

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Education Policy Comment

The Federal Government Has a National Responsibility to Fund Public Education

The call by the [former head of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Martin Parkinson](#), for the Federal Government to hand over all responsibility for school funding to the States would have disastrous consequences for the nation. If pursued, it will only ever apply to public schools because the Coalition and Labor will never agree to ending the Federal role in funding private schools. Ending Federal funding for public schools would undermine national education, social and economic goals

The Liberal Party is openly the servant of private schools. As Tony Abbott infamously said, it is a priority of the Liberal Party to fund Independent and Catholic schools. "[It's in our DNA](#)" and "we want to protect them" and see them "continue to flourish". As the former Federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, told [Christian School leaders](#) in May 2014, the Coalition Government has an "emotional commitment" to private schools and that it was the Prime Minister's (Abbott) view that "we have a particular responsibility for non-government schooling that we don't have for [State] government schooling". [He added](#): "I can't see those circumstances changing. You can rest easy on that".

Both the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) and the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) are firmly opposed devolving full responsibility for schooling to the states as revealed in their submissions to the Abbott Government's Federation White Paper Education Issues Paper in 2016. They both want to maintain the Commonwealth's role in funding private schools. [The ISCA said](#):

For Independent schools, having government funding from two different sources, spreads the risk of governments making changes to their school funding arrangements, with one level of government providing a funding buffer against dramatic funding policy changes at the other level of government. This is particularly important for stand-alone Independent schools which cannot rely on systemic support.

[The NCEC said](#):

...it is not desirable for state and territory governments to be the sole funders of school education and particularly of non-government schools. State and territory governments face an inherent conflict of interest towards the non-government sector arising from their status as funders, regulators and government school operators.

Moreover, if states and territories were solely responsible for education, the inevitable reduction in government funding for non-government schools, for a variety of reasons, would put the viability of the Catholic education sector at risk.

The Liberal Party has faithfully supported these views. For example, when the former [Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull](#), floated the idea that the Federal Government withdraw from funding public education he was careful to say that it would retain responsibility for funding private schools:

No Coalition Federal Government, I suspect no Federal Government, would retreat or from funding and continuing to support the non-government school sector because there would

be a concern that they would not get a fair go from state governments who obviously would have a competing interest with their schools...

It is to be noted that Martin Parkinson was the head of Prime Minister and Cabinet at the time Turnbull made this statement. He is fully aware that the Coalition will never accept handing over responsibility for funding private schools to the States. His proposal is effectively confined to public schools. As such, it fails to recognise the national responsibility of the Federal Government to support public education.

The Federal Government's role in public education stems from its responsibilities to improve equity in education, social cohesion and economic growth. It also has special responsibilities relating to Indigenous Australians and migrants, which implies a key role in funding public education.

While the States have primary constitutional responsibility for education, the national government has a responsibility to ensure that the rights of all citizens to a quality education are upheld. It has a responsibility to ensure that all children, whatever their background and wherever they live, receive an education adequate to prepare them for full participation in the community as citizens. As a report by the Commonwealth Schools Commission in 1985 stated:

The rights and obligations of all Australian citizens to participate in the national democracy, whatever their background or circumstances, confers an obligation on the Commonwealth to ensure that all students are receiving, through their schools, effective preparation to take their place as citizens of Australia.

...it must ensure that every child is prepared for full participation in the community, to the benefit of both the individual and of Australian society.

[Commonwealth Schools Commission, Quality and Equality, 1985, p. 15.]

In upholding the democratic rights of all citizens, the national government has a special responsibility to ensure that children who endure hardship due to poverty, location or cultural background have access to the benefits and privileges enjoyed by the rest of society, especially in relation to access to a quality education.

The national government cannot allow a diversity of state government provision of public education that results in children in some regions being denied an adequate education. If a state government decides by reason of insufficient revenue, ideology, or other reasons, that some children cannot be supported to achieve the minimum level of education expected by society, then the national government has a responsibility to intervene. As the Schools Commission report said:

Children's opportunities in adult life must not be constrained by the limits to parents' capacity to provide their education, or the disparities in what parents can provide. The same argument applies, in turn, to what systems can or do provide. The Commonwealth is the guardian of equity across the nation, and should ensure that the quality of a child's schooling is not dependent upon living in a particular State or Territory and that all systems and schools share the responsibility for contributing to the quality of education for all children.

[p. 12]

Similarly, children from different family backgrounds should be expected to achieve similar levels of education whatever the state or territory in which they live. For example, Indigenous children living in the Northern Territory should be expected to achieve the same level of education as Indigenous children living in the ACT or Victoria. If a state government is discriminating against Indigenous children by not providing an adequate education, the national government has a responsibility to

intervene. The same case applies to other disadvantaged students such as those from low socio-economic status (SES) families and those living in remote areas.

It is the responsibility of the national government to intervene in all circumstances where students are not achieving an adequate education and where there are large differences in the results of children from different social groups. In a federal system, the national government is the essential monitor and backstop to ensure that all children receive a quality education to prepare them for adult life.

This was the central rationale for the expansion of federal government involvement in education initiated by the Whitlam Government. It recognised that the revenue base of state governments was insufficient to meet rising community expectations and demands for increased education amongst all sections of the community. Following the recommendations of the Karmel Report and the establishment of the Commonwealth Schools Commission, successive Labor and Coalition governments accepted their national responsibility in education and provided recurrent and capital funding to public and private schools to reduce deficiencies in resources, support the needs of disadvantaged students and fund specific programs to improve education.

The joint role of the Commonwealth and state/territory governments in school education was later formalised in statements of national goals of schooling and various related implementation agreements, strategies and programs. Three inter-governmental declarations of national goals of schooling have been issued since the first in 1989 (the so-called Hobart Declaration, followed by the Adelaide and Melbourne Declarations in 1999 and 2008 and now the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration issued in December 2019). They established a national framework for schooling and fostered a co-operative effort to improve school outcomes. Equity goals are a key component of each declaration.

National goals for schooling imply a role for the national government. Successive Commonwealth Governments have intervened in school education to achieve these goals in a variety of ways, including funding support, developing national standards, national student performance assessment and providing national information about resourcing and student performance. For example, they initiated the development of a national curriculum which, whatever the debate over the detail, provides a guarantee as to what every child can expect to learn at school wherever they live. They played a central role in the development of national school outcome standards, teaching standards and national assessment of student performance. They supported the development of a national information base of school results and resources through the National Report on Schooling in Australia and, more recently, the My School website.

Federal governments have provided critical funding support for under-resourced schools and disadvantaged students over many years, as exemplified in various disadvantaged schools programs, national partnership programs and the Gonski needs-based funding model. Transfer of all responsibility for funding of public schools to the states would abrogate the national responsibility of the Federal Government to ensure that all children, whatever their background or where they live, have access to a quality education and that disparities in education according to background and location are reduced.

In particular, it would abrogate its specific constitutional responsibilities for Indigenous Australians. The Federal Government has concurrent powers with the states to make laws relating to Indigenous Australians. It has long been a national goal to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students and close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Just this month, the Prime Minister re-committed the Government to working to close the large education gap.

Eighty-four per cent of Indigenous students attend public schools. If the Federal Government were to stop funding public schools, it would be abandoning its constitutional responsibility for Indigenous children and its commitment to reducing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The Federal Government also has exclusive constitutional powers over immigration. It has responsibility for providing assistance to migrants in a range of social issues, including education, to support their integration in Australian society and ensure social cohesion. The large majority of children of immigrant families also attend public schools and Federal Government funding has played a critical role in Australia's success as a multicultural society. Ending Federal funding would threaten continuing success.

In addition, the Federal Government has assumed the major role in economic policy since the Second World War to support economic growth and national prosperity. Education is an important driver of economic growth through improving the knowledge and skills of the workforce. Adequate funding for public schools is fundamental to providing a highly skilled workforce.

Far from abandoning its role in funding public education, the role of the Federal Government should be to develop an integrated national approach which co-ordinates funding from different levels of government. Unfortunately, the Coalition Government sabotaged the Gonski funding model which was designed as a national approach to school funding. Abandoning the Federal role in funding public schools would be another backward step that would further undermine the achievement of national education, social and economic policy goals.

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