

# **Proposed Amendments to the Australian Education Bill 2012**

**A Submission to the Senate Education Committee on  
the Australian Education Bill 2012**

**Save Our Schools  
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This submission considers two issues relating to the Australian Education Bill 2012 – equity in education and collaboration between schools. First, it proposes clarification of what is defined as equity in education and recommends that the definition adopted by the Gonski report on school funding be included as a key principle and object. Second, it recommends that collaboration between schools be included as a component of the reform directions for the national plan for improving the performance of schools and students.

## **1. Equity in education**

### **1.1 The Education Act should include a definition of equity in education**

The Preamble and the Objects of the Bill state that Australian school should be “highly equitable” but this is not defined in the Bill. This failure could lead to ambiguity and confusion about education policy goals and outcomes. It is important that the term be defined in the Act to provide a clear direction for education policy and school funding.

Historically, many discussions of equity in education have focussed on inputs into education such as physical and human resources or the funding required to provide such resources. Some see educational equity as meaning equal educational resources or inputs for all students, for which per-student expenditure is often considered a proxy.

However, students are different in terms of what they need to reach any particular level of achievement. Some students will achieve at much lower levels at a given input level than others because they come from a disadvantaged social environment or because they have special educational needs.

It is educational outcomes rather than inputs which are the ultimate focus of education policy goals. Inputs to education are a means to an end, namely, the education outcomes expected for all children in modern society. Thus, any definition of equity should have regard to education outcomes.

Achieving greater equity in education outcomes was the key focus of the Gonski report on school funding. It said:

The panel has defined equity in education as ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. [p. 105]

The panel elaborated on this definition as follows:

Equity in this sense does not mean that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes. Rather, it means that all students must have access to an acceptable international standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend.

Furthermore, it said:

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.

Save Our Schools supports inclusion of the Gonski report’s definition of equity in education as a principle in the Preamble to the Education Act and as part of the Objects of the Act.

A further question is how the Gonski report definition should be interpreted. Save Our Schools proposes that equity in education outcomes should include both an individual and a social component.

From an individual perspective, equity in education outcomes should mean that all children receive an adequate education for modern times, or, as the Gonski report states, achieve an acceptable international standard of education. From a social perspective, equity in education should mean that children from different social groups achieve similar average results. This follows from the belief of the Gonski panel that the underlying talents and abilities of students that enable them to succeed in schooling are not distributed differently among children from different backgrounds. Again, as the Gonski report emphasizes, this does not mean that all children should be expected to achieve the same results as individuals.

Save Our Schools proposes that equity in education should comprise a dual objective:

- All children should receive an adequate education; and
- Different social groups of children should achieve similar average results.

## **1.2 An adequate education for all children**

A key component of equity in education is the goal that all children should receive a threshold level of education which enables them to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to that society. This can be viewed as a democratic minimum or threshold in education, or, as in the Gonski report, an acceptable international standard. In some discussions, this individual goal is referred to as an “adequate education”, a concept that has played a key role in recent court decisions in the United States about the funding of public education.

Society has a moral obligation to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Indeed, the moral authority of a society that calls itself a democracy depends in no small part on providing all its citizens with an adequate education. It is a matter of justice and a moral obligation of society that all children should receive a minimum formal education required to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to society.

It is also in society’s interest to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Social waste is incurred if some children do not receive an adequate education. It means that human talents that could contribute to society are not fostered. All children have talents that can be realised through education and formal learning. By failing to develop those talents, society incurs lost opportunities for its development and enrichment.

Further social waste is incurred by the long-term social and financial costs of inadequate education. Inadequate education for some leads to large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of health care, social security and crime.

In today’s society, an adequate education should mean successful completion of Year 12 or its equivalent. Those who do not complete Year 12 are to a large extent cut off from further education and training and have limited future employment prospects. All students should complete Year 12 to gain the knowledge and skills they require to enter the workforce or to go on to further education in TAFE or university.

### **1.3 Students from different social groups should achieve similar outcomes**

The distribution of education outcomes between different social groups has a key bearing on access to occupations, income, wealth and positions of power in society. Even if all young people achieve the basic threshold level of education, large inequalities in outcomes above the threshold can still occur between social groups. Such differences affect the life chances of individuals according to their membership of social groups even though their talents and abilities are not distributed differently according to social background.

Some groups of students may continue to obtain a lesser education than more privileged groups because their average results are significantly below those of other groups. For example, average outcomes of students from high socio-economic status (SES) families could still be much higher than for those from low SES families if high SES students continue to comprise a disproportionate number of those achieving at the higher levels of attainment while low SES students are clustered just above the minimum threshold. In these circumstances, high SES students will remain a privileged social group in terms of access to higher education and the higher paying occupations and status positions in society.

Equity in education therefore should also mean that students from different social groups achieve similar average results as well as the minimum threshold level of attainment expected for all students. As the central belief statement put forward by the Gonski panel implies, there is no reason in principle to consider that the innate intelligence and talents of low SES, Indigenous, ethnic and remote area students are somehow less than those of high SES students. No social, racial or geographic group of students is innately more intelligent or talented than others.

Large disparities in school outcomes are also a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity. Australian governments and industry organisations all emphasize the need to improve Australia's productivity. Eliminating inequity in education outcomes would be a huge boost to productivity.

However, achieving equity in education does not mean that all students should achieve exactly the same outcomes. While all students should achieve an adequate education, it will involve different results for individual students. Social equity in education means that students from different social groups should have similar results in terms of group averages. This will involve different results for students within each group, with some in each group achieving higher results and some around the minimum threshold.

### **1.4 Conclusion**

Equity in education outcomes should be seen as a dual objective incorporating both individual and social equity. Achievement of a minimum threshold level of education (an adequate education) for all students should be a fundamental goal of public education. However, this is not enough to achieve equity in education. Achieving social equity in education should also be a fundamental goal. This means that low SES, Indigenous, ethnic and provincial and remote area students should achieve similar outcomes to students from high SES families.

## **2. Collaboration between schools**

One of the reform directions for improving the performance of schools and students specified in the Australian Education Bill 2012 is "empowered school leadership". Section 7 (3) states:

Leaders in schools will have the resources, the skills, and greater power, to make decisions and implement strategies at the local level to obtain the best outcomes for their schools and school students.

Increasing school autonomy is a major policy priority of all Australian governments. Recent policy initiatives have focused on increased power for principals in the recruitment of staff and in budgetary decisions about centrally provided funding.

As outlined in a previous submission to the Senate Education Committee on Teaching and Learning, Save Our Schools considers that the claims made about positive effects of greater school autonomy on student achievement are greatly exaggerated and ignore the weight of evidence from research studies that it has little to no effect on student results and can lead to greater inequality and social segregation.

A particular concern about greater school autonomy is that, together with other factors such as the publication of school results and school league tables, it undermines collaboration between schools and the spread of best practice in teaching and learning. School autonomy encourages schools to see themselves as isolated silos rather than as part of a system working together to achieve particular education goals. This is the strong conclusion of recent analyses of the experience with school autonomy in New Zealand and England.

## **2.1 New Zealand school self-management**

New Zealand has long had one of the most decentralized school systems in the world under the *Tomorrow's Schools* program introduced in 1989. It reduced the NZ Education Department to a much smaller ministry, abolished regional education boards and made schools responsible for their own decision-making.

A new book published last November by Dr. Cathy Wylie of the New Zealand Council of Educational Research (NZCER), titled *Vital Connections*, reviews the history of the program. It concludes that the model is flawed and cannot meet the demands now being placed on the education system. It says that New Zealand needs more than self-managing schools; schools need more central support.

Dr. Wylie says that the past 23 years have demonstrated the limitations of making each school a separate island. *Tomorrow's Schools* created a system of fragmented schools which emphasised the “self” part of self-management, of putting one’s own school first and not being part of an overall national system.

We now have a substantial body of robust analysis that shows we need to rethink the self-managing model in order to create a more dynamic learning system. [NZCER Media Release, 3 December 2012]

She says that *Tomorrow's Schools* has been wasteful, with too much reinventing of the wheel and few channels for sharing good ideas and practice between schools. Collaboration between schools in the same district to support each other to improve decreased under self-management.

After the first ten years, the NZ Department of Education could no longer ignore the growing problems and financial difficulties of many schools. But, Dr. Wylie says it was a case of “muddling through” and this has gone on ever since. For example, at one stage the Department encouraged schools to work together in clusters to compete for additional

funding, but these clusters soon dissolved once the funding ceased. In any case, she says, schools in competition with each other were not likely to form clusters together. The basic problem was that central office support for schools was perceived as undermining school autonomy. The priority was to adhere to the principle of self-management and this meant that any connections with schools had to be framed as indirect or temporary.

...it is separation of the government agencies and schools, the absence of the middle ground and shared responsibility, that made and still makes it difficult to harness and use all the knowledge and actions needed to keep developing the quality of New Zealand education. [p.114]

Dr. Wylie recommends fundamental changes to the system. She says that stronger connections and better support across the system are vital, not only to make gains in student achievement for all but to get much better value for the education dollar. Schools need the opportunity to learn from their peers in other schools.

Our current system lacks the national and local infrastructure of connections to share and keep building effective teaching practices so that all our schools can do what we ask of them. [NZCER Media Release, 3 December 2012]

She says that what is needed is to integrate the key strengths of what was lost with *Tomorrow's Schools*. This means more support at the local level, more connections to share and build knowledge and more coherence between the different layers of the schooling system.

She recommends a return to more central and regional support for schools. Her proposals include a national network of 20 education authorities throughout the country, with responsibility for schools in their region and charged with ensuring schools and teachers are supported and challenged and can learn from each other.

## **2.2 Academy schools in England**

Academy schools are independent, state-funded schools in England which have much more freedom than traditional public schools. They are free to manage their own budget, appoint staff and determine pay and conditions, set their own admissions criteria, set their own curriculum and determine their own governance structures. They were originally introduced by the Blair Labour government as a way to improve struggling schools in deprived areas.

The program has been altered and accelerated by the Conservative/Liberal Democrats coalition government. All primary and secondary schools are now invited to convert to academy status, but priority is given to those deemed to be “outstanding” or “performing well”. Over half of all secondary schools in England and a growing number of primary and special schools have become academies, or are in the process of converting.

A report on the experience with academies was recently published by the UK Academies Commission which was set up by the Royal Society for the Arts and the Pearson Think Tank to examine the implications of the ‘mass academisation’ of state schools and the impact this might have on educational outcomes.

The report covers a wide range of issues, one of which is the impact of the expansion of independent academies on collaboration between schools. It expresses concern at the isolation of academies from other schools and the system and calls for more collaboration between schools.

The report notes that the Academies Act was intended to generate not only competition between schools but also cooperation and collaboration. One of the conditions for moving to academy status is a commitment to supporting other schools to improve. However, many academies have put their energies into competition rather than collaboration and see school-to-school support as a low priority.

The evidence before the Commission suggests relatively few have taken on the supportive roles expected. Some schools told the Commission that the pressure in terms of public accountability to achieve good results and good judgements from Ofsted prevented them from taking on the accountability and responsibilities associated with sponsorship.

A number of converter academies reported keen local competition from other schools and indicated that they did not want collaboration with and support for other schools to divert them from individual success. The headteacher of a highly successful school in an Outer London Borough told a Commissioner that he saw his main competition as coming from independent schools in the area and that this stopped him from spending time supporting other schools. [p.27]

The Commission says that much more needs to be done to capture the power of collaboration for system improvement.

The Commission believes that a fully academised system is best seen as a community of schools, each independent but working best if connected to the rest of the system. These schools would work with one another to accelerate school improvement, in particular the quality of teaching and its impact on learning and the achievements of children and young people. Collaboration across this national community of schools should enable a balance to be struck between independence and interdependence, with the clear aim of serving children and young people well. [p.5]

School autonomy is not enough for school improvement:

Autonomy and independence are fundamental elements of academisation but they should not mean isolation. Academies need to learn from each other if improvement is to be as strong as it needs to be. [p.32]

The report states that collaboration between schools, together with excellent teaching, “is the route to improve learning and raise achievement for all pupils, no matter what their background” [p.8]. It says that more academies should recognise the value of establishing a collaborative culture, both within and across schools, and that a more systematic approach is needed. It says there would be real benefits from the government linking greater collaboration between schools with the academy program.

The evidence considered by the Commission suggests a more intensive drive to develop professional connections, collaborative activity and learning – both within and across schools – will generate fundamental change across the school system. This is a model of autonomous schools working in partnership to improve teaching and learning for them all. It is a model that not only shares and improves practice across the system but also has the potential for creating new and innovative practice. This represents a cultural shift. It is already underway but needing more momentum through a much tighter link with the process of academisation. [p.6]

The report recommends that the Office for Standards in Education support a school-led collaborative approach to school improvement and that the Department of Education should trial a number of school-led excellence networks designed to develop capacity and ensure support for all schools that need it [p.10]. It also recommends that an independent Royal College of Teachers should be established and funded by government to encourage more school-to-school collaboration about effective classroom practice.

## 2.3 Conclusions

Clearly, collaboration between schools to spread best practice in teaching and learning is a very important aspect of school improvement. This is well recognised by high level education leaders. For example, at the launch of the Academies Commission report, Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director for Education and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the OECD's Secretary-General, said that collaboration is vital for system improvement and pointed out that there is a much stronger correlation between collaborative culture and system success than that associated with autonomous school systems.

The experience in New Zealand and England provides substantial evidence that there is a very real danger that school autonomy and school self-management in Australia will undermine and restrict collaboration. While the Federal Government is committed to supporting greater school autonomy it should acknowledge these dangers and act to counter the incentives created by school autonomy for schools to see themselves, and operate, in isolation from other schools.

To this end, the Government should make collaboration between schools part of its national plan for education. Support for collaboration between schools to spread best practice in teaching and learning should be included as one of the reform directions set out in Section 7 of the Education Act.

The Federal Government should introduce programs that support greater collaboration and build networks between schools. It should negotiate a new partnership agreement with state and territory governments to provide funding to support greater collaboration. The National Partnership on Empowering Local Schools should be complemented by a National Partnership on Supporting Collaboration between Schools.

## 3. Recommendations

Save Our Schools recommends that:

1. Equity in education should be defined in the Preamble and Objects of the Education Act as ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions.
2. Equity in education outcomes should be specified in the Definitions of the Education Act as follows:
  - a. Completion of Year 12 or its equivalent by all students (the adequate education objective); and
  - b. The achievement of similar average outcomes by students from all social groups including high SES, low SES, Indigenous and remote area students (the social equity objective).
3. The Government should incorporate collaboration between schools in its national plan for education. Support for collaboration between schools to spread best practice in teaching and learning should be included as one of the reform directions set out in Section 7 of the Education Act.