

## President's Message March 2017

I'm writing this as I reflect on a madly busy February that followed a relatively quiet January. Perhaps it's just symptomatic of the start of every year in education as we gear up for the year ahead and seek to make the most of the end of summer before the evenings start to draw in as autumn begins its relentless march into the cooler nights of winter.

The shortening days often draw us back into the cinemas and other forms of media that, in an ever expanding range of outlets and busy times, often leaves us as parents a little overwhelmed with knowing what is appropriate for our children to engage with. The Australia Council on Children and Media (ACCM) is turning 60 this year and is a longstanding advocate of informed and appropriate media choices for family viewing. Its website offers a variety of helpful resources including 'Know before you go' and 'Know before you load' that gives an objective review of movies and apps that are currently available. You can find it [here](#) and there is a free app available that delivers in a straightforward and visual format – just search for 'ACCM reviews' in your app store. In line with entering its seventh decade of looking out for our children, the ACCM is holding a one-day conference on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> May in Melbourne. Entitled Tots and tech: challenges for early childhood in a digital age it will be exploring the implications of the use of media and technology on early childhood. Having seen the quality of the speakers it will be a unique opportunity to discuss the future policy objectives that will impact on our children's education and wellbeing. The conference landing page is [here](#) and I look forward to seeing you there in May.

### **Parent engagement conference - unlocking learning for all**

Whilst I'm on the theme of conferences, and with a frenetic February moving into a slightly less mad March, please remember that the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and Smith Family's Australian Parent Engagement Conference is set for the beginning of June this year. I understand that close to 300 abstracts have been submitted for consideration that represent a wide cross section of best practice in this field. ARACY has set the conference to have a real focus on what works in school communities, what has the potential to inform future practice and what people on the ground have used and its outcomes. With the international expertise of Debbie Pushor, Karen Mapp, Jenni Brasington, Bill Lucas and other leading specialists in parent engagement practice, it's a unique opportunity to be fully embraced. As a taster of what's to come check out the conference blog [here](#). The conference information page is [here](#) and note that the early bird rate ends on the 17<sup>th</sup> March. There's more

information below and I look forward to seeing you there in a few months' time.

## **Needs and wants, and funding**

In my time as part of ACSSO it's becoming increasingly apparent that the highly complex morass that is the education funding landscape of our proud nation serves no-one particularly well – least of all those in public education with the most to gain from a truly needs-based education system. Insofar as public education goes it is a truly needs-based plea rather than a wants-based expectation. David Gonski's observation that<sup>[AP1]</sup> *'To say that many government schools need further assistance both in money and tender loving care is an understatement'* is a sobering reflection on what is a true need and that which in some sectors could be described as just a want – nice to have and not essential to the core delivery of education. The fact that many of these schools profess strong Christian values and ethically based pastoral programmes is an irony that doesn't escape scrutiny... perhaps there is the need for an allegorical road to Damascus journey of reflection for some of these institutions..?

The more we attempt to bring clarity to this murky space the more we learn of its intrinsic nuances that protect existing special deals and arrangements. What is quite striking are the vested interests that transcend the necessary sense of fairness that should apply to funding across all sectors. Funding seems to be targeted at sectors and systems rather than what is guaranteed to be delivered at a classroom and school level according to real need. Our questioning of this led to ACSSO's call for Fair, Simple and Transparent, and truly needs based funding agreements that we see as an essential imperative to bring clarity in the funding miasma; a call that is becoming increasingly urgent as we approach the looming spectre of post 2018 funding agreements.

## **The Boston perspective**

You may have recently caught sight of a number of articles questioning the real nature of Gonski, what might be possible in terms of overfunded schools and the potential for true reform. This is especially important given that the next meeting of the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) Education Council is due in less than four weeks' time – a meeting where we are anticipating that a consensus on post 2018 funding agreements between the Commonwealth and the governments of our states and territories can be reached. Interestingly, it's the articles commenting on a recent speech delivered by Ken Boston, a member of the original Gonski panel, sharing his thoughts on what Gonski could have been, together with a sense of what might still be possible. A transcript of his speech can be

found [here](#). It is interesting to note that the Gonski panel was bound by its terms of reference and perhaps that's the correct starting point to examine what exists today as a reflection on Ken Boston's thoughts. He makes the strong point that it should have been about the redistribution of funding to schools in real need, and from the bottom up – not in a top-down patriarchy model; he contends that what resulted in being named and championed as Gonski bears little resemblance to its original intent. Can you imagine the day when the wise tenets of truly needs-based and sector blind funding applies to all sectors of [\[AP2\]](#) education. This is absolutely reliant on there being sufficient political will, across the nation, for reform to resolve the obvious tensions that exist between the demands of governments, sectors, fairness and real need. ACSSO advocating for the imperative need for this to all sides of politics. Perhaps now is the time to once again reflect on David Gonski's underpinning tenet, namely: *'differences in educational outcomes must not be the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions'*. There may well have to be legislative change to bring this about and it is ACSSO's considered view that Fair, Simple and Transparent, and truly needs based funding agreements will provide a firm foundation on which to build a sustainable and high quality education for every school age student. The future demands on our children in the modern workplace will expect nothing less.

## **Baselines and statistics**

The School Resource Standard (SRS) from the 2013 Education Act establishes a target level of government funding to sustain an appropriate level of education delivery in schools according to a sector's ability to contribute. There are also additional commonwealth payments made that are [\[AP3\]](#) calculated on quantifiable disadvantage in schools. The overall SRS contribution is derived from a calculation of a shared input from the Commonwealth and the state or territory (S&T) government - balanced for the non-government schools with a 'capacity to contribute'. The current projection for 2017 is looking to be a commonwealth contribution of around 17% towards the SRS provision for public schools. This does vary across S&T's depending on the average 83% contribution to the SRS provision made at a S&T level – a contribution that has to compete with other budgetary demands at a S&T level such as housing, health, roads, budgetary constraints, etc. the vast majority of government funding to non-government school comes directly from the Commonwealth and does not have any competing demands on its distribution the final payment. Overall the long-term national goal is to reach 95% of the SRS for public education – pretty much the sole source of significant funding income. Based on a national average it still appears to be a long way off this for most public schools. It's interesting to note that 25% of non-government schools receive government funding at 100%+ of the SRS they are entitled to as

opposed to just over 1% of public schools that receive funding at this level. I find these figures sobering and cause for deep concern as public schools are open to all and cater for the greatest proportion of students with additional needs and challenges. It is testament to the quality of our public education system together with the professionalism of the Principals and Teachers within it that it does provide a high quality and inclusive education, with innovative practices, for two-thirds of Australia's school age students – a proportion that is growing.

Currently there is a dual rate indexing factor in the 2013 Education Act that designed to adjust these funding anomalies. The travesty is that some of these overfunded schools and systems could take over 100 years of indexing to bring them back into line. This is only taking the overfunding back to 100% of the SRS entitlement. If we are currently talking about the \$215m+ going to around 300 overfunded schools at 100%+ of the SRS then imagine how many additional schools and how much 'overfunding' could then be redistributed to schools in real need if this were set at the notional 95% SRS target level deemed appropriate for public schools..?

### **Time to take action...**

Now is the time to contact your Federal and S&T representatives and make your thoughts known. Our children deserve a fair go and it's ACSSO's belief that Fair, Simple and Transparent, and truly needs based funding agreements - across all sectors - is the way it must be. The post 2018 funding agreements are a critical juncture in this process with April's COAG Education Council meeting only one of these essential steps. With the Gonski buses once again on the road, highlighting the positive impact of targeted needs-based funding in schools, the moment to bring about real reform has never been better. The coming weeks and months will reveal the resolve on all sides of politics and government to address the complex problem of education funding; one that no side can be allowed to walk away from. Our nation's future demands nothing less – it has to be right.

Now is the time...

Phillip Spratt