



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

*Senate Select Committee on School
Funding Investment*

March 2016

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Submission by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding Investment

Terms of Reference

On 4 February 2016, the Senate resolved to establish the Select Committee on School Funding Investment. The committee is to inquire on the effect of reduced Commonwealth funding for state and territory provided schools, with particular reference to:

1. the impact of the cuts announced in the 2014-15 Budget and confirmed in the 2015-16 Mid-year Economic and Fiscal Outlook;
2. the impact on schools and students in regional, rural and remote areas;
3. the impact on students acquiring the job skills of the future, including science, technology, engineering, arts and maths; and
4. any related matter.

Submission

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the national voice for parents of young people in our nation's public schools. We are recognised as the peak national body representing parents of children in public schools

As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding Investment.

The outcomes from this committee's deliberations will provide an opportunity for a responsive government to support a funding system that will not only deliver learning opportunities for every young Australian but will put Australia's economy on a firm and competitive footing. In every state and territory public schools must be well-resourced and appropriately funded providing access to a free, high quality and secular education for all Australian students, irrespective of postcode or parental capacity to pay.

Public education is rich in cultural diversity, and the gifts and challenges of students are many – it is critical therefore that the funding of public education is of paramount importance to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding.

Because of the important and pivotal role that Public Education plays in our society we would argue that it should never be subject to political imperatives such as be used as a means of helping to return our budget to surplus. With our children being our future we advocate that increasing funding for Government Schools is an essential investment for our country and its future prosperity.

There are a range of indicators that identify Australia's challenges with performance in education.

At the aggregate level these indicators include:

- 22% of Australian children do not meet key developmental milestones in the first year of school.
- 28.4% of Australian learners have not developed the core skills required to access educational opportunity in the middle years of schooling as identified by NAPLAN Year 7 reading results.
- About a quarter of young Australians do not attain a Year 12 or Certificate III equivalent by age 19.
- Around a quarter of Australians aged 24 are not fully engaged in education or work.¹

These cross all stages of young people’s lives and all transitions through education.

ACSSO’s policy is very clear with regard to the fact that education must be seen as an investment in nation building.

We strongly advocate that:

- **The interests of the Australian nation, its diverse communities, and the educational needs of Australian children, are best served through the maintenance of a strong public education system.**
- **A strong and viable government school system is vital for the nation's future. Australian society and its distinctive values depend on the practical expression of acceptance, tolerance, fairness, egalitarianism and equality of opportunity that public schools provide.**
- **A public education system must be designed and resourced to ensure that all young people develop the skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to contribute constructively to the social, political, ecological and economic future of the community and the country.**
- **Investment in education should give every student a fair go**

ACSSO policy is unapologetic in its emphasis that the funding of public education must be recognised by all governments as their first and absolute priority. Currently, public education caters for two thirds of Australia’s schools students – approximately 2.4 million students. According to the most recent ABS data² public education has had the greatest growth in the past year – 1.6%. Public Schools carry the “heavy weight” when it comes to supporting young people with additional challenges. With these numbers comes need for resourcing.

¹ Lamb S, Jackson J, Walstab, A & Huo S (2015) Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute: Melbourne

² Australian Bureau of Statistics – 4221.0 – Schools, Australia, 2015 Quality Declaration. Issue released 04/02/2016

Cuts to education funding from the Commonwealth, itemised in the 2014-5 budget and confirmed in the 2015-6 mid-year Economic and Fiscal Outlook will have the greatest impact on public schools – a system that is inclusive of all. Being an inclusive system means that great demands are placed on resources both human and financial.

Education is a key influence on a child's life. ACSSO supports a needs based funding system similar to that outlined by David Gonski and has witnessed the difference that funding based on need has made to the students in so many of our public schools. The Australian government has an obligation to every child, every family to provide a funding system that's foundation reflects equity. It is clear from the description by the OECD that Australia's education system is high in quality but low in equity.

Budget cuts will mean the issues highlighted in the *Review of Funding into School Education* will remain unaddressed – young people, particularly our disadvantaged will be put at risk of poor outcomes. Research is clear that poor engagement in schools and low attainment result in poor educational outcomes, diminished employment opportunities and for some adverse life outcomes – exclusion from society, marginalised community, poverty and risk of involvement with the justice system.³

A failure to obtain an education represents both an individual and societal problem⁴

In long term this will lead to a far greater burden on taxpayers than the cost of a world class public education system (commencing from prior to school), where young people's educational and well-being needs are addressed from an early age.

The acknowledgement that investment in the early years, in both time and money, has been shown to be far more cost-effective than investments made at any other time⁵

James Heckman – Nobel Economist states *efforts aimed at improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people are most cost effective if they involve long term support across a young person's life.....A sustained and early intervention approach is far more cost effective than one off short term programs for young people, or any remedial efforts⁶*

ACSSO believes students should have equitable access to opportunities and that schools should be resourced and organised so that students from all backgrounds have opportunities for success. We advocate that student access to learning should not be limited by personal circumstances, ability, sexuality, race, religion or socio-economic circumstances.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015

⁴ Gyonos E 2011, 'Early School Leaving: Reasons and Consequences', Theoretical and Applied Economics

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015 Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on

learning and development

⁶ Cunha F and Heckkman J (2007) The Technology of Skill Formation

Additional funding to support students with disability has been long awaited. The fairer funding model introduced as a result of the Review into School Funding saw a significant metric to support a flow of additional funding for students with disability— substantial funding reduction in this area would have a major impact in this already under resourced area of support. Recent reports indicate that one in five students in government schools have a disability or learning difficulty⁷. According to data provided by the states and territory's these ever growing numbers require additional support in the classroom.

*More severe and moderate, rather than mild cases of autism and mental health students are emerging in government schools.*⁸

Education cuts come at a time when students with disability were beginning to see some long awaited support. The latest data confirms that whilst the number of students recognised with disability is 20% only 13.6% are receiving assistance and as little as 6.2% attract any additional funding.

These young people require additional support and attention – sometimes they present with challenging behaviours. Teachers need additional support in order for these young people and their class colleagues to thrive – this support can be in the form of counsellors, para professionals in the classroom or physical resources. Cuts in this area could be seen to be negligent in both nature and intent.

The number of students in Australia identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander increased by 4.2% between 2014 and 2015, with larger proportional increases in the ACT (7.5%), Victoria (6.8%), and South Australia (6.4%).

In 2015, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students totalled 200,563, and made up 5.3% of total enrolments in Australia's schools. The majority of these students (84.0%) attended government schools.

According to the Prime Minister's report 2015 we are still well away from achieving the targets set for *Closing the Gap*⁹. Access to early childhood education for four year olds in remote area; school attendance; halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy and Year 12 achievement are all key to achieving quality life expectancy and lifestyle for our first Australians – none of these targets have been met. Whilst this strategy has a separate funding bucket the unique needs of our Indigenous students will be effected greatly by any cuts in budget in education.

⁷ State and Territory government audit information presented in The Australian March 12, 2016

⁸ NSW Department of Education and Communities Discussion Paper: Australian School Funding Arrangements, p.20

⁹ Closing the Gap – Prime Minister's Report 2015 Commonwealth of Australia 2015

The nature of Public Schools provides 'learning in place', in Rural and isolated locations public Schools often provide the only educational opportunity being provided to the local population. Public Schools in isolated and rural locations are greatly valued by their communities and are very often the hub of the community providing sporting, technological, health (lack of other medical facilities means schools often provide early screenings) and meeting facilities and being much more than a school to the community. In many communities, the school is the basis of the community – economically and socially.

Significant effort has gone into improving rural education with intervention and resourcing at both state / territory levels and federal levels. Without a school, young families may not move to or stay in area. Many of the initiatives require disproportionate budget commitments to maintain. Rural education is therefore constantly vulnerable to reductions / cuts in education budgets.

Schools need to immediately invest in infrastructure to meet the needs of the 21st Century. A majority of our schools were built prior to the great surge in information technology, computers in schools and now BYOD (bring your own device). Our children need every opportunity to access the latest information and be equipped for work in this fast growing world. Costs to families, especially our low- SES and indigenous families has become restrictive. Public Schools grappling with BYOD as a means of coping with technology/learning – skills aligned with this technology are essential for the employment future of our children.

In addition rural and remote areas need reliable connection and access to the World Wide Web – this requires investment. Connected classrooms are key to access of curriculum choice in these areas.

Access to curriculum is impacted by levels of funding. A national curriculum is not a guarantee for an equal opportunity. Resourcing allows greater access to curriculum and to specialist teachers – should funding be reduced then there will be an impact on curriculum offering. There will be less access to specialist teachers and resources; professional learning for teachers; access to visiting expertise and many schools may need to combine year groups to facilitate choice. This issue is exacerbated in rural, remote and isolated areas.

A significant proportion of students in Australia speak English as an additional language. In some of our schools, particularly metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne and remote indigenous communities in the NT, Queensland and Western Australia 100% of the school population have English as an additional language – the proportion in our schools is increasing, not declining. Funding in this area is often combined in schools to stretch literacy / numeracy program – a funding cut will increase this “creative use” of funding

Home and family account for 60% of the variance in student achievement¹⁰ - governments tend to place a heavy emphasis on strategies for improving teacher quality – extremely important but don't tend to examine and fund strategies to effect factors outside the classroom. Forty years of research clearly establishes that parent engagement in children's learning is one of the most significant predictors of how well a child will do in school. This particular area described by Minister Birmingham as *“the lowest cost area that can make the biggest difference in terms of our educational outcomes, it will be by better informing and enabling parents to provide assistance from the earliest years to their children, to know what the best and most practical assistance can be, to be engaged through their schooling, and to set ambition for their children in their engagement with schooling.”*¹¹

Whilst ACSSO agrees that this is an area where the biggest impact can be made we would argue that a significant investment needs to be made. This would target professional learning for school staff and provide additional staff to support the facilitation of parent engagement.

Little has been invested in this area in pre-service training, professional learning or school planning yet the evidence is compelling. Schools are still yet to recognise the scope and value of family engagement on student outcomes. Historically as funding is tightened, parent / family engagement is seen as a lesser priority and suffers the greatest cut in the school budget. Additionally systems tend to close down that area of school support to schools thus parent engagement goes out of the dialogue of the professionals. This often marginalises the community.

In conclusion cuts to education in any form will have a huge impact on public schools and this impact is going to be magnified in isolated and rural public schools. Public schools cater to all young Australians and carry a much heavier load of students with disadvantage and disability and needs to be funded equitably.

ACSSO firmly advocates for a fairer needs based funding model for education in Australia. This model would eliminate the many funding deals that exist and that often advantage the already advantaged. It should be recognised that talent and genius is not limited to the offspring of wealthy parents, nor is it limited to metropolitan or coastal locations – it is essential that all public schools are funded to ensure our country provides access and opportunity for all Australians to fulfil and extend their potential to will ensure an innovative, clever and successful future for our nation.

¹⁰ Hattie J “Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?” Paper presented at the ACER Annual Conference on *Building Teacher Quality*: Melbourne

¹¹ <http://www.senatorbirmingham.com.au/Latest-News/ID/2993/Speech-National-Catholic-Education-Commission>