



Australian Council of State School Organisations Ltd.

One voice for every child in public education

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President's Message, May 2018

Gonski does it again

Just over a year ago the Prime Minister, flanked by Simon Birmingham and David Gonski AO, took us by surprise declaring that there would be a new education review with an independent Review Panel and Secretariat, to be once again led by David Gonski.

This may have resolved some unfinished business for David Gonski due to the constraints of the first review of 2011 that limited its deliberations solely to funding and its method of calculation and distribution between sectors, and not how it should be allocated to maximise learning gain. The new Review Panel's task was to define education excellence in our schools and determine where the best use of resources can be made for the greatest impact on learning improvement.

The end of April this year saw the same trio speaking of the findings of the review; complete with its new and highly aspirational prefix 'Through Growth to Achievement'. Without diving into the detail of the report, the scope of its considerations gives a holistic and aspirational vision for the future of education – one that ACSSO broadly welcomes. It seems we're not alone as it appears to be garnering strong support from all sides.

There is no surprise in this, as the report is a considered and extensive discussion of what should be possible and why it must happen. It offers no detailed instruction on how it should be delivered at a grass-roots level, instead leaving that for the Commonwealth Government and the states and territories to negotiate. As well as being one of its strengths in our federation of independent nation states, it could potentially be its Achilles' heel as this is the point where the detail of how, what and by when of implementing its recommendations will be resolved.

The most recent step in implementing the review's recommendations came with the Council of Australian Government's Education Council meeting, with David Gonski in attendance, to explore the report together with its findings and recommendations. From this there will naturally be an ongoing overtone of how the suggested reforms will be resourced, by whom and by when.

ACSSO expects that the review's ambitious recommendations will be implemented in a declared spirit of cooperation and collaboration. For the benefit of all our children, we hope this impetus can be maintained by all sides. One point we would add is that many of the recommendations are already in place across the nation and there is scope to explore the nature and efficacy of these existing initiatives with the aim of sharing this knowledge across jurisdictions and school communities.

If we pause to reflect on this approach, it's deeply gratifying to note the report also recognises the value of collaborative and supportive partnerships at all levels, offering a broad and sustainable foundation for future improvement; perhaps one that can go on to imbue all future policy deliberations, particularly those which will determine how policy initiatives are implemented.

There has been some criticism of the report with suggestions that the review has gone beyond its terms of reference in regard to its early years recommendations. A period that ACSSO sees as being of critical importance as the foundation of a child's future learning potential; one that as a non-compulsory offering can be seen as being beyond the remit of an education department's core activity, and a jurisdiction's compulsory funding obligation. We hope the report's recommendations in this area will correct this and bring parent and family engagement to the forefront of education delivery.

Negative comment also extended to its view of senior secondary education with a recommendation to conduct a separate review of this equally important part of education within the next 12 months. This is a period of education that sees our children transitioning into post school vocational education, tertiary studies or employment options. Perhaps we should see this as being Gonski 3.0 - as the issues raised in senior secondary education are wide ranging, complex and will have implications on curriculum, engagement and assessment delivery protocols. ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to engage with any proposed review of senior secondary education – especially from a national perspective on what is delivered to widely differing criteria in individual jurisdictions.

As a nation, we have an extraordinarily diverse range of cultures and traditions that cross all jurisdictions. The report is a unique opportunity for all sides to focus on the possibilities for our children, especially the needs of families that have chosen public education as the first choice for their child's future. With inclusivity, collaboration and partnership as our watchwords it's their future, our future and our nation's future that's at stake.

Budget Bluster

With the excitement surrounding the release and discussion of the new Gonski report the 2018-19 Federal Budget was delivered little over a week later. This time last year we were faced with the Quality Schools funding reforms that were due to be resolved in the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017. With the Bill making its way into the statute book, this year's budget is a much less dramatic document.

Looking at topics that will garner universal support, there is the commitment to fund universal access to 15 hours of universal pre-school education – again on a year to year basis. Whilst recognising that the 15 hours is a joint Commonwealth/State and Territory commitment it would be terrific to see this given the permanent status it richly deserves, especially with early learning as one of the new Gonski report's key areas of recommendation. Even better would be to see this as a two-year option for all pre-school students – the rationale for this is explained in a Mitchell Institute report on the value of this, available [here](#). Maybe this is something for the Education Council to ponder as part of its deliberations over the new Gonski report.

Elements of the recommendations of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education have also attracted resourcing in this budget with its recommendations considered as part of the new Gonski review. Additionally, we see welcome expansions of the ELLA - Early Learning Languages Australia program and the Sporting Schools programs that offer well-liked additions to our children's learning and participation opportunities.

We also see a rise in Commonwealth support for non-government school representative bodies, within all jurisdictions, to nearly \$42 million dollars in an ongoing arrangement. This is an extraordinary amount of money for an already wealthy sector – especially when we consider the minimal level of resourcing for public school representative bodies that come to rely on voluntary input for a tiny fraction of this figure, and yet represent the interests of our public-school students, families and school communities that make up the vast majority of all schools, and those with the most to gain from education.

Chaplaincy on parade

The real elephant in this year's budget that no-one can look past is the expansion of the chaplaincy program in schools and a move to a permanent arrangement. It's absurd to think that the funding for such a controversial program should be given legislated permanency over that of pre-school early childhood learning. Whilst ACSSO recognises that there are individual schools within our states and territories that welcome chaplains and the support they offer, it has to be the absolute right of every public school in Australia to choose support workers that best meets their community's particular needs – a constant position ACSSO has made plain to the Minister's office on many occasions over successive Ministers. The current regulations surrounding the chaplaincy program prohibit this with the option of a faith-based chaplain or nothing. If chaplaincy is to remain this has to change – there has to be a fair-go for every school in a form of subsidiarity that gives schools the freedom to choose the support that meets their requirements.

The privileged regulation surrounding chaplaincy is further testament to the tenacious reach and depth of influence of religious bodies in Australian education policy; a reach that must be curtailed – especially in what should be the truly secular system of public education. It's an abomination that our public schools only have the option of a Christian chaplain who has to be accepted as a proven practitioner of that faith before being employed to work in our secular schools. A further abomination is when we consider that the Christian faith is just one of many religions that are freely practised in Australia as a given right of every person, and yet it has a supreme and overarching primacy over all other faiths when it comes to accessing Commonwealth funding for chaplaincy programs in schools.

Chaplaincy seems to be a neatly packaged solution from religious bodies that are looking for a problem to solve as part of delivering their mission - all with tangible support from the Commonwealth in a unique arrangement to states and territories; one that has been devised to accommodate two adverse High Court judgements against the program. It's interesting to note that there is a possible new case to come before the courts that may yet see the opportunity for non-religious chaplains to be employed in our schools. Mike Seccombe's article, available [here](#) explores its context.

Even with the potential to freely employ a non-religious support worker of a school's choice the program is little more than a stop-gap measure, a plaster on a deep wound that is in-school wellbeing support for students. This speaks of the tangible school support for wider psycho-social/trauma issues; to which ACSSO has been advocating as a new seventh needs-based national loading to address disadvantage. It was one of our points as a sensible amendment to last year's Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017, and one that has yet to be adopted. All sides of politics and education policy stakeholders recognise that this is an issue, but one that may be currently too hard to accurately define.

The fact that it is complex and difficult to rationalise demands that we start to seriously explore this growing need for in-school support for psycho-social/trauma issues. We note that the National School Resourcing Board, once it delivers its SES funding report in June, will next be looking at disability loadings. It's been suggested that this topic will form an element of the review as an additional element in the context of disability – an error in ACSSO's view.

This topic demands its own objective appraisal to establish the impact of potential solutions for students and staff teams in schools. Issues that characterise psycho-social/trauma such as violence in the home, abuse, family break-ups, etc. have a direct impact on a child's ability to learn in a school setting and function as part of an inclusive public-school community. We hear many anecdotal reports of teachers having to devote their energies to managing and supporting students who are experiencing such issues. There has to be overt and active support for teachers and school leadership teams with additional professional support and resources to cope with this and lift the learning opportunities for every child in their schools.

In a perfect world we should expect that this initiative can achieve a consensus of support across all jurisdictions and political parties. Let's explore the context of these issues with an open mind, define a pragmatic starting point and target resources to meet true need in every school and not just to supply a stop-gap solution to meet the demands of a political minority or peculiar interest group in a tiny portion of our schools. This issue is too big for well-meaning amateurs and bystanders to remedy. Our schools, their staff teams and most of all, our children deserve the very best in their life chances – education is a certain route forward with unique opportunities in a world that is brim-full of uncertainty. Our fully inclusive public education system, with its surging enrolments as the first choice for our children's future, offers hope for every Australian family and to our nation as a whole.

Phillip Spratt

25th May, 2018