

Schools Funding Conference: Why Money Does Matter

8.30 – 3.30 18th February 2022

Speaking notes:

Lyndsay Connors:

“Time to take a stand for the proper and fair funding of public schools – again!”

Thank you to the Federation for organising this important event when the union and our teaching force are under such pressure. And for launching the Centre for Public Education Research under the leadership of Maurie Mulheron. And for the honour of an invitation to speak today.

In Australia’s publicly-funded, hybrid school system, schools in the public sector shoulder a disproportionately large share of the heavy lifting and never more so than in hard times such as these. Today is an opportunity to consider the current state of schools funding from this perspective.

Those here who have been front-line responders have borne far more of the brunt of the COVID pandemic than those like me who have retired. But no one could avoid the painful irony – that while we have all been wearing our masks, COVID has been ripping the mask off our society and revealing starkly some of its uglier failures.

Even those who’ve been warning for decades of the inequalities scarring our school system tend to live in hope they’ll prove to be wrong. Finding you’ve been right still causes a shock...shock at the educational potential that has been squandered in recent decades.

This country could have used its unique heritage -- an ancient and continuing indigenous culture and its recent history of expanding cultural traditions and loyalties -- to secure a strong and socially representative public system – designed to broaden the horizons and expand the intellectual capacity of students, providing both for their common needs and entitlements and their

individual and group differences – a system where diversity and equity are entwined.

Instead, Australia has tapped the potential of cultural diversity – of social class, religious, ethnic and other social traditions and loyalties -- to find expression through a highly and increasingly class-stratified school system where choice and competition are driven by resource gaps among schools and where disparity is confused with diversity.

We must be realistic. To aspire to a public school system characterised by democratic principles, objectives and practices is to aspire to an ideal that is hard to achieve. It requires governments to set public policy frameworks that enable informed, rational and open consideration of options; and an electorate able and willing to make decisions that transcend personal interests for the common good.

Prior to and during my lifetime, there have been times when progress has been made towards achieving that aspiration.

But the problem is that progress is rarely linear. It is always under threat and needing to be defended.

The late Jean Blackburn, one of our finest education thinkers, referred to ‘the great idea of public education’. It is an idea we can never afford to abandon, but it is always needing to be re-imagined to fit the times...rather like democracy itself.

We’re here today for the 10th anniversary of the release of the Gonski Report on schools funding. So let me take you back to a time just prior to its release. In December 2010, the Gonski panel released its *Emerging Issues* paper to inform the public of the panel’s initial deliberations.

Around this time I attended an education dinner here in Sydney. The stranger sitting next to me, who turned out to be from a private school peak lobby group, had no sooner sat down than he began riffling through his briefcase. He then surfaced, brandishing the *Emerging Issues* discussion paper towards me, demanding to know had I read it. Almost foaming at the mouth he directed me to the following statement from the Gonski panel:

... the panel... believes that equity should ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions... The panel does not intend it to mean that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes, but rather that they will not be prevented from achieving their maximum potential because of their background or family circumstances.

“That’s Marxist” he bellowed at me. “They’re all Marxists”. Now I had worked closely in previous years with two members of the Gonski Review panel and if they were Marxists they certainly kept it well hidden.

Then, in 2011, prior to the final report of the Gonski Review, some reports which the review panel had commissioned were released. These rang alarm bells for one MP, an Alan Tudge. I recall my shock at his short speech to the House of Representatives. It revealed his exclusive concern for the Catholic and independent schools (one in particular) in his own seat of Aston in Victoria. Resorting to innuendo, he expressed his fear that the effect of the Gonski Review might be, for the first time, to compel these schools to take “certain cohorts” of students or lose public funding and that this would be “an incredible intrusion”.

I wonder now why I was shocked.

Maybe because I was born and raised in NSW and was the beneficiary of a political leader who was very clear about the connection between democracy, nationhood and public schooling – Sir Henry Parkes.

In the build-up to both the 1880 Education Act and to Federation, Parkes had proclaimed that opening a public school was ‘...one of the most important things that can at any time be done in a state of civilised society’.

...a Public school system in any country is an essential part of its institutions in the large sense of politics. It is part of the policy of the country. It is part of the intention and action of the Government; part of the very life of constituted authority.

But, at the very time Henry Parkes and others were driving reform, there was a lawyer and landowner, a Mr Downer, giving the whole notion of free state high schools very short shrift in the South Australian Parliament. For him and his ilk, the gradual expansion of public high

schooling threatened the exclusiveness of the education provided to the wealthy.

'To provide that the inmates of the Destitute Asylum should have supplied to them raspberry jam tarts after every meal would be no more a luxury than to provide this higher education for people who had no business with it. It was interfering with the very laws of nature. Some must be higher and some lower, but this was trying to make an average of the whole lot and to turn a great number of first-rate labourers into indifferent scholars'.

My point here is that there have been champions and victories for public education in the past, but there always were and always will be Downers and Tudges who reject the democratic ideal of equality of educational opportunity. And they are alive and well today.

We can be proud that the 1880 NSW Public Instruction Act went beyond provision of universal primary education. High schools were provided to prepare 'those girls and boys who were so disposed to proceed to University'. Across the rest of Australia, it was not until the 1950s that public schools became the main providers of secondary schooling.

This was a great step forward, as was the increased participation and achievement of girls which was to come later. But this does not mean that there was ever a golden age for our public school system, when the resources provided and the demands upon it were perfectly matched or when its fundamental principles were fully expressed and implemented.

Henry Parkes had referred to 'the children of the country'. But when I started school in the 1940s "children of the country" did not include **all** the children of the country. I would not have had the same educational opportunities had I been Aboriginal, had English not been my first language or had I experienced significant learning difficulties.

Looking back to when I started school, the principal of my primary school in a then outer Sydney suburb and several of the other male teachers, had returned from WWII visibly battle-scarred. Quite a few of my classmates were living in what was known locally as 'the camp', which consisted of curve-roofed corrugated iron huts known as Quonset huts, which were no longer needed as barracks for troop de-mobilisation. They were being used to

accommodate families being moved out of inner Sydney slums, in the context of a general housing shortage.

Then came the polio epidemic which sent fear through the community and disrupted the lives and education of classmates. By the time I turned ten, I was in a class of 56. And the only reason my grandchildren haven't also been in classes of 56 was the collective action taken over the years by this union, alone or in alliance with parent organisations.

Suddenly, the paddocks between the school and my home sprouted new houses. Schoolfriends from the camp moved into these Housing Commission homes. This surely contributed greatly to their health and well-being and their chances of succeeding at school.

I was growing up in a society capable of producing governments which were up to the task of the economic and social re-construction that is needed after depressions and war – and epidemics.

Knowing that there has been leadership and fortitude to do the right thing in the past does engender hope for the future. And it certainly places a responsibility on those of us who have benefited from past progress to take the stand which is needed now when our public schools are being short-changed.

My favourite Irish joke is relevant to this conference. It's the one about the chap who asked a passer-by for advice: "Can you tell me the best way to Dublin?" And he got the answer: "If it's going to Dublin you're wanting, you wouldn't be starting from here".

If your aspiration is a school system grounded in the principle that all our children share an equal entitlement to access, in their own right, to the highest quality schooling the country can afford then you are starting from well behind.

And you are equally poorly placed if you believe that the essence of schooling lies in what happens in classrooms, in the engagement between and among teachers and their students...in what the American educator, Jerome Bruner, called "the subtle process of empowering human intelligence and sensibility for life in an open society"; and in its corollaries: that teaching is a highly intellectually demanding profession; and that the focus of schools funding arrangements should be on supporting that subtle process in all classrooms.

But we have to start from here because we cannot just eradicate the past and start again. We need to understand the circumstances which led to the Gonski Review a decade ago.

Henry Parkes did not live to see his two great legacies – public schooling and our federal system of government – become badly unstuck. There are serious structural flaws in our federal system with its ill-defined roles and responsibilities and the virus of vertical fiscal imbalance. These have been implanted in schools funding arrangements. Schools funding has been further bedevilled by old and emerging sectarian rivalries; and, more recently, by the political battle over the extent to which the nation's social and economic directions should be shaped by public policy or left to market forces.

Since the 1970s, the net effect of the Commonwealth and its funding policies in particular and of states has been to move our national school system from one broadly grounded in the provision of schooling as a common good to one increasingly driven by a view of schooling as primarily a private and a positional good. The combined effect of two distinctive features of Australian life – its public funding policies for private schools and its obsession with real estate values – have unleashed market forces that may well now have taken on a life of their own.

Compromise is generally essential to progress. But too many compromises can lead to contradictions and discontinuities which damage the system itself.

How can we have allowed it to happen that Australia has one of the most socio-economically stratified school systems in the OECD and the world; where inequality is reflected in primary and secondary school reading achievement.

There are other aspects of our school system which don't make sense!

Consider the location and size of schools.

In the public sector, decisions about the location and size of schools are decided on demographic criteria, to expedite and protect student access. Keeping up with trends in growth, decline and shift in the overall student population and with local circumstances is a complex process even if all students attended public schools.

In our hybrid system, the location and size of schools outside the public sector – which serve over one-third of the total student population - is primarily decided by private providers. These are largely free to take account of demographic circumstances, if at all, in their own best interests -- having regard to their individual or systemic target markets and the level of private fees these will bear. Such costs and inefficiencies as result from these decisions must then be absorbed into the delivery of public schooling.

Schools owned and operated by religious and other private providers, which are exclusive by dint of fees charged and other privately set admission criteria, have always been, and will continue to be, part of the provision of schooling here and in most countries. They can co-exist with free, secular public schools within a rational and equitable regulatory framework set by governments. But it is beyond me to understand how schools which cannot be accessed by all students and which require exemptions from the laws of the land can ever provide the foundation of a school system in a democracy. That requires a consistent planning and funding policy across the nation which guarantees that a public school will be the first to come and the last to close in all areas of the country.

How students get access to teachers is another discontinuity.

In the public system, decisions about the overall staffing of schools and the distribution of teachers among individual schools are affected by a number of factors, primarily educational and financial considerations.

Outside the public sector it is a different story. Acting within the framework set by governments, the individual parents of over one-third of Australian school students pay an admission fee to the private provider of their choice ...an amount which is arbitrary in relation to the actual cost of a school place. But that fee gives individual parents the right to directly affect the placement of teachers, through the recurrent grants attracted to the school of their choice.

Increasing recurrent grants to non-government schools over almost five decades have had the effect of transferring the full costs of teaching in the private school sector to the public purse!

Teacher shortage – long predicted but poorly planned for – is now with us. Are we seriously going to allow market forces to be a significant influence on

distributing this shortage of teachers? We do not have a system in place for ensuring that every school will receive an equally inadequate share of teachers in these circumstances. And I will admit that it would be cold comfort if we did. But are we to have arrangements that read like a script for a TV reality show called Winner Take All, where children from schools ranged across the disadvantage/advantage spectrum compete with each other for teachers?

In my rear vision mirror, the Gonski Review can now clearly be seen as the third in a series of key reviews established by Labor governments at the Commonwealth level.

The first was the Karmel Review in 1973, blueprint for the entry of the Commonwealth as a significant funding partner. Next came the review by the Commonwealth Schools Commission on behalf of the Hawke Government in 1984. And then came the Gonski Review itself in 2012.

These reviews shared common features: sound structures and processes for policy formation; clear terms of reference from the Commonwealth. They were conducted at arm's length from government by review panels which were generally credible and authoritative. They fostered open and informed debate. Research reports and discussion papers were circulated and public submissions were made available to the public in the course of the review. Final reports were explicit about the underlying values and principles for their recommendations. These reviews were, in other words, educative and participatory processes, designed to maximise the chance of achieving workable consensus.

It was to be expected that the politically conservative successors to these three Labor administrations – the Fraser, Howard and then Abbott governments -- would attempt to unpick the funding policies of their predecessors in favour of policies more reflective of their own values. But their changes to funding policies were effected without due transparency and public participation, let alone evidence of rational consideration of options from an educational perspective.

Since the 1970s the conservative side of politics had displayed an increasing indifference to public education. But, by the 1990s, under the leadership of John Howard, this morphed into active hostility.

A commitment to resource standards was one of the common features of the three national funding reviews I've discussed above, sponsored by Labor governments. But the Gonski Review is the only one where the concept of a resource standard survived the election of a conservative government.

This hostility to public schools gained new, legislative force under the Turnbull-Morrison government. The Coalition has retained the device known as the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) as set out in Labor's original 2013 Act. But only to traduce it. Through its amendments to the Act in 2017, it used the SRS to widen rather than to narrow resource gaps among schools -- gaps for which there is no educational justification. A cap was placed on the Commonwealth's contribution to the achievement of their SRS for public schools, limiting it to 20 per cent of the public funding required. And then, to expedite agreements with the states for political purposes, the Commonwealth agreed that states could adopt accounting devices to reduce their own commitment to public schools only.

The effect is to leave public schools to compete at state level with other essential services such as health, transport and policing to have any hope of ever achieving their discounted SRS.

The purpose of resource standards is to link the actual costs of schooling with the achievement of desired outcomes. Recognising the vastly different circumstances in which schools operate, resource standards can provide a way to avoid a situation where students and teachers are expected to do their work without the necessary means: the people, the time, the space, the equipment and materials.

Resource standards can provide a rational basis for planned public investment in schools and for the setting of priorities; as well as being a benchmark against which public funding decisions can be assessed in a transparent and impartial way. And that is what the Gonski Review intended.

"Don't be too polite, girls" was one of the feminist anthems of my younger days.

I don't know whether or not it's polite to take advantage of my position as first speaker on today's program to play an opening card and to suggest one option that may be worth consideration today.

I'll start by being explicit about where I'm coming from here. I'm basing my proposal on the principle set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Schooling being a compulsory and universal service, no profession is more aware than the teaching profession of the inequalities that were already affecting too many of our children and young people well before and then during the COVID pandemic. Given the global environmental, political, social and economic challenges that this and coming generations will face, the need is urgent to provide all their schools with adequate and appropriate resources in terms of quantity and quality, giving priority to those with the greatest needs. Even those obsessed with the economic significance of investment in schooling to the exclusion of its social and human benefits, should surely understand that short-changing our schools at this time will have negative consequences in both the short and the long term.

Teachers' work entails maximising the time that their students spend on task to ensure their steady progress towards learning goals that reflect their interests, aspirations and abilities in their young lives as well as preparing them for constructive and rewarding lives in the future. At this time of their lives, and especially for those many students almost entirely dependent on their schools to make this steady progress, it is unthinkable that resources should be withheld. Resources delayed are resources denied.

Battered and bruised as it may be, it is highly significant that the SRS, one of the central features of the Gonski Review, has survived. Among the many lessons I have learned from experience, sometimes bitter, is to keep hold of anything that is of use, that has real or potential value because you may not get it back again.

It is unconscionable that the current Commonwealth administration should be allowed to get away with using the SRS to achieve its own political priorities, privileging some of the nation's children and young people and short-changing the rest, primarily those in public schools.

It would have been heartening to have seen more willingness by the political party which incorporated the SRS in its own legislation to defend it strongly over the years since 2013; and to have seen state governments resist the temptation to white-ant the value of the SRS to their own public school

systems. But there is no escaping the fact that it has been the Commonwealth which holds the whip hand financially and the capacity to wedge and intimidate states or political parties with the threat of funds being withheld altogether from public schools.

An opportunity may well arise in the future to design a better form of resource standard than the current SRS. But by then it will be too late for many of those currently in schools.

Every effort should be made, right now, to extract the full value from the existing SRS for those schools and students who have been hung out to dry by our leaders.

There is still time before the coming federal election to pressure the current Commonwealth government to do the decent thing and to commit, if re-elected, to meeting the full remaining costs of bringing all schools to the point of achieving their rightful 100 per cent of the SRS by 2026. Closing this funding gap will require the Commonwealth to remove the current 20 per cent legislative cap on its contribution to public schools.

The current SRS was not designed as an ambitious target standard. It was designed to provide a decent, basic minimum.

And asking, on behalf of public schools, for the Commonwealth to bear the full remaining costs to bring all schools up to that standard is not ambitious or unreasonable. It is the decent thing to do, the honest thing to do.

If we care about the future of our children and young people and of our democracy it is, in my view, the very least we could do.

It would mean, in this matter of schools funding, putting all the children first.