Submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding

March 2014

Introduction

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the national federation of organisations representing parents of students attending Catholic and independent Schools. We thank the Committee for the opportunity to present this submission to the Inquiry into the development and implementation of national school funding arrangements and school reform.

We note the detailed terms of reference for the review and the complexities of conducting the inquiry in this first year of funding arrangements under the Australian Education Act 2013. We further note that a review of the loadings for disadvantage that are built into the funding arrangements is to commence this year.

We support the Australian Government’s reform agenda aimed at the improvement of student outcomes with its focus upon quality teaching, principal autonomy, engaging parents in education and strengthening curriculum.

We also support the role of the Commonwealth in collecting and reporting national data. Such data must be made publicly available to ensure transparency in reporting how funding arrangements are being implemented and their effectiveness and progress in achieving school improvement.

In regard to the first point we note that details of individual Commonwealth funding per student in the various schooling sectors, which was previously available online is no longer available.

It is worth noting here that key policies of APC with regard to the provision of public recurrent funding to school students, state that funding must always be allocated as a basic per student entitlement plus additional funding for education disadvantage.

APC has therefore previously expressed support for the principles that underpinned the recommendations of the report of the Gonski review of funding for schooling. However, we do not believe that those principles are adequately reflected in the design and implementation of the current funding model.
Funding of schooling

It is unlikely that a fully national system for the funding of schooling as envisaged by the Gonski Review will be achieved given the outcomes across the last 12 months of negotiations with the jurisdictions and sectors.

Under the Gonski recommendations, school students would be allocated a base funding amount plus loadings according to how many students from low socio-economic communities, Aboriginal students, students with low English proficiency and students with disabilities were enrolled, along with loadings determined by the size and location of their schools.

A fundamental Gonski recommendation for the development of national school funding arrangements was the setting up of a national schools resourcing body to disburse all public funds, state and federal, to all schools, irrespective of sector. This was not accepted by the government of the day or by the state jurisdictions.

In the absence of such a national body, separate arrangements are in place for each government jurisdiction and non-government sector and each system in each state can decide how to use its money as long as it is used for school education. The calculations of the loadings for disadvantage appear unbelievably complex.

The funding arrangements now in place are therefore far more complicated than the previous method of distribution of Commonwealth funds for schooling. Throughout the development of the new funding model APC’s position was consistent – that any new model had to demonstrably be an improvement on the pre-existing model. That has not been done.

Without the national body recommended by the Gonski review, the concept of truly national funding arrangements was lost. The Student Resource Standard has become vulnerable to political expediency and may lack contemporary relevance. It is noted that the reported figures for education expenditure on the My School website, the National Report on Schooling and from the Productivity Commission report remain some one to two years behind actual expenditure.

A national schools resourcing body with authority over all funds for schooling, state and federal, could have been instrumental in bringing about the Gonski reforms for funding and school reform in a more objective way. However, we now have a situation where the current funding model is subject to political manipulation and expediency in much the same way as the AGSRC it replaced.

The funding situation for the non-government sector now remains essentially the same as under the previous funding model. Non-government schools are still subject to parental capacity to contribute restrictions which determine the basic per student entitlement and students’ entitlement to loadings. Systems continue to receive block funds with the capacity to redistribute for needs. As a consequence, non-systemic non-government schools are the only schools that are actually subject to the new Act at present.

Students with disabilities

The needs aspect for children with disabilities is still on the backburner although multiple reports over the past 10 years have asserted that three times the average cost of schooling a
student in a mainstream school is required to educate a student with disabilities. State jurisdictions have already invested large amounts in their disabled student populations, but students with disabilities attending non-government schools receive only a small proportion of the funding they need.

A start in addressing this urgent problem would be to increase Commonwealth funding for students with disabilities in the non-government sector to a figure at least three times the average cost to the states and territories of educating a ‘mainstream’ student in a government school. The recommendation of the Gonski Review, that all students with disability be fully funded, regardless of school sector, should be implemented to enable that to happen.

The APC therefore supports a position where funding for students with disabilities be removed from the funding model.

**Funding Reform and Parental Engagement**

We wish to bring to the attention of the Select Committee an aspect of school reform which was canvassed in Gonski, is a stated pillar of the current education reform agenda and is featured in international and national research as a critical focus for school reform.

Authentic engagement between parents and the teachers and school leaders to whom they entrust their children’s formal schooling is an essential element of school reform. It should be written into school improvement policy and resourced to a level that is consistent with its potential to achieve improvement in student outcomes.

In Australia a parental engagement strategy is supported by the COAG National Educational Plan, which identifies “Boosting Parental Engagement” in schooling as a key policy and reform direction. It is also supported by the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians, which commits to developing stronger partnerships between parents/families/carers/communities and schools. The National *Family-School Partnership Framework*, which was endorsed by all Ministers for Education throughout Australia, also emphasises that schools need to recognise the primary role of the family in education as well as advocating for families and schools to work together in partnership.

In overseas jurisdictions parental engagement is being embedded into educational policies and reforms. For example in 2009 the USA created a National Family, School and Community Engagement Working Group, to inform the development and implementation of federal policy related to family, school and community engagement. Another example can be found in Ontario, Canada where in 2010 the Minister of Education introduced the first comprehensive parent engagement policy in schools.2

Parental engagement is evident in some worthwhile individual programs and projects throughout Australia but APC proposes that Australia should aspire to the systematic and sustainable integration of parental engagement into all aspects of the reform agenda.

Policies and practices that enable this strategic approach to parental engagement are urgently needed. Studies confirm that when teachers understand parents and communicate

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and build relationships with them, students benefit\(^3\). Recent research into parent engagement programs in Australia also shows that such programs are not only effective in terms of student outcomes, but that the programs have wider and lasting benefits for parents, teachers and the community which feed directly into improvements in the life quality and economic wellbeing of individuals, the social capital of communities and the fortunes of the economy generally\(^4\).

Strong, positive relationships with parents also play a role in retaining teachers, as teachers are more likely to stay in schools where there are high levels of trust with parents and where teachers feel that parents support their work and respect them and when their own professional practice is strengthened by working in partnership with families.

The importance of trust between schools, families and communities is evident from a World Bank working paper in 2006\(^5\) which suggests that one of the six factors that contributes to the success of the Finnish education system is the culture of trust, i.e. the belief that teachers together with principals, parents and their communities know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth.

A study conducted by APC\(^6\) found that for many parents the sense of partnership, or lack of it, turns on whether the school and the teachers recognise them as the primary educators of their children and treat them accordingly.

The study found that parents judge this by:

- the quality of interactions they have with the school;
- the ease with which they can gain access to teachers and principals if they wish;
- the responsiveness of the school to their wishes or concerns, and
- the extent to which they receive early notice of any issues arising about their child.

Parents who feel well treated in these areas are far more likely to say they feel as if they are partners.

A cultural shift will be required throughout Australian schools to enable the enormous potential of parent engagement to achieve improvements in student outcomes, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will require sound policies and an appropriate level of resourcing.

**In conclusion**

Claims that the funding system now in place is a “Gonski” model are disingenuous as the model is not a national funding model and the bulk of the funding required to implement the model is not guaranteed. Despite the intent of the Australian Education Act, future funding arrangements for students with disabilities, particularly those attending independent and Catholic schools, are still undecided. Parental engagement, identified by

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\(^6\) Australian Parents Council (2008) *Values and Other Issues in the Education of Young Australians*.
the Gonski Review as a key lever for schooling reform, remains on the outer fringes.

There is a need for all political parties to work together at the Federal, State and Territory levels to find an authentic national funding model for schooling that puts the needs of students at its core. The Gonski Review provided a starting point but the opportunity was lost. Nothing of real note has occurred in the development and implementation of the current funding model to convince APC that real national funding reform is achievable.

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