

VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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GONSKI: RE-IMAGINING AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION**Ken Boston**

The Gonski Panel was set up in April 2010. It worked for 20 months and reported in December 2011.

The immediate purpose was to recommend to government on new funding arrangements for schools for the period beyond 2013, when the existing funding legislation was due to expire.

In 2010, the 2009 PISA results had shocked the nation. Not only was it clear that our international performance was declining in both absolute terms and in relative terms in comparison with other countries, but there had developed since the year 2000:

1. a much stronger correlation between under-performance and aggregated social disadvantage than in any other in any other comparable country, and
2. a gap between its highest and lowest performing schools greater than the average for the 34 OECD countries. (The 2012 PISA results have since shown that the position has worsened.)

We have the most socially segregated education system in the western world.

The Education Minister, Julia Gillard, understood the causal relationship between aggregated social disadvantage our deteriorating national performance, and to her great credit asked us to develop a funding system which is “transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent educational outcomes for all Australian students”.

The Shadow Minister, Christopher Pyne, who I think almost certainly also understood that relationship, nevertheless - for reasons I will come to - called instead in 2010 for a review of curriculum and for greater attention to teacher quality. Apparently, the problem was simply that students in our under-performing schools were being taught the wrong thing, by poor teachers.

The Gonski Panel read more than 7000 submissions, met with 71 key education groups (many of them several times), contracted out several major research projects, visited 39 hand-picked schools in all states, and worked with a very skilled secretariat. And we reached unanimous agreement: there are no caveats or dissenting reports attached to Gonski. Six people, from an extraordinary range of different but backgrounds, signed up to the most far-reaching education report since Karmel.

What is the essence of Gonski, in a nutshell?

To explain that, I begin with economics: the question of whether education is a public good or a positional good.

A public good is something that is universally available, although it might have a cost. It is of benefit to all of us, and the benefit to each of us does not reduce the availability of the benefit to others.

Fresh air, traffic signs and street lighting are common examples of a public good.

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 teaching children to read. It is of benefit to all of us. Teaching one child to read does not reduce the capacity of another child also to learn to read.

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

Bluntly, the value of a person's achievement in education depends upon the educational achievement of the person ahead of him in the queue for a job.

Now, stripped down to the chassis, Gonski seeks to do two things:

1. to ensure that education, as a public good, genuinely gives every child the support that he or she individually needs; and
2. to ensure that educational achievement, as a positional good, is available on the basis of talent and hard work alone, rather than purchased by those in a position of wealth and privilege.

It is important to understand that Gonski is a fundamental re-imagining of Australian education, not simply a proposal for allocating resources to schools.

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 teaching quality or 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 macro-scale, 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 there is real 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 targeted at the recovery of the individual.

A school I know well, in the poorer suburbs of Sydney, 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 I have visited many times, 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.

We haven't got that image across 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.

Hospitals save lives; schools save - indeed create - futures.

If children don't get the support they need, when they need it, they are deprived of education as a public good. Instead, they are consigned to the bin of under-achievement, and we fail as a nation to realise our potential stock of human capital.

And that support requires money. You cannot deliver education as a genuine public good, without adequate public funding. That's what Gonski seeks to achieve.

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, not the result of a political settlement.

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.

So, what's at risk if we fail on this first objective, is the full realisation of education as a public good. The gap between the top and bottom 20 per cent of Year 9 students in reading performance is currently equivalent to five years of schooling.

That is not the result of insufficient independence for government schools.

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.

If we fail to reduce that gap, we will continue to have knowledge and skill never created; human capital never realised. It is as if a rich vein of some precious metal, which if extracted would generate far more wealth for the country than the cost of its extraction, was nevertheless left undisturbed in the ground.

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, which is specifically what Gonski calls for, 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. He claimed this would mean better education, by using "the dynamics of consumer opportunity and provider competition to drive service quality" (Address to NCISA, 14 July 2000).

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. While choice might be important, it is the national interest that the grounds for such choice should not be that the public schools have been starved of funds.

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, it had to be perceived as manifestly better than state education.

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 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 will 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.

Is Mr Pyne up for that? A meritocracy? A funding system that devalues the benefits of private schooling? One that creates a more even playing field?

Of course not. As Jim McMorrow's paper shows, the die is already cast: the December 2013 Mid Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook Statement shows that funding for government

schools in 2016-17 is \$90 million lower than projected in the May 2013 Labor budget, and that for non-government schools is \$34 million higher.

So, what's at risk is that educational attainment will continue to be a positional good available more to the privileged than the disadvantaged.

At risk is the Gonski vision of a fair go for all young Australians that, in due course and over time, a hard-working talented young girl will come to have the same real prospect of winning a place in the university and course of her choice regardless of family circumstances and background, and regardless of the school she attends - Pakenham Secondary College, Melbourne Girls Grammar, University High School, Sacre Coeur or Ballarat Secondary College.

Further, our national performance will continue to stagnate and decline, regardless of any tinkering with the curriculum.

It is important to remember that terms and sentiments such as meritocracy, a fair go for all young Australians, 'maximising our human capital' and 'creating a clever country' resonate well with many members of the Liberal and National Parties, including people in parliaments around the country. Gonski has strong national support from parents, teachers, and universities, from charities church-based and otherwise, from substantial although not all non-government school interests, from important elements within state governments and opposition parties, and from national opinion leaders.

It is critical to our success that we maintain and build this alliance of very diverse interests, many from the non-government sector, around sector-blind needs-based funding.

For so long as we can maintain and build that alliance, and occupy the moral high ground represented by sector-blind needs-based funding, we will see no frontal attack on Gonski. Rather, Minister Pyne will launch diversionary and flanking attacks, under the banner of the Students First program and its four pillars of teacher quality, school autonomy, parental engagement and a robust curriculum.

Mr Pyne says that funding should never be an end in itself. Whoever proposed it should be? The final chapter in the Gonski Report, *Building Momentum for Change*, focuses on the need to invest the increased and/or redistributed funds in a great teaching profession, in empowered schools and leadership, in developing and sustaining innovation, in parent and community engagement, and in quality assurance.

Similarly, we would support the proposals from the Grattan Institute on turning schools around, but the price of doing so is increasing or redistributing the available funds, so that these priorities can be met.

As I have argued, our poor international performance and steep social gradient cannot be explained away by poor teacher quality. If every teacher in Victoria 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 Pakenham Secondary College and Melbourne Girls Grammar will never be reduced without the strategic redistribution of funding according to measured need. The same goes for school autonomy and parental engagement.

The most dangerous diversion is the charge that our poor performance is the result of a 'cultural left' national curriculum. Of course the curriculum can be improved, but it is not the

cause of our national decline or explanation of the poor performance of disadvantaged schools.

As the year develops, criticism of the national curriculum will be drip-fed into the shock-jocks of the media week by week and subject by subject. The risk is that advocates of Gonski will be distracted by this and other diversionary issues, and lose sight of the fact that such issues are perennial, peripheral and subsidiary. Gonski is of an entirely different order: it is an opportunity that has never come before, and if lost will not come again for many years.

Improvements in quality education, which subsumes teacher quality, should be supported, as should parental engagement, but neither can be achieved without adequate funding.

In short, unless Mr Pyne's four pillars are built on sector-blind, needs-based funding, they will have no impact on our overall national performance.

The Federal Opposition also is failing to come up to the mark. The great risk within the current political context is that the Labor Opposition will fail to put sufficient political pressure on the government to achieve the Gonski reforms.

Even on the curriculum review the Opposition has failed to take a trick: it has failed to nail home the obvious challenge to the authority of the review of the national curriculum: the national curriculum is an Australian curriculum not a Commonwealth curriculum; it is approved by the Ministerial Council; the Commonwealth Minister has no more authority unilaterally to mount a review than the Minister for Education in Tasmania. Review it, certainly - but do so under the auspices of the body responsible for its creation.

More importantly, the Opposition has not rammed home to the Australian public the reason why six year rather than four year Gonski funding is critical: that funding only to 2016/17 will leave up to 20 per cent of public schools still well below the Gonski school resourcing standard. These are the genuine emergency wards of Australian education.

The implementation of Gonski over the six year period requires an additional \$15 billion: \$10 billion from the Commonwealth and \$5 billion from the states. Yet, although the Abbott Government now says that it will honour "the spirit and the letter" of its assurances on needs-based funding, the total it will provide in the four years to 2016/17 is only \$2.8 billion. There is a shortfall of \$7.2 billion to be met in the fifth and sixth years.

Further, there is no evidence that the Labor Opposition has learned from the mistakes it made in government in the long 21 months between December 2011 when we submitted our report and the election in September 2013:

- setting aside the recommendation to establish a national schools resourcing body, similar to a schools commission, responsible to all education ministers, to determine in a nationally consistent way the resourcing standard, the minimum public contribution, the loadings and the indexation factor;
- instead, seeking to negotiate these matters unilaterally and separately with the state authorities, non-government school organisations, church leaders and unions - after we had consulted with them all for more than 18 months - thus repeating the pattern of the past forty years;

- setting aside the recommendations on disabilities funding and the coordination of capital works funding across states and territories;
- announcing that the required funding would come from tertiary education;
- and in the final few weeks of government, touting Gonski around the country in an unholy scramble to entice states to sign up to deals in which the fundamental principles were entirely secondary.

Six months after the election we have no road-map from a party that commissioned the most important education report since the Karmel Report and failed in the politics of its delivery.

Before I, for one, would want to link arms with the Labor Party on the future of Gonski, I would want to know that it has learned the lessons from that lost 21 months; that it has gone beyond the easy rhetoric; and that it has mastered the hard task of developing a step-by-step and achievable strategy for putting pressure on government to implement Gonski now - in this government's current term of office - rather than hope the pendulum might swing back in another three years.

We know that investment in quality teaching can turn around poor national performance in a relatively short space of time. In 2009, Poland was a basket case, although the capital Warsaw was up there with Finland. The education authorities in Warsaw had focused on investing in improvements in classroom practice; that has now spread to the rest of the country, and Poland is now near the top of the PISA league table. Similarly Canada is ahead of Australia in performance and has a flatter social gradient, but the province of Ontario is well ahead of the others because of its greater investment in teachers and pedagogy.

The same is perfectly achievable in Australia, but only by implementing Gonski.

If we lose Gonski, we will lose public education. We will lose what everyone in this room has worked for and valued. The purpose of education will be to sort the wheat from the chaff. Generations of children will continue to be lost. Australia will be diminished.

As the educational leaders of government schools, you are at a watershed in the history of public education. It is time to nail your colours to the mast.