

Much Ado About Gonski

By Gino Amato, SAASSO President

To listen to the Federal Government, teacher's union or the media over the last year, you would think Gonski is going to save education in Australia.

Fact One - Gonski is not a remedy to Australia's declining education standards. It is simply a review of the way we fund our schools.

Fact Two - Gonski is blunt about Australia's declining education standards; nothing SAASSO and others haven't been telling our government for years.

Fact Three - Gonski hasn't actually come up with a new funding model. It claims a new one is necessary, criticizes the current one and suggests things a new model should include.

Background

There are 3.5 million students in 9468 schools. 416 are special schools.

2.3 million children attend public schools, with 713,289 in Catholic and 491,233 in Independent.

That is 66% public schools. Catholic schools educate 20% & Independents 14%.

While the number of schools has decreased, the number of students has increased.

Recurrent Funding

Public Schools

80% State Government
15% Federal Government
5% Private sources

Catholic Schools

20% State Government
57% Federal Government
23% Private sources



Independent Schools

12% State Government
33% Federal Government
55% Private sources

In 2009, Australia spent \$39 billion in all schools. 75% of this paid our 249,000 teachers and 8,700 specialist staff.

72% of Independent schools receive most of their revenue from the government.

What Do We Get For Our Money?

Gonski tells us education standards have declined at all levels over the last decade, including:

- A notable decline in our top students.
- A growing gap between our highest and lowest performing students.

20% of public school students fail to meet baseline standards. 500,000 of Australia's students will leave school without the skills and knowledge to participate in society.

An unacceptable number of Australian students are not meeting minimum standards - with a higher number of Indigenous students, poor students and students from remote schools not making the grade.

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Gonski says a funding model alone won't change this, but tells us what will change it - quality teaching. "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers". Gonski says we need to:

- attract and retain the best teachers
- use data to generate continual assessment
- engage parents
- increase school autonomy and accountability.

Outcomes Across Sectors

In NAPLAN and PISA, Independent schools had the best results, followed by Catholic schools, with the lowest results in public schools. The same trend exists in year 12 completion, absentee rates and TER scores.

Equity In Australia

This is the key problem according to Gonski. According to PISA we achieve only average equity - meaning that a child's background has a greater impact on their education than in other OECD countries.

"20% of public school students fail to meet baseline standards. 500,000 of Australia's students will leave school without the skills and knowledge to participate in society."

Gonski goes on to say that 'Australia must focus on lifting the performance of students at the tail end'.

One in four children from the bottom socio-economic quartile perform below the baseline on PISA.

Current Funding Model

Gonski says the current way we fund schools is, 'unnecessarily complex, lacks coherence and transparency and involves duplication of funding effort.' This is nothing every Governing Council treasurer couldn't have told you.

There are currently 34 different school systems in Australia, including 8 education departments, spending government education dollars.

In terms of transparency, Gonski says, 'Parents should be able to see why their schools are funded at a certain level'.

Gonski's Plan

Gonski says we need a dollar amount per student for primary and secondary schools.

On top of this base funding, there should be loadings to cover additional costs.

What Will Gonski Cost?

Gonski based its numbers on 2009 data and says the math needs updating for a 2014 start:

Primary - About \$8,000 per child
Secondary - About \$10,500 per child

Loadings would be added as percentages of this base amount. These numbers are estimates only, with Gonski saying governments must accurately calculate

the cost. This should have been completed by early 2013.

English Language - Loadings ranging from 15% for children with limited comprehension to 25% for recently arrived refugees.

Indigenous Students - Loadings of 40% (for schools less than a quarter of students are Indigenous) up to 100% per student in schools where more than three quarters are Indigenous.

Socio-economic Status - Loadings from 10% for each poor student in schools where there are only a few such students, up to 50% in schools where more than 75% are in the lowest SES quartile.

School Size & Location - From 10% for medium sized schools in remote locations to 100% for very small schools in very remote locations.

Now you can see why we would need an extra \$5 billion to pay for this.

Special needs students are missing - Gonski doesn't know how many there are or what funding is needed. The government was meant to have calculated this by January of this year.

This is recurrent funding - what it costs to run a school; mainly pay for teachers and staff and pay bills. This is not capital funding - what it costs to fix our broken schools and build new ones.

Where Did Gonski Get These Numbers?

Gonski looked at a group of schools that were scoring well on NAPLAN and then looked to Myschool for what these schools spend, to estimate a per student amount.

They identified 'reference schools' from all sectors; chosen because they had 80% of students achieving above the minimum

standards in NAPLAN. Currently only 16% of schools reach this benchmark.

Half the 'reference schools' were private. A higher percentage of private schools met the benchmark than public - they had lower levels of disadvantage.

Why did they set it at 80%? Because if they set it at 90%, only 3% of Australian schools would have qualified and the 'reference group' would have been too small.

Who Will Pay?

Gonski says the Federal Government should increase its role in funding public schools and state governments should increase their role in funding private schools.

Governance

To manage this new simplified system, Gonski wants to establish the National Schools Resourcing Body.

Gonski says this 'body' should be independent of governments ... but it won't make decisions ... it will make recommendations to ... the government. And who decides who is on this 'independent' body ... the government.

As this 'body' is independent from the government, there should also be an advisory group so that schools have input. And who will be on this advisory group? Government officials.

Where Gonski Is Wrong

Gonski says, "needs based funding for non-government schools is generally accepted within the Australian community". I've put three children through school and volunteered in school and at SAASSO for a decade. I've also served on two national



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parent boards ... I have not once heard anyone support government funding for private schools.

Gonski also says the federal government should stop funding programs and just give the money to the states. Gonski acknowledges that the level of government closest to the communities receiving the services, should fund and regulate them.

Ideally then, funding should be organised at the local level - but Gonski says in public schools it shouldn't ... even though they recommend that in Independent schools it should.

Giving the money to the state departments is a bad idea. Computers In Classrooms - meant to increase the ratio of laptops to students. But in South Australia, the state government used the money to replace

old computers in public schools. And the BER? A federal task-force recommended the program be scrapped because of mismanagement by the states.

Finally, there's the 'administration costs'. SAASSO and the principals association have both calculated that as much as a third of funds are spent running the education department bureaucracy.

Mr. Gonski, give the money to the states and see just how much of the \$8,000 and \$10,500 per child actually makes it into the school.

Give the money directly to the schools, managed by the principal and overseen by the Governing Council. ■