

Australian Greens Additional Comments

Introduction

The Australian Greens are pleased to endorse the majority report and recommendations of the Senate Select Committee on School Funding.

The Australian Greens supported the Australian Education Act 2013. We did so in the knowledge that, while the Act did not implement the full range of recommendations from the Gonski review of school funding, it would begin to provide the framework for a better education for every Australian child.

However, the Australian Greens remain highly critical of the manner in which the previous government approached the negotiations with state and territory governments and the lack of transparency and accountability in the Act.

Despite these criticisms, the Greens acknowledge that the previous government was overseeing a transition towards a more equitable school funding system.

The Australian Greens utterly condemn the current government's disregard for a genuine needs-based funding model and the lack of transparency in relation to their expenditure on schools. As is clear from the data examined in this report, the Coalition's deep cuts to education, including abandoning the planned fifth and sixth years of funding, will mean hundreds of schools across the country will never reach the Schooling Resource Standard envisaged in the Gonski review. In other words, thousands of Australian children will miss out on the best education this country can provide, often solely because of their family circumstances.

The Australian Greens believe that education is the foundation of democracy and a well-resourced, public education system is vital for a healthy and fair society. We believe it is the right of all Australian children to have access to high-quality and affordable education. The public education system is the only guarantee of this right, being open to every child irrespective of the wealth or background of their family, and it is under serious threat from the policies of the Abbott Government.

Federal negotiation process

Many of the submissions to the Select Committee expressed frustration at the process of negotiation conducted by the previous government – including the delay between the release of the Gonski panel's report and the Gillard Government response, and the lack of transparency around the negotiations that ensued.

Dr Ken Boston, former head of the NSW Education Department and member of the Gonski review panel, was particularly critical of what he called 'the 20 lost months' between the panel's report and the 2013 election:

There was ample time during that period, in my view, for Gonski to have been implemented satisfactorily with the support of the states. ... The basic reason we do not have Gonski today is not because we elected the Abbott

government but because the previous government failed in the politics of its delivery.¹

The Australian Greens equally lament the 14-month gap between the release of the panel's report and the Gillard Government response, which meant negotiations with state governments and school sectors were conducted in the heat of an election campaign. This gap allowed the unravelling of the initial general consensus that met the release of the Gonski report, in which most significant stakeholders acknowledged its authority and the compelling case it made for a larger investment in education in Australia, and a more equitable funding system.

It is our view the previous government delayed action on the recommendations of the Gonski review panel to ensure education would be a key election battleground. The support of the Parliament was there to legislate for the panel's recommendations well ahead of this period, yet the previous government was willing to risk the education of Australian children to boost their own electoral chances.

The Gillard Government created a number of false deadlines for signatory states, including the COAG meeting of April 19, 2013 and the end of the 2012-13 financial year. In the end, negotiations continued right up until the September 2013 election. Dr Boston's submission to the Committee said this highly politicised context created:

...a scramble to secure an agreement to deals in which the fundamental Gonski principles became a secondary consideration. The result is thoroughly unsatisfactory: agreements with some states and not with others, and – amongst participating states – different agreements and indexation arrangements.²

This was evident in a second and higher offer being made to Western Australia, with an extra \$620 million on the table.³ The South Australian Government also was offered a further \$90 million.⁴ This followed reports South Australia would receive approximately half as much Federal money on a per-student basis as NSW, Queensland and Tasmania, with accusations the Federal Government was 'using Gonski funding to boost its election prospects in the eastern states'.⁵

1 Dr Ken Boston, private capacity, *Committee Hansard*, 16 May 2014, p. 7.

2 Dr Ken Boston, *Submission 29*, p. 2

3 Aleisha Orr, 'WA offered \$620m sweetener to sign up to Gonski deal', *WA Today*, 12 June 2013, <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/wa-offered-620m-sweetener-to-sign-up-to-gonski-deal-20130612-2o3ta.html#ixzz36IXcJ6TD> (accessed 4 July 2014).

4 Tory Shepherd and Sheradyn Holderhead, 'Julia Gillard signs Gonski deal with Jay Weatherill, delivering extra \$656m for SA students', *The Advertiser*, 14 June 2013, <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/julia-gillard-signs-gonski-deal-with-jay-weatherill-delivering-extra-656m-for-sa-students/story-e6frea83-1226663709829> (accessed 4 July 2014).

5 Sheradyn Holderhead, 'Why Gonski education funding numbers don't add up for South Australia', *The Advertiser*, 18 April 2013, <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/why-gonski-education-funding-numbers-dont-add-up-for-south-australia/story-fn3o6nna-1226623861667> (accessed 4 July 2014).

The signatory states and territories all negotiated differing implementation arrangements with the Commonwealth government. For example, the final agreement between South Australia and the Commonwealth reflects an arrangement whereby an even larger percentage of funding was to be delivered in the fifth and sixth years than had been agreed with other states.

Mr Martin Hanscamp, Executive Officer of the Australian Association of Christian Schools, also critiqued ‘the messiness, opaqueness and inconsistency that had emerged from state-federal negotiations with different jurisdictions receiving different deals’.⁶

It is the view of the Australian Greens that the Gillard Government’s decision not to establish a National Schools Resourcing Body, as recommended by the Gonski review, to conduct these negotiations with states and schooling sectors is largely to blame for these failures.

The National Schools Resourcing Body (NSRB) was integral to the effective implementation of the recommendations of the Gonski Review. Such a body, independent of governments and the various sectors and interest that characterise education debates in Australia, could have provided the governance necessary to ensure school funding was provided in a way that maximised its educational impact and minimised self-interest, including political and sectoral interests.

The Australian Greens strongly regret that the Australian Education Act 2013 did not provide for this body.

Dr Boston told the Committee that the failure to establish the NSRB was a major mistake:

You refer to the national schools resourcing body. Looking back over the Gonski period, one reflects on what went wrong. The failure of the national schools resourcing body to be established was a major mistake; and, with the government going off into unilateral discussions behind closed doors with state governments and then the unseemly last few months we had with the Labor government when Gonski was being hawked around the country with very little appreciation of its basic principles, I think that was all very bad.⁷

The Australian Greens agree with Dr Boston’s further evidence to the committee that the decision to negotiate individually in a political environment eroded the consensus that had been built through the Gonski panel’s extensive consultation with state governments, schooling sectors, community groups and others.

In conjunction with the recommendations in the majority report urging the Government to progress a six year transition to a nationally consistent Schooling Resource Standard and work with non-participating states and territories, the

6 Mr Martin Hanscamp, Executive Officer, Australian Association of Christian Schools, *Committee Hansard*, 16 May 2014, p. 10.

7 Dr Ken Boston, private capacity, *Committee Hansard*, 16 May 2014, p. 7.

Australian Greens strongly believe a NRSB should be part of this framework to prevent school funding from continuing to be a political football kicked around by the two old parties.

Recommendation 1

The Australian Greens recommend the Commonwealth Government establish a National Schools Resourcing Body, as envisaged in the Gonski Review of School Funding, to administer current funding arrangements, rebuild shared ownership of the Gonski reforms and manage future school funding negotiations.

Australian Education Act 2013 implementation

As noted by many submitters to the Committee and acknowledged in the majority report, the Australian Education Act 2013 introduced by the previous government did not incorporate the full scope of recommendations made by the Gonski Review.

While the previous government independently chose not to adopt certain recommendations, other principles were eroded during the negotiation process. The Australian Association of Christian Schools noted ‘political tweaking’ had led the delivery of a ‘complex, confusing and therefore less credible model’.⁸

The Australian Greens note three key areas where poor implementation jeopardised the overall success of school funding reforms – transparency, funding distribution over the six years and the ‘no school will lose a dollar’ dictum.

Firstly, a number of submissions criticised the lack of transparency under the current Act, which created uncertainty for schools and the broader community.⁹

The Australian Greens were equally disappointed in the lack of transparency and accountability measures in the Australian Education Act 2013, and sought to move substantive amendments in this area. We wanted to include yearly reporting obligations providing for transparency in how public funds are distributed within a particular schooling system, to be included in the regulations and the legislation itself.

Under these reporting requirements schools would have to report their resources – their assets, income, fees and other interests of a beneficial nature – as an essential element of transparency and accountability in the context of needs-based funding. We wished to embed this in legislation because we knew there was a high risk of these transparency measures being overturned by a future Coalition government.

Our amendments would have also mitigated against Federal funding being dissipated within bureaucracies before reaching the schools where it is most sorely needed.

Secondly, there was a great degree of criticism of the previous government’s decision to backload two-thirds of the total funding package into the fifth and sixth years.

8 Australian Association of Christian Schools, *submission 48*, p. 1.

9 For example, see South Australian Primary Principals Association, *Submission 45*, and Victorian Principals Association, *Submission 46*.

The Australian Greens believe this decision to put the majority of funding outside the forward estimates (and beyond two Federal elections) was a cynical exercise which damaged the perceived legitimacy of the previous government's commitment.

Mr Ross Fox, Executive Director of the National Catholic Education Commission, told the Committee the NCEC had immediately advised schools not to count on the final two years of funding.¹⁰ The Independent Education Union of Australia also expressed a similar sentiment.¹¹

The Australian Greens consistently argued for a shorter transition period, arguing revenue could be found from a strengthened mining tax, and other revenue reforms, to deliver the full quantum of funding within four years. The Greens believe that a society's budget reflects its values and adequate investment in education benefits its citizens and the economy.

Finally, the requirement that no school would lose a dollar significantly increased the cost of the reforms and undermined equity principles.

As Dr Boston told the Committee:

To start off by saying that there would be no loss of a dollar to any school and then for the current government presumably to take the same view is initially to build into any solution a higher cost than is absolutely necessary. We could continue state aid to all church schools, we could continue to provide government funding to all schools, but, by redistributing it in some way, we could go much further towards addressing the real educational issues of this country in our low performing private schools, catholic systemic schools and public schools than we are able to with the current solution.¹²

With neither the previous or current government willing to raise the revenue necessary to bring all Australian schools up to standard, a genuine approach to equality of opportunity in all Australian schools will need to take a braver approach.

As said by Mr Peter Garrigan, President of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, 'If funding for education is to be reduced, it should be given not to those who need it the least, but to those who need it the most'.¹³

School funding under the Abbott Government

The Australian Greens strongly believe the Gillard Government must bear some of the responsibility for the fact this once-in-a-generation chance to fix huge inequality

10 Mr Ross Fox, Executive Director, National Catholic Education Commission, *Committee Hansard*, 13 March 2014, pp. 28-9.

11 Mr Richard Shearman, Federal President, Independent Education Union of Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 13 March 2014, pp. 57.

12 Dr Ken Boston, private capacity, *Committee Hansard*, 16 May 2014, p. 2-3.

13 Mr Peter Garrigan, President, Australian Council of State School Organisations, *Committee Hansard*, 13 March 2014, p. 64.

across Australian schools may be lost because of its failures in negotiation and implementation.

However, the Australian Greens acknowledge the previous government's many achievements in beginning the transition to a genuine needs-based, nationwide school funding system. As a result of their work, some of the fundamental structures of Gonski are in place.

We also note the destabilising influence of the previous Opposition on this issue, who sought to discourage state Liberal governments from signing up to Gillard Government's offers and undermine consensus built with school sectors and other stakeholders.

The numerous conflicting positions expressed by the previous Shadow Education Minister also created confusion in the community. In opposition, Mr Pyne called the reforms 'un-implementable'¹⁴ and a 'Conski'¹⁵ before his infamous "unity ticket" declaration. Mr Pyne initially said the Gonski report was a 'failed report'¹⁶ but later wrote to State Governments saying it was 'a road map' to 'improved student education outcomes'.¹⁷ Many more such inconsistencies could be listed.

Furthermore, Mr Pyne consistently denied the findings of the Gonski report that there was inequality in Australian schooling system.¹⁸

For the many reasons so comprehensively detailed in the majority report, the Australian Greens condemn the Coalition's continued unwillingness to genuinely embrace the need for significant additional investment in education in Australia, and to approach the principled recommendations of the Gonski review panel with any degree of fair-mindedness, foresight or commitment.

The principles of the Gonski review are strong, sound and fair. Ministers in the Abbott Government regularly refer to 'cleaning up Labor's mess'. If they have any intention of following through on this rhetoric, they will do so by perusing a nationally consistent needs-based funding model and implementing the recommendations of the Gonski review panel.

14 Shadow Minister for Education, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP, press conference transcript, 26 November 2013, <http://www.pyneonline.com.au/media/transcripts/press-conference-parliament-house>

15 Shadow Minister for Education, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP, 'Gillards Conski Not Gonski', media release, 14 April 2013, <http://www.pyneonline.com.au/media/media-releases/gillards-conski-not-gonski>

16 Shadow Minister for Education, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP, *ABC Lateline*, interview transcript, 16 July 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2012/s3547117.htm>

17 Australian Education Union, 'Pyne must show his hand on Gonski – AEU', media release, 6 November 2013, http://www.aeunt.org.au/images/mediarelease/media_release_6_november_2013.pdf

18 Shadow Minister for Education, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP, *ABC Lateline*, interview transcript, 19 February 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2013/s3948371.htm>

It is an indictment on our claim to be a country of the “fair go” that in 21st century Australia wealth and social position is a greater determinant of educational opportunity and outcomes than talent and hard work, and that this is more the case in Australia than in some other OECD nations.

As expressed by AEU Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos – needs-based funding is a simple equation:

Either people can put their hands up and say, 'Yes, we believe that all children should be able to attend schools that have resources that are needed for them to be given the opportunity to succeed,' or they do not. Either it is about all kids or it is about some kids. That will define the kind of society we are going to be.¹⁹

As found by the Gonski review panel and reiterated by Dr Boston, the huge disparity in measures like reading and mathematical skills between the most and least privileged students are ‘the direct result of a sector-based, needs-blind funding’ model.²⁰

Failure to deliver a the full funding amount will entrench privilege in education; it will leave so many schools – particularly government schools – below the schooling resource standard (that is, the level of funding which the Gonski review established is required to provide students with a high quality education) and with no clear means of ever reaching that level of funding.

Hundreds of submissions received by the Committee came from schools all across the country – detailing how they would use the extra money to help disadvantaged students in their school, from hiring specialist literacy and numeracy teachers to programs to improve student wellbeing. The Australian Greens strongly encourage Minister for Education Christopher Pyne to read these submissions closely to understand what the Coalition’s cuts will mean for individual students.

Ultimately, the Coalition’s decision to repudiate the fifth and sixth years of the Gonski school funding reforms will disadvantage every one of Australia’s 3.6 million students. In so doing, the Coalition has abandoned every child, every parent, every teacher and every school, but none more so than those in greatest need.

Maintaining the current inequality in education should not be an option. As stated by the St Vincent de Paul National Council, ‘the current level of inequality in education resources is a recipe for entrenching social exclusion and perpetuating privilege. The social and economic costs of exclusion will always be higher than a proper and equitable investment in education’.²¹

19 Mr Angelo Gavrielatos, Federal President, Australian Education Union, *Committee Hansard*, 13 March 2014, p. 47.

20 Dr Ken Boston, private capacity, *Committee Hansard*, 16 May 2014, p. 2.

21 St Vincent de Paul National Council, *Submission 36*, p. 4.

As such, the Australian Greens are pleased to endorse the majority report and recommendations of the committee, and commit to continued advocacy for a more equitable funding arrangement to ensure every Australian child has the opportunity to reach their potential.

Senator Penny Wright (Deputy Chair)
Australian Greens Senator for South Australia