

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Reference

1.1 On 29 November 2012, the Senate referred the Australian Education Bill 2012 to the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Committee for inquiry and report by 13 March 2013.¹

Conduct of inquiry

1.2 The committee advertised the inquiry in the *Australian* and called for submissions by 8 February 2013. Details of the inquiry were also made available on the committee's website.

1.3 The committee contacted a number of organisations inviting submissions to the inquiry. Submissions were received from 32 individuals and organisations, as listed in Appendix 1.

1.4 A public hearing was held in Melbourne on 1 April. The witness list for the hearing is at Appendix 2.

Background

1.5 The most comprehensive review of Australian schools in over 40 years, the Gonski Review provided a blueprint for overhauling school education and school funding. It considered issues relating to better educational outcomes, funding allocation and mechanisms, and financial accountability and transparency. Key findings of the review included:

- Australia's educational system is complex, and lacks coherence and transparency;
- educational outcomes should not be determined by a student's background or the location of their school, but by their potential;
- funding alone would not be sufficient to address Australia's schooling needs and should be accompanied by further schools reform;
- current funding arrangements are not logical, consistent or publicly transparent; and
- new funding arrangements should be linked to educational outcomes, equitable and target disadvantaged and underperforming students.

1.6 The bill sets out the expectations and vision for national school reform and the development of a National Plan for School Improvement (the 'national plan'). It provides a legislative framework for school funding and education delivery that will ensure all Australian children have equitable access to high quality education.

1 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 129, 29 November 2012, pp 3480–3481.

According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) submission, the bill details five specific legislative measure including:

- (i) a commitment by the Commonwealth to support quality education for all Australian school students;
- (ii) improving the international ranking of students and Australian schooling;
- (iii) development of a national plan including five core reform programs (see para.1.13 for details);
- (iv) new principles for school funding consisting of base recurrent funding and loadings; and
- (v) linking school funding and school improvement to ensure the Commonwealth's investment in schools results in improved education outcomes.

Purpose of the bill

1.7 The bill is the first step in implementing the government's response to the Gonski Review and the national plan, first outlined by the Prime Minister in a speech to the National Press Club on 3 September 2012.

1.8 The bill represents nothing less than the Government's blue-print for the future of Australian school education. The Government expects the national plan, when fully implemented by 2020, will see an additional \$6.5 billion spent on schools each year by the Commonwealth, states and territories.²

1.9 The DEEWR submission stated that the national plan:

...will outline national education reforms to enable all students to acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment, in a globalised economy, and make successful transitions to further education, training and work.³

1.10 The purpose of the bill, as set out in the Objects (Clause 3), is to enable schools to provide an 'excellent education' for all students; to ensure that Australian schooling is 'highly equitable'; and to place Australian student performance in the top five globally in reading, mathematics and science by 2025. The bill also acknowledges matters referred to in the Preamble, which set out the Government's aspirations for school education. These focus on the quality, equity and excellence of education for all students regardless of their background and personal circumstances or the location of their school, thereby enhancing Australia's economic prosperity during the Asian century.

2 *A National Plan for School Improvement*, Speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 3 September 2012.

3 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 22*, p. 4.

1.11 Clause 6 commits the Government to work with state and territory governments and non-government education authorities to develop and implement a national plan to improve school performance and the educational outcomes of students, drive improvement in schools and provide opportunities for school students to develop capabilities to engage with Asia.⁴

1.12 Clause 7 of the bill stipulates five reform directions including:

- (i) quality teaching (teachers will have the skills and support they need to deliver a high quality education);
- (ii) quality learning (the educational experience for students will be high-quality, inclusive and responsive to the needs of students);
- (iii) empowered school leadership (recognising the potential for principals and teachers to be leaders at the local level and to drive improvements in their schools);
- (iv) transparency and accountability (including providing better data on schools and students to monitor performance and drive continuous improvement); and
- (v) meeting student needs (recognising different backgrounds, aspirations and circumstances).⁵

1.13 These reform directions, the merit of which is widely acknowledged and supported by research, build on related developments in schools initiated by the Australian and state and territory governments, and through the Council of Australian Governments.⁶ The bill provides an assurance that future Commonwealth funding will reflect a needs-based model and consist of grants to the states and territories.

1.14 The government's intent is that following the conclusion of negotiations with the states, territories and non-government education providers, the bill will be amended to reflect the final agreement reached with all parties. The bill requires a commitment by schools to implementation of the national plan for school improvement as a prerequisite for continued Commonwealth funding. This is set out in Clause 9 of the bill.

4 Explanatory Memorandum, Australian Education Bill 2012, pp 8–9.

5 Explanatory Memorandum, Australian Education Bill 2012, p. 2.

6 Australian Education Bill 2012, Bills Digest No. 73 2012-13, Parliamentary Library, p. 5.