

Here today, Gonski tomorrow

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Did you ever work really hard on a piece of work, and when you brought it home, your mum said it was good, but was too distracted to get around to putting it up on the fridge? That might be just how David Gonski, chair of the review of school funding in Australia, feels after delivering his final report to the Prime Minister last December. It has taken the government two months to formulate their response, and while many key stakeholders are encouraged by the content of the report, there is widespread concern about the government's commitment to implementing the recommendations.

The *Review of School Funding – Final Report December 2011* contains 41 recommendations and 26 findings which comprise a blueprint for lifting educational standards and outcomes in Australia. The simplicity of the presentation belies the complexity of the task faced by the Gonski panel, which considered more than 7,000 submissions from interested parties in the process of drafting its report.

The need for reform has been apparent for some time. The Executive Summary of the report highlights the inequity in funding to the different sectors by state and Commonwealth governments as one significant driver for change, noting that, “These roles are divisive within significant parts of the Australian community because they can give the false and misleading impression of a preference by the Australian Government for non-government schools over government schools, and a corresponding false and misleading view of neglect by state and territory governments of the funding needs of non-government schools.” The lack of a cohesive view of funding between and within the states and territories, whether it be in regards to indexation, capital and infrastructure or special needs, gave rise to the first, and possibly most important recommendation in the *Review of School Funding* – to develop a school resource standard on which funding for schools across all sectors can be based.

Many of the subsequent recommendations in the report provide context and detail about what a schooling resources standard might encompass. From an educator's perspective, it is reassuring to see that the panel developed an understanding of the breath of issues faced by schools and teachers, while focusing on the core ideal of providing equity of opportunities and outcomes regardless of the background of students. “The panel acknowledges that schools contribute to a much broader range of outcomes for students than those currently measured by governments and which receive the greatest



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attention in this report,” the Executive Summary states.

Under the Gonski vision, in addition to a baseline standard of funding, schools would be eligible for extra resourcing for disadvantaged students. The rationale for this is directly linked to evidence that the gap in achievement levels between high and low performing students in Australia is much larger than in many top performing Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. With students from low socio-economic and indigenous backgrounds being disproportionately represented in the bottom end of our results, the need to allocate extra resourcing to our most vulnerable children is undeniable.

The *Review of School Funding* proposes a model of funding that would allow disadvantaged students to receive a loading of between 10 and 100 per cent of the schooling resource standard. In allocating the loadings, factors such as the size and location of the school and whether or not the students are from an indigenous or non-English speaking background would be taken into account. It is

recommended that the loadings will be available to any student who meets the required criteria, regardless of the school system they attend, a move that will ensure government schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged students are well supported and non-government schools have a greater ability to accept students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The report also suggests that, “In contributing towards the additional costs of educating disadvantaged students, governments should move away from funding targeted programs and focus on ensuring the states and territories and the non-government sector are publicly accountable for the educational outcomes achieved by students from all sources of funding.”

While the schooling resource standard was not an unexpected recommendation, what perhaps came as the biggest shock was the price tag – an estimated \$5 billion. This is possibly why the response of the federal government has been so measured. In a joint press release, the Gillard government pledged to “implement a model of this kind if we are satisfied it will help Australia to achieve the following objectives.” A list of



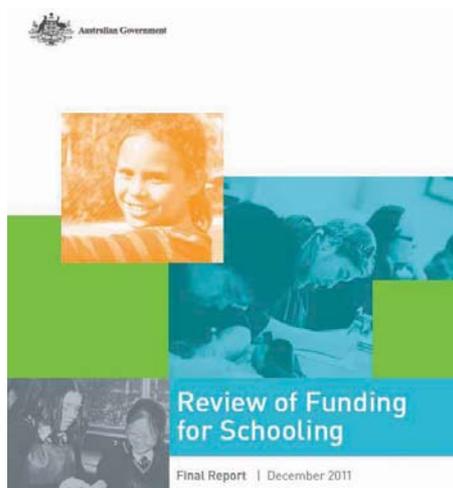
David Gonski

eight goals follows, one of which is, “Deliver financial sustainability, to ensure that schools can be financed properly into the future.”

The tone of the Gonski report has an urgency to it that is not reflected in the government’s response. It appeals for immediate action to establish a schools resourcing body, and for the representatives from all sectors across the country to set an indicative school resource standard by mid 2012. Rather than waiting to research schooling resource standards, Recommendation 9 of the *Review of School Funding* suggests using the three most recent years of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results to identify schools with 80 per cent or more of their students consistently performing at the minimum benchmark. The report advocates using the resourcing levels of these schools as a baseline schooling resource standard that could be refined over time.

To further expedite implementation of the reforms, Recommendation 20 of the report acknowledges that the current Socio-Economic Status (SES) model used to allocate funds to non-government schools is flawed, but should be used initially to determine independent school funding. This would allow a new funding system to be established in the short term while a more accurate measure of school need is developed. The approach is both pragmatic for the present and forward-thinking.

The government’s press release, on the other



hand, talks of establishing working groups, seeking the commitment of the states and territories, working through the reforms, and establishing, “a ministerial reference group to ensure there is ongoing consultation and dialogue with key stakeholders and the public through this process.” It acknowledges the government’s previous \$65 billion investment in education without promising its share of the \$5 billion required to realise the Gonski panel’s recommendations and looks to be leading towards a review of the review, instead of a timeline for action.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable achievements of the Gonski panel’s work is

that traditional education adversaries appear to agree with its findings and, by extension, with each other. Peak bodies such as the Australian Education Union, the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia have all hailed the recommendations as a once in a lifetime opportunity to effect sustained and meaningful change in school funding. Of course, their agendas remain different, but all are united in a belief that the proposed schooling resource standard will help meet the *Review of School Funding*’s aim that, “Every school must be appropriately resourced to support every child and every teacher must expect the most from every child.”

What all the stakeholders want now is clarity. For the independent sector in particular, this means knowing the implications of funding arrangements in real terms as soon as possible to determine whether the feared fee hikes will come to fruition. The Australian Education Union has added its voice to the call for detail with Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos stating in his press release, “We also need a clear timetable for the introduction of legislation this year to ensure new funding arrangements can be put in place by 2014.”

David Gonski and his review panel deserve to feel proud of the vision they have created for a better educational future for Australia. Let’s just hope it makes it to the fridge door sometime soon where we can all benefit from it. **ET**