

Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

One voice for every child in public education



PO Box 8221

WERRINGTON COUNTY

NSW 2747

☎ 0418 470 604

✉ contact@acssso.org.au

🌐 www.acssso.org.au

ACN: 611 783 218

OPINION PIECE

Needs and Wants in a Gonski 2.0 World

There's an ancient curse masked as a compliment: 'may you live in interesting times' that could happily apply to the topic of education funding in the present day. As a subject of an endless legacy of vested interest loaded up with parental aspiration, guilt and one upmanship, it's no wonder most sensible people are left with no desire to willingly wade into the heady morass that is the political side of influencing education policy. And then there are people like me.

My life, like that of many others, has been shaped by being brought up in a community with a sense of making the best of what you have and taking every opportunity that life throws at you – and face the challenges too. Especially those that knock you down and leave you in the dirt. It's times like that where a community rallies around to help each other when life serves you the muddy end of the stick and builds your character to new levels, ready to go again.

So goes the nature of the families and communities that champion our public schools. On the back of this is the celebration of what goes well and what has the potential to make a positive difference. In the current day it's the Prime Minister's surprise announcement that the Government is proposing a single funding model to replace the current twenty-seven agreements crossing all sectors, and the plethora of additional models and special deals within them.

Like all policy declarations the temptation is to immediately focus on the detail rather than the intent behind the declared position. Perhaps now is the time to recognise that education funding is a truly wicked problem where there can be no absolute right or wrong answers, just better or worse outcomes. The key to unlocking this is asking enough questions, and listening to the responses, in a way that may help to expose some of the layers of complexity and strip away the masks to fairness.

If we are looking at equitable outcomes just savour for the moment the concept of a single funding model that has the potential to be fair, simple and transparent with the tenet of creating – in the Prime Minister's words - 'great schools, great teachers, great outcomes'. In a world of political slogans that's a great one to reflect on and to hold the politicians across our proud nation entirely accountable for. I think we'd all struggle to find a parent that wouldn't want this for their child and wider community.

What has led us to this point is a number of legislated adjustments and special deals that, over the years, have corrupted the integrity of needs based funding – and that's just for the non-government sectors that operate less than 30% of Australia's schools. One could say that the grand experiment to richly reward private sector schools with direct government funding, over the last twenty years or so, has been an abject failure in improving the educational outcomes of our national schooling system.

What it has allowed is a massive expansion in the innate cost base of private sector schooling. A sector that has now come to want and expect additional government funding to subsidise the cost of maintaining and operating ever growing campus's with facilities, and overt marketing campaigns, that public schools can only dream of.

In a bullish economy with parents that can afford a growing fee demand for a private and exclusive education for their children then there are no worries. However, we are now in a more bearish economy where considerations of price and value are at the forefront of many family budget considerations. There is also the increasing appreciation of the qualities and inherent strengths of public education leading to burgeoning enrolments in public schools. With the resurgence of the fully inclusive public education system across Australia private sector schools are facing new challenges in maintaining their relevance and market share.

The Quality Schools Initiative will allow a fresh start with the end in mind – a truly needs based funding model that can strip away the subjective and unfair nature of the current arrangements and special deals. The cornerstone of this is the Gonski 2.0 review that gives the potential to establish a body of evidence based best practice led by a trusted champion of needs based funding. A process that can give every school-age student the chance to thrive within their own communities and beyond. Our proud nation, its families and their children deserve nothing less.

Now is the time to make this a reality.

Phillip Spratt
President
Australian Council of State School Organisations
0419986547