

President's Message – April 2017

If not now, then when...

A month that starts with all fool's day where innocent jokes are played on friends and strangers, together with the end of daylight saving at summer's close for those of us that had it, also sees the next session of the Council of Australian Government's Education Council as it grapples with the complexities of education funding. Another irony is that in its rotating tour of Australia it is to be held in Hobart. A town that's also the proud home of MONA – the world famous Museum of Old and New Art – or more colloquially known as the museum of sex and death. Whether this is an accurate metaphor for the current state of play in the education funding debate remains to be seen. What we can hope for is that the unique perspective and talents of David Walsh, as the inspirational owner, creator and curator of MONA, and some say the saviour of Hobart, can imbue the Education Council's vital deliberations in reaching a consensus on the post 2018 education funding agreements.

Enrolments on the up

I often rely on the maxim that without accurate information how can one hope to make a decision let alone formulate realistic policy perspectives? The funding agreements debate is one such example that relies on accurate data. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) latest education update, available [here](#), sees a fascinating set of numbers that compares 2016 with 2015. In the last recorded 12 month period we have seen total student enrolments grow by 47,253 across all schools. What makes this number particularly interesting is that 38,672 or 82% of them were to public schools. Seeing that over 70% of all schools in Australia are public schools it suggests a growing shift towards public education and recognition of its inherent strengths as an inclusive and high quality option for the vast majority of our nation's children. The question then is how is this growing demand to be fairly and properly resourced?

Mateship and learning

Mateship and 'education for all' go hand in hand as two of our defining national values. Mateship is defined as helping and receiving help from others, especially in difficult times or in times of need, and can be combined with the natural sense of a fair-go. This spirit was extended to a Catholic school in need half a century ago, in a way that prised open the door to government funding of private sector schools. This initiative was intended as an interim measure to bring them up to the level of resourcing of public schools. The door was finally wrenched off its hinges in the mid

1990s in a way that saw direct government funding for the private sector enshrined as an absolute right - together with a matching sense of entitlement. We now have a school resource standard (SRS) defined in the 2013 Education Act that seeks to codify this sense of fair-go in government contributions to education funding across all systems, states and territories. To say that we have independent schools in Australia is something of a misnomer as they all rely on a significant government contribution – perhaps the term ‘subsidised private sector schools’ is nearer the mark.

The irony is that we now see 25% of private sector schools funded at 100% or more of their SRS entitlement and yet only just over 1% of government schools are at this level. This is also relative to public schools that are denied the legislated special deals and other forms of financial advantage available exclusively to the private school sector. I’m not sure a sense of mateship prevails in this scenario when public schools that are open to all, and with 82% of the additional 2016 enrolments, are compared to private sector schools that operate on a selective and exclusive entry basis, and often with levels of overall funding, facilities and resourcing that public schools can only dream of. In the spirit of mateship and a fair-go for all I call upon the private sector schools to willingly give up this overfunding and unfair advantage they have enjoyed for far too long. There is also a point to consider in these schools repaying the historical surpluses that have already been paid out to them so that it can be redistributed to schools in real need. Perhaps the Centrelink debt recovery robot might like a new focus for its activities?

Growing opportunities for change

ACSSO’s perspective is that the current historical education funding arrangements may have occurred with the best of intentions as provision was made for various sector interests and lobbying interventions. What we have been left with is a range of partisan agreements, special deals and unfair advantages that are not fit for purpose. An attempt was made for reform with the Gonski review – now many years old – that was again subject to brinkmanship and sectorial shenanigans that has left schools in all sectors at a disadvantage, and most of all those in our burgeoning public sector that operate over 70% of our nation’s schools.

Education funding is an emotive issue that ACSSO seeks to address as the fire of funding reform is burning hot and we need to clear the smoke. Our call for Fair, Simple and Transparent and truly needs based funding is resolute and sustained and we have yet to see any feasible alternative. Our proud nation has to start again with the end in mind – education funding where it’s needed, at the level needed and going to schools that have real need. Each of our children has to have the opportunity to thrive and flourish

in an appropriate learning environment. An environment with educators that can truly focus on the job they are passionate about – giving our children the very best of learning opportunities.

Our nation's future demands nothing less.

Phillip Spratt

4 April 2017