

# The Gonski “needs-based” school funding fraud in Australia

## Part 2: The “socio-economic status” racket

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16 November 2017

*The following is the conclusion of a two-part article. Part 1 was posted on November 15.*

Amid all the genuflecting from the teacher unions, Labor and the Greens to “Gonski,” none of them has mounted any serious challenge to the legitimacy of handing enormous amounts of public funds to religious and wealthy corporate schools, in violation of the democratic principles of the separation of church and state, and social equality.

Gonski’s funding formula obliterates any significant distinction between public, Catholic and corporate schools. The only difference is that a fraction of each private school’s SRS must be raised from private contributions, including fees, donations and fund-raising—although the total required can amount to as low as 10 percent.

Here we come to the next level of deceit within “Gonski.” How much money a private school is deemed to be able to generate from private contributions is calculated on the basis of its socio-economic status (SES) score, not on the basis of how much private income it *actually receives*.

The SES was first introduced in 2001 by the Liberal-National government of John Howard, as a means of funnelling ever more public money into elite schools, behind a smokescreen of “equity.” It works by linking students’ residential addresses to national census data on *average* incomes, education, and employment *within the area in which they live*.

In other words, the real socio-economic status of specific school families is irrelevant, except insofar as it contributes to the average in their residential area. Likewise excluded are schools’ already existing assets and infrastructure, along with other funds generated by

fees, donations and bequests, and fund raising activities.

The system allows multiple distortions. If, for example, a wealthy family from a regional or country town decides to send its children to an elite boarding school in the centre of Sydney or Melbourne, the SES is calculated on the average, usually depressed, conditions within that regional town. As a result, the elite school’s SES score will be lowered, meaning it will receive more government funding per student than if the student’s family lived in the upper-class residential area surrounding the school.

The reverse is also the case. If a poor, working-class family, living in an average middle-class suburb, sends its children to the local public school, the SES will be calculated on the average middle-class income of that suburb, not of the poorer area where the school is located. This will lift the local public school’s SES score, meaning it will receive less funding per student than if the student’s family lived in the poorer area, where the average income more closely matches that of the family.

In both cases, the system benefits wealthier students attending private schools.

### **Further windfalls for elite corporate schools**

Take King’s School in Sydney, for example. It currently charges \$34,000 a year for senior student fees. The school’s website boasts that it was “established as a boys’ school that would provide Australia with its next generation of leaders... Crown Princes, leaders of political parties, authors, actors, leaders in law, medicine and in a wide range of other professions, have all been educated at King’s.”

King’s already boasts, according to its website, 300

acres of grounds, including expansive parkland, grassed quads that are modelled on Oxford and Cambridge, graceful colonnaded buildings with terracotta columns, sandstone and open veranda areas, a centre for learning and leadership, including a library and conference centre, as well as halls, a music centre, classrooms, drama centre and sports hall. Its sports facilities feature extensive playing fields, a strength and conditioning centre, tennis courts, rowing facilities, rifle range, basketball courts and swimming pools.

In addition to the parental fees it charges, King's will receive a total government funding increase of \$19.3 million over the next decade. Per student funding will rise from \$4,527 this year to \$6,849 in 2027, a 50 percent increase over the decade.

A very different picture emerges from the profile of Girraween Public School, located just a 15-minute drive from King's. This school, like innumerable others across Australia, lacks the most basic facilities, let alone state-of-the art infrastructure like that enjoyed by the children of the super-rich at King's.

Serving mostly working-class families in the area, and with 93 percent of students hailing from a non-English speaking background, the Girraween Public School's student numbers have ballooned, as a direct result of the government's failure to construct more schools in line with population growth. Consequently, Girraween now has 29 portable classrooms, installed in areas that used to be set aside for students' play and recreation, and just 16 permanent ones. There is now virtually no space to play and children from different year levels have staggered recess and lunch breaks so they can fit in the yard. Enrolments since 2010 have nearly doubled, with around 1,100 now students attending the school. Yet not a single new toilet has been installed over this period, much less other desperately needed infrastructure.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) issued a press release last year heralding Girraween Public School as among several "disadvantaged NSW schools benefiting from Gonski." After reporting that the school had received extra funding, under "Gonski," of a miserable \$784,000 in 2015, AEU federal president Corenna Haythorpe boasted: "Gonski is directing more resources to the schools which need it most—the ones which educate our most disadvantaged students."

This statement expresses the indifference and

contempt of the union bureaucracy and the political establishment as a whole towards working class, public school students and their *social right* to a high quality, fully-resourced public education. It also explains their enthusiasm for Gillard's "Gonski" funding model, and their role in covering up the socially regressive agenda that lies behind it.

What *should* exist—and the resources are already there for it—is a universal public system that provides every student in the country with the quality and abundance of resources currently on offer at King's, Knox, Kambala, Geelong Grammar, or any other of the myriad elite corporate schools around the country. In other words, every student, whether residing in a major city, regional town, or remote area, deserves the opportunity to develop to their maximum potential—intellectually, physically, culturally, and artistically. Moreover, every person—child, teenager, adult and elderly citizen—should have the *social right* to engage with the public education system, to the extent that they desire, throughout their lives.

Such a transformation in the provision of education, however, requires the revolutionary reorganisation of society, through the establishment of workers' government that will implement a socialist and internationalist program. This would include placing the banks, major corporations and utilities under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, and prioritising the social needs of the majority over the parasitic wealth of the privileged few.

Those who agree should join the Committee For Public Education, recently launched by the Socialist Equality Party, to fight for this perspective.

*Concluded*



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