

Australian government dismisses call to boost school funding

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3 March 2012

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Labor government last month rejected a call by its own inquiry into school funding for a \$5 billion annual increase in education spending to address the gross inequality in Australia's school system.

Gillard said the report provided "great insight," but she refused to commit any extra funds. Education minister Peter Garrett commented: "We've always said that we're going to bring the budget back in to surplus [and] I think that's the most important thing that we can do at this point in time."

Even the limited 15 percent increase in funding recommended by the report is anathema to the Labor government. Its overwhelming priority is to satisfy the demands of the financial markets for the elimination of the budget deficit produced by the bailout packages during the first phase of the global financial crisis.

According to the report, Australia has one of the most inequitable education systems in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). "When compared to other high-performing OECD countries, Australia's schooling system is characterised by a strong concentration of disadvantaged students in certain schools, and conversely, a strong concentration of advantaged students in other schools," the report states.

Nevertheless, while the report calls for increased funding to tackle "high concentrations of disadvantaged students," its central thrust is a new financial regime that would represent a step toward a voucher system. Such a scheme would benefit private schools, accelerating the shift toward fee-paying education over the past four decades.

The review was conducted on the basis of Gillard's pledge that no private school would lose funding as a result of its deliberations. Since taking office in 2007, the Labor government has preserved the former Howard government's funding system, which favours private schools, and the report's recommendations will maintain basic features of that system.

To chair the inquiry, the government selected David Gonski, the Australian Stock Exchange chairman. He also chairs the fund-raising arm of one of the country's most elite schools, Sydney Grammar. To ensure a "bipartisan" approach, other panel members included former Keating government minister Carmen Lawrence and former Liberal Party municipal councillor Kathryn Greiner.

The national teachers' trade union, the Australian Education Union, portrayed the *Review of Funding for Schooling* as a means of alleviating the vast disparities that exist in Australian schools. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The key proposal from the 250-page report is a Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), which would allocate schools about \$8,000 for each primary student and \$10,500 per secondary student. Extra "loadings" would apply to five categories of students: in remote locations, in schools with a high proportion of indigenous children, from low socio-economic backgrounds, with limited English proficiency, and with a disability.

Government schools would receive the full SRS, while private schools' entitlements would be based on an "anticipated level" of funding from other sources. This would not be a direct calculation of their fee income, supposedly because this would generate "disincentives for parents to invest in their children's education."

Gonski's report specifies that all private schools would receive government money, "regardless of the capacity of the school to contribute or of its actual contribution to the funding for the schooling of its students." Trinity Grammar, for instance, which charges fees of \$23,500 in Year 12, would obtain 30-35 percent of the SRS.

This is despite the fact that the report acknowledges that the elite Independent schools are "bastions of privilege" where nearly half the students come from the wealthiest quarter of the population. Government schools, on the other hand, cater for 80 percent of those from poor backgrounds, 78 percent of those with disabilities and 85 percent of indigenous students.

However, the report is not concerned with overcoming the social chasm. It argues for increased funding for the most disadvantaged schools in order to improve "productivity and competitiveness within the global economy." Its essential concern is that many young people emerge from schooling without even basic employment skills.

"Over the last decade the performance of Australian students has declined at all levels of achievement, notably at the top end," the report states. To reverse that decline, it also calls for a performance lift at the "tail end."

The review reveals a starkly polarised school system, with social disadvantage prevalent in government schools. "Research commissioned by the panel found that one-third of all Australian schools serve a student population where the average socioeconomic background of students is below the national average. Further, within these schools, the majority of students are from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds (58 percent)."

In 2010, 36 percent of all government school students came from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 21 percent in Catholic schools and 13 percent in Independent schools.

Parents are increasingly driven to enrol their children in private colleges to give them any chance of a decent future. In 2010, 66 percent of students attended government schools, 20 percent Catholic schools and 14 percent independent schools. In 1970, independent schools enrolled just 4 percent of students. Over the past

decade, the number of government schools decreased by 223, while the number of Catholic and Independent schools had increased by 12 and 79 schools respectively.

This trend is driven by the systemic under-funding of government schools. In 2009, they received only 49 percent of the total expenditure on school infrastructure—counting federal and state government funding and private sources—even though their enrolment share was 66 percent. Overall, government spending on education accounted for 3 percent of gross domestic product, below the OECD average of 3.5 percent, but private spending was double the OECD average (0.6 percent of GDP compared with 0.3 percent).

The government is attempting to blame teachers for the decline in educational performance. Education minister Garrett told a teachers' conference that improvements would come from lifting teacher quality, not spending more money. "It's not a mystery," he declared, "teaching is the answer". His response was in line with editorials and opinion pieces in the *Australian*, effectively scapegoating teachers, and placing the entire burden of the declining education system on their backs.

The Gonski report itself concluded that social background is the major factor in determining educational outcomes. In reading literacy, "the gap between Australian students from the highest and lowest economic, social and cultural status quartiles was found to be equivalent to almost three years of schooling."

Gonski's funding regime, however, would only entrench the education divide. It would be a transition to a voucher system, where parents are offered a nominal amount to enrol their children in either a public or private school. This market-driven approach is central to the "education revolution" that the Gillard government is implementing at all levels of education, including tertiary and vocational training.



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