

President's message

The times they are a changing

For many of us the summer is flashing by and before we know it our children are starting the new school year with what appears to be so much time ahead of us. For me, looking back on the year that was it seems like the previous January was just a moment ago. And yet in that time so much has happened – or is it just that I'm getting older and time passes ever quicker..?

In all the haste of family life, together with all the logistics and busyness that comes with the start of the school year, it's vitally important to remember and appreciate that we as parents are the initial and ongoing educators of our children. Schools are vital partners with parents and the community in establishing a strong foundation for our children's future opportunities in life. When considering this partnership it's salutary to reflect that over 80% of a child's time in any one year is spent out of school and with their families and community.

There are a growing number of initiatives that are designed to support these learning partnerships. A couple that have recently been updated are the free Learning Potential app – designed to give tailored tips and advice to parents – available here, and ELLA (Early Learning Languages Australia). The best of these support the focus of the Australian Curriculum that defines what our children should be learning in school, and act as a teacher's reference for all the hopefully glowing reports to come.

There is a well-hidden resource for parents that gives a clear and straightforward explanation of what our children will be taught in the year ahead. It's on the Australian Curriculum website via this link to downloadable PDFs and well worth a look. If your school has a communication app then these PDFs can be easily incorporated within it. As parents it can provide real insight into what our teachers are teaching and allow us to engage with our child's teachers in a truly informed and authentic way.

Money, money, money...

Our nation's public schools offer fully inclusive learning environments with highly trained professional educators that can see our children flourish. To do this to the best of their abilities schools and the staff teams require resources. Therein lies the highly complex and wicked problem that is education funding in Australia; a nation that is in reality a federation of independent nation states and territories – each with its own interests and agenda in the schools funding debate.

The Council of Australian Government's (COAG) Education Council, with representatives of each state and territory, is tasked with engaging with the Federal government to resolve the post 2018 funding agreements for public education; work that appears to have gone quiet over the Christmas break. ACSSO's resolve to see Fair, Simple and Transparent, and truly needs based funding for education is as strong as ever. The Federal government has a crucial role in leading the debate to ensure that every child has the same opportunity to thrive in our education system - regardless of their family circumstances.

The resourcing baseline

The foundation that underpins this ability to thrive is the measure known as the School Resource Standard (SRS) - a level of combined funding per student that is calculated to provide a suitable standard of education provision.

The fact that almost all of Australia's schools receive funding that is less than this standard, from both the Federal and State and Territory governments, is a blight on our children's future. This must be a major point of consideration in the COAG Education Council deliberations.

The formula that produces the SRS has itself been called into question. Whilst it is appropriate to explore the nature of this it cannot be allowed to inhibit the consensus that must prevail in ensuring an appropriate level of funding for our public schools – all of them. As part of the 2013 Education Act SRS formula there are a number of additional loadings to address specific challenges and disadvantage faced by students. These loadings have increased the federal contribution to education at a state and territory level and possibly added to the claims of record levels of education funding that has attracted the Government's attention.

Within all of this is the implicit expectation that every cent of Federal money destined for public schools makes its way through the school gates. In reality this is often not the case and has to change – our schools deserve every cent that's due to them. Nothing more, nothing less.

Learning for life

The consequence of funding and resourcing shortfalls is a growing need to rely on parent and community contributions. Levies and fees have long been a part of the new school year and could be said to be an example of parents having to fund an under-resourced schooling system.

The loss of the 'school kids bonus' has hit hard for many at a time of year when there are greater demands on family resources – especially in communities with low incomes where education can be a critical pathway out of poverty. The recent move to bring your own device (BYOD) policies in schools exacerbates the potential for unfairness in the opportunity to access essential resources. With the coming of NAPLAN online, over the next few years, access to suitable technology will be an important and ongoing issue to consider.

One of the strengths of the 'school kids bonus' was the fact that it was allocated without having to go through an application process with the school or a third party in the immediate community. It offered a certain dignity in its distribution.

The Smith Family's Learning for Life scholarship programmes offer a similar level of dignified and targeted support for the less advantaged students in our community. The scholarship does require an overt application process that many families will find undesirable and choose not to engage with for that very reason. However, with a \$48m allocation by the Government from the last budget and linked in with private sponsorship contributions, it looks like these programmes are here to stay. It's currently working with over 33,000 students and looking to work with an additional 24,000 students and their families over the next four years. For more information [click here](#).

Provenance and authenticity

Whilst public education undeniably faces some unique challenges with its open to all policy it also has unique strengths. Every public school naturally reflects the character and strengths of the communities in which they are sited and as such offer tailored specialist teaching support for all abilities – for those that need extra help and those that need extra challenge. It's this diversity without fear or favour that truly reflects the authentic demographics of our nation and does not pander to an out of date vision of what might have been, or subject to an exclusive dogma.

Public schools thrive on parent and community partnerships, and we as parents have the provenance and authenticity to actively engage with our children's schools and the professional

educators within them. Make the time to engage with your child's teachers – they wouldn't be in the job if they didn't care about education and they get to see a unique side of our children in a truly objective way. That little bit of information you learn from them, or that you share, could make all the difference. The conversations we have with our child's teacher can be one of the most powerful tools in ensuring great outcomes.

In amongst all of this are the practical elements of settling back into the school day routine, new rosters, uniforms and lunches that come as something of a reality check after the summer break – and that's just for us as parents. I can't help thinking that this year will appear to pass as quickly as the last one did – perhaps now is the time to savour every moment and enjoy what's to come...

Phillip Spratt

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