

More than two-thirds of our nation's children attending public schools, including more than eighty percent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The issue of funding their future is always important and at no time more than when a Federal election is approaching.

What we are funding is essentially the future of Australia, and to begin on a positive note, it is true that we have, as a nation, taken some significant strides in the right direction. Although the speed of change can appear glacial at times, the last decade has seen the school funding model evolve to some semblance of respectability and equity as it has come under considerable and considered scrutiny.

Fair, simple, transparent

ACSSO has argued consistently for a "Fair, Simple and Transparent" funding model with no special arrangements or deals to win votes by influencing particular sectors. Past decades have been littered with such examples, where party political need has been the catalyst for policy. The resultant national model was, until recent years, a patchwork of stitched up inequalities.

A data investigation by ABC media last year looked at the billions poured into Australian schools since the dawn of the "education revolution" under then Minister Julia Gillard in 2008. It found that while the funds were meant to establish sector-blind, needs-based funding the money had in fact left thousands of public schools with less public funding than similar private schools, because of the steep rise in government funding to private schools.

Growing divide

As a result, rather than closing the equity gap, the income divide is wider for many schools than at any point in the past decade.

Grattan Institute's school education program director Peter Goss notes, "*A decade ago, one in 20 private schools ... [received] ... more public dollars per student than comparable government schools ... By 2016, it was more than one in three.*"

This is a direct result of the special deals that both Coalition and Labor governments have done with the non-government sector.

Tangled past

The first Gonski report in 2011 laid the foundation for national needs-based funding via the creation of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) but was deemed too costly to fully implement.

Labor's 2013 Education Act included many positive elements but was hampered by the political shibboleth that "no school would lose a dollar". It thus failed to lift most schools to 100 per cent of SRS, while continuing to increase funding for already over-funded schools.

The Coalition's Australian Education Amendment 2017 improved on the 2013 Act. For the first time, funding will be reduced to overfunded schools. Commonwealth funding will be consistent across states and territories, and the new National Schools Resourcing Board (NSRB) is reviewing key elements of funding.

National Schools Resourcing Board

The NSRB's first review proposed a new and better parental *capacity-to-contribute* model for non-government schools, based on family income rather than where parents live. However, in accepting the NSRB model the Coalition also introduced a \$1.2 billion *Choice and Affordability Fund*. This is a backward step, subsidising low-fee private schools even when parents can afford to pay their way. It is difficult to see any justification whatsoever for such a fund and it should be removed. It is a clear example of where *Fair, Simple and Transparent* can be quickly subverted by the horse-trading of old.

Future commitments

Labor has committed to build on the 2017 Amendment and invest \$14 billion more in public schools. Under Labor's policy, Commonwealth funding would rise to 22.2 per cent of SRS, compared to the Coalition's 20 per cent.

Despite these improvements, neither party's policy will fully fund all schools. Unless that changes, public schools will continue to be under-funded when compared to non-government schools.

We need a government that not only prioritises public education but that has the tenacity to make the hard decisions and take action on the over-funded, elite private schools.

The need is clear

We call for a further investment into education funding with a clear priority to addressing those in most need such as in the six additional loadings to address disadvantage across the nation.

There is also the potential in any review to address the scope of a new seventh loading to address psycho-social trauma issues experienced by students that can provide tangible and meaningful support in schools for trauma-informed practice.

Family engagement

We are now hearing of parents bullying school staff. A significant part of the answer to this is surely the pursuit of Family Engagement strategies. The value of Family Engagement in education is a key point of interest for parents with over 50 years of research and best practice to draw on.

The Gonski 2.0 panel's findings amplify this point and we look forward to the opportunity with the promise of additional funding, to make this a priority and to target funding to support schools to engage with families, provide professional development, provide additional time for teachers to engage in this practice and for governments to promote this as a priority.

Connect to early years and community

Additionally, we support the increase in number of “community hubs” – particularly connecting to early childhood settings – this would aid the development of authentic Family Engagement practices.

Student well-being should also be a priority for any incoming government – resourcing this in our schools is paramount. We urge the next Federal government, if they insist on continuing to fund the Chaplaincy program, that they amend the National Partnerships to allow schools to employ secular welfare workers.

Alarming

In conclusion, political commentators are pointing to an alarming trend in the current election campaign: that education is not given the primacy it deserves. Issues of the economy and the environment have become central to the campaigns of all parties and that education is not receiving the attention it needs.

Our public schools are increasingly and proudly the first choice for our children's future, therefore for the nation's future, and ACSSO will continue to lobby vigorously for a high quality, appropriately funded public education system, one that is able to be a benchmark for all nations and the corner stone of Australia's future. There is no more important political imperative than this.

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March 2019