



The gavel comes down on Gonski

Annie Facchinetti

The crime? Education funding in Australia. The suspects? Past and present state, territory and federal governments. The victims? That all depends on who you talk to. Everyone – educators, unions, parents and students, politicians and principals – seems to have an opinion on the Gonski Review and how it should be interpreted and implemented to ensure that Australian students receive a world-class education. Although witness testimony is notoriously subjective and therefore unreliable, evidence from all sides is pouring in before the trial begins in earnest.

The witnesses for the prosecution – those who want an end to current funding arrangements – are many. The star witness is, as you would expect, the federal government. In his latest response to the Gonski Review conveyed via a joint media release with Prime Minister Gillard, Minister for School Education Peter Garrett outlined the government's National Plan for School Improvement. Top of the list is, "A new way to fund schools that would ensure all our schools are getting the money they need to do their job." The plan's detail includes introducing a School Resource Standard, based on the costs associated with running already successful schools, which would be allocated to each student regardless of the institution or school system they attend. In addition to the benchmark amount, students requiring extra support due to six pre-determined factors ranging from socio-economic disadvantage to disability, would

attract a loading, thereby making more funds available to students with the greatest needs.

At times Mr Garrett seemed to contradict himself, first stating in his media release (2012), "Like the current system, the government funding provided to non-government schools would be adjusted based on parents' capacity to contribute," then suggesting that, "Funding would

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not be determined by whether a school is public or private – it would be determined by how much funding a school needs to deliver a great education." Conspicuously absent from his testimony was his earlier promise which reassured schools that they would not be worse off under the changes, reiterated on Facebook in August as follows: "Reports today about school funding cuts are just wrong. No school will lose money under our plans."

A number of additional witnesses, while backing the prosecution's central case against the present education funding formulas, have come forward with views which are not altogether consistent with those presented

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Schools immediately need additional resources in order to lift performance

by the federal government. The Australian Education Union (AEU) for example, has always contended that public schools deserve greater funding, and sought to reduce independent school support. In response to an AEU report analysing the impact of the 2012 Budget, Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos concluded that, "Nothing could illustrate the inequity in the current arrangements better than these budget projections which show public school funding being slashed at the same time as private school funding is soaring" (AEU, May 2012). The announcement of the details of the National Plan for School Improvement prompted the AEU to urge state and territory leaders to, "put the interests of children first and commit to additional funding for education in line with the recommendations of the Gonski Review" (AEU September 2012). While supporting the bulk of the Gonski recommendations, Gavrielatos expressed disappointment at the government's six-year implementation timeline, suggesting that schools immediately need additional resources in order to lift performance.

The AEU's perspective on events was corroborated by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO). In ACSSO's media release responding to the National Plan for School Improvement, President Peter Garrigan also welcomed the prospect of ending current funding arrangements, while suggesting that, "we would have preferred to see a much shorter transition period" (2012). Like the AEU, ACSSO also highlighted the urgency of building an education funding system that is based on need.

The Independent Education Union (IEU), while also appearing for the prosecution, declared that, "The six years implementation timeline proposed within the Gonski parameters is probably what's needed." (2012) The IEU's view is that any changes to funding methodology need to be thoroughly trialled and tested, "to ensure the model for the school resource standard, loadings and the annual indexation have integrity for Catholic and independent schools."

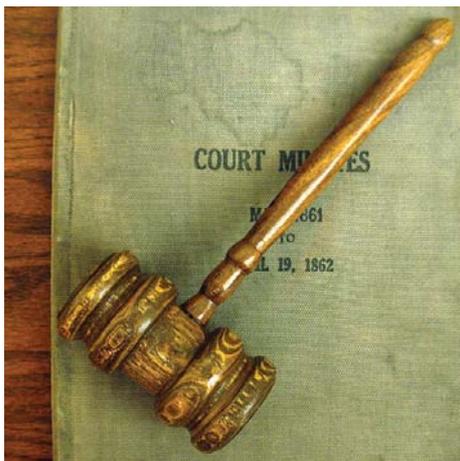
The jury may, however, be somewhat surprised to hear that both the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) and Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) disagreed somewhat with the IEU's assessment of the timeline, instead agreeing with the AEU assessment. For both these organisations, funding certainty was identified as a fundamental issue, with the NCEC registering disappointment with the lack of detail provided in the Government's plan, and ISCA Executive Director Bill Daniels asserting that, "Whilst acknowledging the need for a phase-in period, the critical short-

term issue for independent schools is funding certainty to allow schools to responsibly plan for the future." Daniels did, however, applaud the Government's pledge to include independent school representatives in future discussions over details of the plan.

Chief counsel for the defence of the current funding arrangements is predictably the Liberal Party. Leading witness Tony Abbott stated in an address to the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia and Independent Schools Council of Australia National Forum, "The only way, ladies and gentlemen, right now to ensure that no school is worse off is, I believe, to stick with the existing system." The Opposition Leader was openly sceptical about the Government's ability to successfully execute the changes recommended in the Gonski Review, explaining that he has seen nothing to suggest that the Howard-initiated SES model of funding could be improved upon. Mr Abbott also drew attention to the common misconception that the Commonwealth Government unfairly favours independent schools when it comes to funding. "Overall, the 66 per cent of Australian school students who attend public schools get 79 per cent of government funding; for 34 per cent of Australians who attend independent schools get just 21 per cent of government funding. So, there is no question of injustice to public schools here. If anything, the injustice is the other way."

Mr Abbott's testimony is supported by the Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training Christopher Pyne. Pyne described Prime Minister Gillard's speech in which she expressed the goal for Australian students to be ranked in the top five in the world by 2025 as "all feathers, no meat" (2012). The Liberal Party, he claimed, would maintain the recurrent funding that schools currently receive with a rise of approximately six per cent each year to manage increasing costs.

Unfortunately, the credibility of the claims made by the Federal Opposition are seriously undermined by the recent release of the New South Wales State Government's budget. Minister for Education Adrian Piccoli admitted that tough decisions had to be made when announcing cuts to State and Regional Education Offices and a cap on non-government school funding for four years, although he also claims that education funding is being increased by \$383 million. His assertion that, "general



expenses in the education portfolio have outstripped growth in Government revenue and this is simply unsustainable," does not bode well for the negotiations between the states, territories and the Federal Government about who will provide the extra funds required for the National Plan for School Improvement.

What is most damaging to the Liberal Party case is that the NSW funding cap for non-government schools has far-reaching implications. Since Commonwealth funding is directly tied to state and territory levels, a freeze on increases to state funding equates to a freeze on increases to Commonwealth funding. A recent Sydney Morning Herald (2012) article maintains that decreased state and territory spending means the indexation rate for this year will be just 3.9 per cent, compared with the average indexation rate of six per cent, representing a drop in independent school funding of \$150 million from the previous year. According to the executive director of Catholic Schools in the Sydney archdiocese as quoted in the article, the NSW funding freeze represents a \$15 million funding loss for Catholic schools; all of which appears to prove that the SES model of funding does not guarantee that some schools will not lose out.

The upcoming trial of the Federal Government-initiated Gonski Review is likely to be long and drawn-out. On paper, student need seems to be a solid principle on which to base education funding, but the reality of implementing the National Plan for School Improvement in a difficult economic climate against the competing priorities of the states and territories, not to mention the education sectors,

seems a challenging one. Judgement in this case will be suspended pending further evidence.

Further reading

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Australian Education Union (May 2012) Report Warns of Budget Cuts to Public Schools Australian Education Union Media Release Retrieved 26 September 2012 from: <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Media/MediaReleases/2012/2305.pdf>

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Independent Schools Council of Australia Independent Sector will Partner with Government to Improve School Outcomes Independent Schools Council of Australia Media Release Retrieved 27 September 2012 from: <http://isca.edu.au>

Piccoli, Adrian Building a sustainable education system in NSW Media Release on NSW Government Department of Education and Communities Retrieved 27 September from:

<http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/about-us/news-at-det/media-releases1/building-a-sustainable-education-system-in-nsw>

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