

NSWTF CONFERENCE

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I begin at the heart of the matter: why the neo-conservative right that has taken control of the Federal Cabinet is so totally opposed to Gonski.

It is not because of the budget or the state of the economy, or because the Gonski solution won't work.

It is because the two key Gonski objectives are both anathema to a neo-conservative agenda.

Those objectives are:

First, to ensure that education, as a public good, is genuinely available to every child, according to individual need.

Second, to ensure that educational achievement, as a positional good, is available to all on the basis of ability and hard work alone.

A public good is something that is universally available to all and accessible by all.

Traffic signs, fire alarms, air traffic control, street lighting and roads are common examples of a public good.

A public good usually has a cost, which may vary according to circumstances. For example, the cost of bitumen roads as a public good in rural NSW is more than the cost per capita and per kilometre of roads in metropolitan Sydney.

A public good is of benefit to all of us, and the benefit to each of us does not reduce the availability of the benefit to others.

By these criteria, education is a public good.

Education is universally available, in government and non-government schools.

There is a cost to the taxpayer, and in many schools to the parent, in educating children. The cost of delivering education as a public good for some children will be more than the cost for other children, because of circumstances such as disability, ethnicity, poverty, language background or remoteness.

The provision of education for all children is of benefit to all of us.

And teaching one child to read does not reduce the availability of reading to another child.

A positional good is inherently scarce. It is a service or product with value arising from the fact that it is not available to everyone, so not all can benefit from it. Its possession confers status and preferment on the possessor. The economist's usual examples are luxury cars and houses, ocean cruises and so on.

An education credential - a Higher School Certificate, a TAFE certificate, a degree, a graduate diploma, a higher degree - is a positional good. By definition, high achievement in education is relative to the lower achievement of others. High educational outcomes confer status and preferment on the possessor.

Now, the essence of Gonski is that it seeks to do two things:

First, to ensure that every child, regardless of individual circumstances, receives the support needed to experience education as a public good.

This is very different from every child receiving the same level of support. It is about ensuring every child is given the particular level and kind of support needed to ensure that they can gain full access to education as a public good.

Second, to ensure that educational achievement, as a positional good, is available on the basis of talent and hard work alone, rather than preferentially available to those in a position of wealth and privilege.

Gonski is a fundamental re-imagining of Australian education, not simply a proposal for allocating resources to schools. It is a radically liberal rethinking of priorities and approaches and objectives, not an exercise in accountancy.

Christopher Pyne understood that sooner than most people, and he is utterly opposed to it.

To explain the first of those objectives - to make education a genuine public good - I begin with the term teacher quality. We do not talk of doctor quality or dentist quality: we talk of the quality of health care or the quality of oral health.

And that quality varies greatly from place to place. Health care in Australia is not everywhere of the same quality. The variation is not explained by the quality of the medical staff, but by their number, the availability of specialist diagnosis and treatment, and the availability of technical and ancillary support.

Low quality health care in rural and remote Australia is explained by inadequate funding for the task at hand, not by the relative incompetence of the available doctors and nurses.

Now, it is the same with teaching. We should talk not about teacher quality, but about the quality of education. The teachers in our most disadvantaged schools are at least as good as those in our most advantaged schools.

The issue is not their competence, skill or commitment.

The issue is that their number, resources and support are unequal to the task.

At a national and state level, there is no correlation between teacher quality and school performance in Australia. There are some ineffective teachers as there are incompetent doctors, but they can be found in schools both effective and ineffective, and there are procedures for dealing with them.

But education in Australia is not everywhere of the same quality. There is great variation in the quality of education from school to school, and it is that which Gonski seeks to address.

The schools at the lower end of both the scale of aggregated social disadvantage and the scale of educational performance are the emergency wards of Australian education. In a hospital emergency ward there is a battery of medical specialists and intervention techniques and diagnostic tools targeted at the recovery of the individual.

A school with more than 90 per cent of its intake being children with a language background other than English, from families from thirty-five different language groups, less than three years in the country and unlikely to stay more than three years in the school, is an emergency ward in the same real sense.

So too is a small rural school, taking children from the long-term unemployed, some suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome, some of whom have never been read to, or even held a book.

That image has not been implanted firmly in the public mind. Children entering such schools require immediate diagnosis of need and immediate intensive care. They need smaller class sizes, the ready availability of tier 2 and tier 3 interventions delivered by fully qualified personnel, speech therapists, counsellors, school/family liaison officers including interpreters, and a range of other support.

A child is eight years of age once in her life. If she has not learned to read to the level of national minimum standard by the end of year 3, she will not effectively read to learn in later years. It is in the public interest that we invest in her education as a public good.

And if a refugee child newly arrived in the country, not speaking English and from a very poor family, requires greater support than the child of a third-generation Australian family in secure employment, with an income twice the national average, then so be it.

We have for years accepted such needs-based differentials in the cost of our road system, and in the provision of many other kinds of public good.

If we fail to make the investment, we consign that child and thousands of others to the bin of under-achievement, and we fail as a nation to realise our potential stock of human capital.

The Business Council of Australia – certainly not a neo-conservative body, but hardly socialist left – estimates that a 10 per cent increase in the number of young people completing Year 12 would increase GDP by \$1.8 billion by 2020; the Grattan Institute estimates that increasing our international tests scores by one standard deviation would lift GDP growth by one per cent.

Over the past forty years, and particularly since Howard, successive governments have allocated funding to the three

sectors, after consultation with state governments, independent school organisations, church leaders, teacher unions and others.

It has never been on the basis of the detailed assessment of the needs of individual schools. It has been essentially a political settlement, **sector-based and needs-blind**.

There has then been a series of post-hoc equity programs designed to address specific purposes, the most recent of which was the New Partnership funding. These programs have been but partially effective, and time-limited.

The Gonski model turns all this on its head. It is **sector-blind and needs-based**. It seeks to assess the resource requirements of each individual school according to need. It proposes a base loading for all schools and loadings for the different elements of aggregated social disadvantage. It brings equity funding into the main stream. What is eventually spent in each sector is to be the sum of the needs of the schools in that sector, built up from the bottom, not the result of a political settlement pushed down from the top.

The Labor Government, not Gonski, said no school should lose a dollar, and to satisfy that requirement we included in the model a base grant for all schools. But there is no doubt that the model is redistributive, and that it creates a more even playing field across the three sectors.

Christopher Pyne understood that sooner than most people in politics, and unlike some people in the Coalition parties he is

utterly opposed to it. The Abbott Government might claim the nation cannot afford an increase in education funding: what Pyne is really opposed to is the redistribution of whatever funding might be available, according to measured need.

The second Gonski objective is one of equal opportunity: to ensure that educational achievement as a positional good is earned on the basis of talent and hard work alone, rather than purchased by those in a position of wealth and privilege.

The strategic targeting of resources according to need, will do much more than reduce the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes.

The flip side is that it will also reduce the impact of advantage and privilege on educational outcomes.

If school performance is neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by parental income, ethnic background, religion, school size and location, or whether a student attends an independent, Catholic or public school, success at school will be determined essentially by the student's ability, application and hard work.

In other words, Gonski will create a genuine meritocracy. And that's where Minister Pyne - although by no means all other members of his party - has particular difficulty with Gonski.

Mr Pyne is anchored in the era of Dr Kemp, the minister in the Howard Government who presided over increased funding for non-government schools in order to underwrite financially the exercise of choice between government and non-government schools by parents.

As many of us predicted at the time, this has not resulted in reduced fees and greater accessibility to the non-government sector, but has widened the gulf between the rich and the poor. It has sucked the oxygen from any real competition between schools in different sectors.

And, as the international data clearly demonstrate, Australia's educational performance has sharply deteriorated since that time.

The publicly-funded user-choice model introduced by Dr Kemp was intended to encourage increasing number of parents to pay for their childrens' education.

To do so, non-government schools had to be perceived as manifestly better than state schools.

If parents are to invest in their child's education, they want to see a return on the investment.

And the return they want is educational achievement as a positional good - to increase their child's chances for selection into courses such as law, medicine or engineering in the university of their choice.

At present, the hard-working and talented children of the privileged have a somewhat better prospect of access to the very highest levels of educational achievement than the similarly hard-working and talented children of the socially disadvantaged.

Gonski would change that: all won't have prizes - this is about equality of opportunity not equality of outcomes - but those who do receive prizes will do so on the basis of hard work, ability and application alone.

Mr Pyne correctly recognizes this as a direct challenge to the neo-conservative heartland. A funding system designed to build a genuine meritocracy by creating an even playing field, and devaluing the benefits of private schooling, cannot be contemplated by the clique currently in charge in Canberra.

So, what is to be done?

Five thoughts.

First, we should heed the advice of Justice Michael Kirby at the recent awards night for the Centre for Public Education, that the priority is again to make the case for the Gonski reform to the Australian electorate. This the previous government failed to do adequately – indeed, its failure to accept the Gonski recommendation to establish a national schools resourcing body

largely unpicked the broad-based national consensus built by the Gonski process.

The objective should be to elect a pro-Gonski government at the next election, either Coalition or Labor.

I am immensely encouraged by state governments including Liberal National Party governments, and most prominently in NSW, which are committed to the Gonski principles and are prepared to bear the cost of their implementation. Such support, together with support from state opposition parties and some Federal Government backbenchers, does bring real pressure on the present Federal Government leadership.

There also seems to me – from the various discussions I have had around the country following presentations on Gonski – substantial potential to build support among the more disadvantaged non-government schools and their parents; and within those many elements of the Catholic sector in which there is a strong Catholic social justice perspective.

I am also encouraged by the strong interest that I have experienced among business and industry groups, which clearly recognise the importance of education to the economy, and understand the imperative of maximizing our national stock of human capital.

Nothing the Federal Government has done, or said it will do, or can do other than implement needs-based funding, will prevent further decline in our national performance in the next round of

PISA results in 2015, which will become available in the first part of 2016.

Barring a double dissolution, the first date at which the next election for the House and half-Senate can be held is 6 August 2016. Gonski will be right back on the agenda.

Second, we must not be distracted by the diversionary and flanking attacks on Gonski, launched by Pyne under the banner of the Students First program and its four pillars of teacher quality, school autonomy, parental engagement and a robust curriculum.

Our poor international performance and steep social gradient cannot be explained away by poor teacher quality. If every teacher in NSW were to obtain a master's degree within the next three years, there might be some improvement in performance across the range including at the top and the bottom, but the gap between the most disadvantaged state school and the most affluent private school will never be reduced without the strategic redistribution of funding according to measured need.

Improved teacher quality - or, as I would prefer to describe it, 'improvement in the quality of education', costs money: it is not an alternative to Gonski. Gonski is an essential pre-condition.

As the research has shown, the second pillar, school autonomy, is an irrelevant distraction. I worked in England for nine years, where every government school (i.e. maintained school, which includes faith-based schools) has the autonomy of the independent public

schools in WA - governing boards that can hire and fire head teachers and staff, determine salaries and promotions, and so on. Yet school performance in England varies enormously from school to school, and from region to region, essentially related to aggregated social advantage in the south of the country and disadvantage in the north.

It is the quality of the whole-school instructional leadership of the principal that is the important thing, not their capacity to hire staff or borrow money for capital works. And building high quality instructional leadership across a school system costs money: it is also not an alternative to Gonski. Gonski is the pre-requisite.

The third pillar, parental engagement, is critical to school improvement. But building effective engagement, for example with newly arrived communities from different language and cultural backgrounds, demands very substantial resourcing. Improved parental engagement is not a substitute for Gonski - it requires Gonski, if it is to be effective.

The fourth pillar, a robust curriculum, is code for the charge that our poor international performance is the result of a 'cultural left' national curriculum.

No-one would be opposed to ongoing monitoring and review of the curriculum, by the proper authority (the Ministerial Council, not the Commonwealth Minister), and by independent reviewers.

But this is not what we've got. In the next few months Pyne will focus on an allegedly content-free, left-wing and insufficiently

Anglophile curriculum as the cause of our national decline. To him, education is a matter of filling an empty vessel, rather than the Socratic vision of lighting a flame.

We must not be distracted by all this. The real issue is Gonski.

Consider: the gap in reading performance between the top 20 per cent of Year 9 students, who are mainly in affluent schools, and the bottom 20 per cent who are mainly in disadvantaged schools, is currently equivalent to five years of schooling.

It is an appalling situation. One in five of our 15 year-olds is reading at no better than mid-primary level.

This is not the result of insufficient autonomy for government schools and their principals.

It is not the result of poor teaching.

It is not the result of a cultural left curriculum.

It is not the result of failing to make Thomas Hardy compulsory in Year 8.

It is the direct result of **sector-based, needs-blind** school funding – and it will not change until the situation is reversed, and funding becomes **sector-blind and needs-based**.

Third, we must all have the arguments at hand to counter – in meetings with parents, in the local media, in the local pub, in meetings such as Rotary which principals are often called upon to

address – the fallacious and frequently dishonest assertions made in the media.

Despite neo-con assertions that there is no evidence that increased expenditure will improve school performance, the positive impact of increased funding on student and school performance is overwhelmingly reported in the scholarly literature.

The jury is in on this.

The relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement is also absolutely beyond question. This is true however socioeconomic status is defined: either narrowly as parental occupation or income; or more broadly as the Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status, which is used by PISA, and which includes parental occupation, parental education attainment, and home possessions relating to wealth, educational resources and cultural possessions; or even more broadly as aggregated social disadvantage, which is the Gonski measure, and includes additionally Indigeneity, language proficiency and geographic location.

Again, the jury is in.

Briefings prepared by the Teachers Federation and the AEU are invaluable in assisting you to respond to fallacy with fact. I also recommend the submissions, transcripts of evidence and answers to questions on notice which are now available on the website of the Senate Select Committee on School Funding.

For example, answers to questions on notice number 41, in my name, is a comprehensive survey of the research findings on the relationship between expenditure, socioeconomic status and performance. Twelve of us worked on this document, and it is well worth a read.

The point is we each individually cannot afford to let nonsense go unchallenged, at any level from the Murdoch Press and 2UE down to a dinner table conversation or a chat with a parent, if we are to turn things around at the next election.

Fourth, keep the pressure on the Labor Party. They have a lot to answer for. I admire Gillard for establishing the Gonski process. But the reason we don't have Gonski today is not because the country has elected an Abbott Government, but because the Labor Government failed in its implementation.

Nine months after the election there is no roadmap apart from a promise to fund the full six years. Why does the Opposition not commit to setting up a national schools resourcing body, as we recommended, which would surely be immensely attractive to the states and territories – as the basis for implementing needs-based funding once it returns to government?

Finally, whoever forms the next government – a rejuvenated Labor Party or a more enlightened group of Liberals – let's campaign to

get rid of what proved to be the albatross around the neck of the Gonski Panel: the undertaking that no school should lose a dollar.

I am not suggesting the end of state aid to non-government schools. But, taking up David Gonski's comment in his recent Blackburn Oration, I do believe that it is in the interests of the nation and the individual that whatever funding is available should be spent strategically on the schools that need it - government and non-government - and on the things that matter, rather than on the schools that don't need it and on things that are simply nice to have.

In conclusion, Gonski lives.

And in ensuring that is so, great credit must be given to the AEU, the NSWTF and the teacher unions in the other states for your highly successful national campaign to keep this issue at the forefront of the public mind. Without that campaign, which we need to continue through to the next election, the neo-conservative right would have swept away the Gonski agenda. It not only remains, but has much support within the government's own ranks.

I firmly believe that needs-based funding along the lines of the Gonski model will eventually be introduced to this country. The longer the delay, the greater the deterioration and injustice. But at some stage there will be a national government that will be prepared to act, to prevent Australian education going utterly to the dogs.

It has been a privilege to speak with you: I thank you, and wish you well.