, lawyers and business people, we need to acknowledge that teachers are qualified and that they are experts in their field. In the case of teachers they are the best guides on how to educate our children and should be empowered to do so through the full expression of their professional knowledge.

The final element of consideration in this Bill is the support acknowledged, though vaguely, to the recommendations of the Gonski review. The principles underlying the recommendations of the Gonski Review should be supported in full and uncategorically. Responses to Gonski must include the re-empowering of teachers and valuing diversity in education (which I suggest should also imply a movement away from detailed and centralized curriculum models) and a movement away from simplistic measures, as well as embracing the demands for increased funding and new approaches to the distribution of these funds. At present an argument is made that there is a need to continue to reinforce the support already provided to the private school sector. I declare to the committee that my children attend private schools. Not because I do not value public education, but because I desire a faith based education for my children. This choice is a private one that as I live in a free society are free to make. It is not the responsibility of the public purse to subsidize this decision unless it is the interest of the public. This therefore means that there is some merit to government support for private education as it reduces the burden on the public system and can afford greater value for investment. However, this support, in many circumstances, is excessive and unnecessary and is often at the detriment of students in the public system. The proposed funding regime of Gonski counters this excess and places at the centre of conversations of education funding the needs of the child, not the desires of the parents. It is due to this that it is a far more equitable outcome for all, and a small sacrifice by parents like me will permit others in our society to achieve the desired overall excellence in education. It is therefore only founded in selfishness that faith-based and private schools would not be supportive of these changes. The role of government should be to balance these individual desires against the good of the broader society.

Whilst this Bill is reassuring that there is hope for education in Australia and proper funding of our future, there still remains strong leadership to make this happen. I personally hope that there is able to be unity across the political divides and state boundaries to make this happen.

Signed:

Mr Matthew CAMPBELL

M.Ed. M.RE. Grad Cert Ed Law, Grad Cert Physics, B.Ed