

AUSTRALIAN GREENS ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

1.1 The Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling ('the Gonski Review') is a watershed document which represents the most comprehensive review of Australian schools in two generations.¹

1.2 The Australian Education Bill 2012 forms part of the Government's response to the Gonski Review. Largely aspirational, the Bill is very light on detail, and is specifically stated to create no legally enforceable obligations. While largely supporting the aspirations contained in the Bill and expressed in the preamble, the Australian Greens consider they are meaningless without a firm, detailed agreement with the States and Territories for increased school funding.

1.3 The Australian Greens believe that the recommendations arising from the Gonski Review represent the best opportunity in decades to fix our school system to ensure that every Australian child can obtain a high quality education, irrespective of their background or where they live, and thus have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

1.4 The Gonski Review squarely sets out the benefits of a high quality schooling system for a nation:

High-quality schooling fosters the development of creative, informed and resilient citizens who are able to participate fully in a dynamic and globalised world. It also leads to many benefits for individuals and society, including higher levels of employment and earnings, and better health, longevity, tolerance and social cohesion.²

1.5 However, marshalling extensive evidence from Australia and overseas, the Gonski Review clearly identifies the areas in which Australia's schooling regime is failing, highlighting our declining levels of achievement internationally, particularly in reading and scientific literacy and mathematical literacy, and the pronounced inequity which is a characteristic of our system.

1.6 Famously, in relation to the latter feature, the Gonski panel defined equity in schooling as 'ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions'.³ Shamefully, Australia performs poorly when it comes to measures of equity, meaning that the link between student

1 Review Panel (Chaired by David Gonski), *Review of Funding for Schooling*, Final Report, December 2011, <http://www.betterschools.gov.au/review> (accessed 12 March 2013).

2 Review Panel (Chaired by David Gonski), *Review of Funding for Schooling*, Final Report, December 2011, p. xiii.

3 Review Panel (Chaired by David Gonski), *Review of Funding for Schooling*, Final Report, December 2011, p. 105.

background and educational outcomes is significantly more pronounced in Australia than in other high-performing OECD countries.

1.7 Central to the panel's definition of equity is the belief that the underlying talents and abilities of students that enable them to succeed in schooling are not distributed differently among children from different socioeconomic status, ethnic or language backgrounds, or according to where they live or go to school. The Review cites evidence that all children are capable of learning and achieving at school in the right circumstances and with the right support.⁴

1.8 The Gonski Review provides extensive evidence of the inequitable state of Australian schooling system, including the following:

- Australia has a strong concentration of advantaged students in certain schools and a strong concentration of disadvantaged students in other schools, predominantly government schools.
- There is a growing body of evidence that the composition of a school's population has a significant impact on the outcomes achieved by all students at the school so that concentrations of disadvantage accentuate underperformance.
- Schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students tend to have less material and social resources, more behavioural problems, less experienced teachers, lower student and family aspirations, less positive relationships between teachers and students, less homework and a less rigorous curriculum
- Over 80 per cent of students who did not reach the level required for proficiency to participate in society in reading and mathematics are in government schools. (They represent about 20 per cent of government school students, compared to about 8 per cent of Catholic students and 7 per cent of independent school students.)
- There is a significant gap between Australia's highest and lowest performing students which is linked to educational disadvantage, particularly among students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds.
- In relation to reading literacy, the gap between students from the highest and lowest economic, social and cultural status quartiles was approximately three years of schooling.
- The average performance of Australian students from the lowest quartile is significantly lower than the OECD average.
- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in Australia's 'underperforming tail' in the 2009 PISA assessment of literacy domain.

4 Review Panel (Chaired by David Gonski), *Review of Funding for Schooling*, Final Report, December 2011, p. 105.

- According to 2010 NAPLAN data, Indigenous students living in very remote areas for all domains *and all year levels* performed, on average, below the mean score of *Year 3* non-Indigenous metropolitan students.
- In the 2009 PISA assessments around one quarter of Australian 15 year-olds in the lowest economic, social and cultural status quartile performed at a level which puts them at serious risk of not being able to adequately participate in the workforce and contribute as productive citizens.

1.9 In order to respond to Australia's declining international performance, and the inequity in the system, the Gonski Review recommended a significant and ongoing increase in school funding in Australia in the order of \$5 billion per year, which translates into \$6.5 billion per year in today's terms.

1.10 It is widely acknowledged that Australia currently underinvests in education. As a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Australia's spending on education is lower than the OECD average. Education Minister Garrett acknowledged this himself in September 2012, when he said, 'Our spend on education as a share of GDP has remained flat since 2001 and is currently still lower than the OECD average, once the one-off spend is removed'.⁵

1.11 There is an even more significant underspend when it comes to government schools, which educate the great majority of children from high-needs and disadvantaged backgrounds: 80% of those in the lowest SES quartile, 85% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, 78% of those with a disability, 83% of students in remote areas and most students from a non-English speaking home.

1.12 Total government funding (Federal and State) per student in independent schools increased by 82 per cent between 2002 and 2009, and the increase per student in Catholic schools in the same period was 64 per cent. By contrast, the increase for government schools was 48 per cent.⁶

1.13 Overall, the proportion of total government schools funding spent on public schools in Australia, has decreased from 77.1 per cent in 2003 to 68.6 per cent in 2009. The OECD average is 85.8 per cent.⁷

1.14 Over the same period of time, Australia's educational performance has declined, both at the highest and lowest ends of educational advantage.

1.15 More than a year after the Gonski Review was released, the Australian Greens are alarmed that the Australian Education Bill 2012 contains no detail regarding the amount of funding to be provided for its implementation, nor how it is to be allocated. Details of the contributions from the States and Territories are also missing, as is any

5 The Hon. Peter Garrett MP, 'More Liberal excuses on education', *Media Release*, 13 September 2012.

6 Save Our Schools, Education Research Brief, 9 January 2012.

7 Save Our Schools, Education Research Brief, 9 January 2012.

overall guide to its implementation. The situation is critical, particularly for those students in government schools where disadvantage is concentrated.

1.16 The Gonski Review itself has stressed the need for urgent reform, stating that:

The additional investment needed to implement a schooling resource standard is necessary because, without it, the high cost of poor educational outcomes will become an even greater drag on Australia's social and economic development in the future. The need for the additional expenditure and the application of what those funds can do is urgent. Australia will only slip further behind unless, as a nation, we act and act now.⁸

1.17 It is essential that funding arrangements be finalised and legislated for, as a matter of urgency, if the concerns raised by Gonski are to be addressed and the risk of further decline averted.

1.18 In light of previous indications from the Government that any increased investment into Australia's schooling system, as recommended in the Gonski Review, will be introduced over a lengthy period of years, the Australian Greens call for the Bill to be amended to ensure that the most disadvantaged government schools will be prioritised for any additional Commonwealth funding during the implementation of the national plan.

Recommendation

1.19 The Australian Greens recommend that the Australian Education Bill 2012 be amended so that the most disadvantaged government schools will be prioritised for any additional Commonwealth funding during the implementation of the national plan.

Senator Penny Wright

8 Review Panel (Chaired by David Gonski), *Review of Funding for Schooling*, Final Report, December 2011, p. 212.