

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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The Soap Opera That Masquerades as Debate on Education Policy

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Much ado has been made of Gonski 2.0 and the Turnbull Government's claim that it is a uniform, needs based and fair model for the resourcing of Australian schools. The implication is that it will lead to better learning outcomes for all children. It is certainly not uniform, though it does bring in a measure of fairness not in existence in Gonski 1.0. In the sense that it may disrupt our public/private model of education though, it is a failure. Its major consequence is the 'segregation' of children in their school age years based on religious beliefs, socio-economic background and even educational ability.

The future, also, of those select entry government schools will not be jeopardised and property prices of desirable, zoned government schools in Victoria, will continue to ensure the exclusion of anyone other than those who can afford them. There's a very sad irony to the mantra of choice of schools in our country – it's hardly a stretch to argue that the cost of choice in school education may well be pricing the average Australian family out of more choice than we care to admit.

What does all this say for the state of education in our country? Politically speaking, our nation embroils itself in a self-destructive discourse in school education – unsurprising really, given the fiercely competitive landscape we have fashioned over the years across and within our school systems. Given the importance a good education bestows upon the holders, and the influence of powerful stakeholders, it is little wonder that our major political parties flip-flop on policy more than a well-baked pancake ever does. Populism has never been more rampant. Perhaps those of us in schools can be forgiven for believing that we are little more than pawns in the political games our leaders play.

Who was it, after all, that stated that they had no problem with seeing swimming pools in the grounds of wealthy private schools? It's hard to believe that that comment came from a Labor leader, yet all the while an embarrassing number of poor government schools couldn't even find the funds to fix leaking roofs or replace rotting timbers.

No surprise, however, to hear from a recent Coalition Prime Minister that supporting private schools was in his DNA and that he had no compunction in stripping \$30 billion from primarily government schools by discontinuing Gonski 1.0. Surprise, however, that the

current Coalition government has reinstated some measure of ‘fairness’ to school funding by reinventing Gonski 1.0 as Gonski 2.0. Puzzlingly, the Labor Opposition now fiercely opposes Gonski 2.0 partly because they view it as being unfair to the Catholic school sector. Conveniently however, it is forgotten that the Catholic sector were in receipt of a ‘sweetener’ in the first place to support Gonski 1.0. Then there was the promise that no school would be worse off!

Back ending the bulk of Gonski 1.0 funds into the never-never of years five and six by the Labor government of the day might have made short-term economic sense, but it certainly contributed to the current and longer term short-changing of public schools in particular. That in no way excuses the current Coalition government for renegeing on the original Gonski recommendations.

Welcome as are the minor improvements of Gonski 2.0, it still falls far short of the original recommendations of the Gonski Report. In the wash-up, it was the minor parties who supported the bill through the Senate: ironic, since it was the Greens who negotiated last-minute changes that saw more than \$5 billion added to Gonski 2.0 and the time line for funds distribution cut by years, but who couldn’t in the end support the Bill. Opportunism and populism exact a heavy price on us all!

It is little wonder then that scepticism remains alive and well in many school communities. The perception that the politics of education policy in our country is fast becoming an unedifying soap opera is difficult to resist. For that, we have our political leaders and parties, not to mention the powerful lobby groups to blame.

As if that’s not enough, alarm bells continue to ring when discussion on the likely impact of the Gonski 2.0 package of reforms turn to indicators such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests and our own NAPLAN tests. There’s so much more to a quality education than PISA and NAPLAN. Given that Australia is one of the leading nations in the world insofar as supporting and promoting a competitive public/private school system and Gonski 2.0 will not change that one bit, it is also fair to question whether we have the right model of school education in place in the first instance.

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