

An initial response to the Gonski Report

Review of funding for schooling—the final report (2011)

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On Monday, 20th February, 2012, the eagerly awaited *Review of funding for schooling—the final report*¹ by David Gonski, was released to an assemblage of educational leaders amid tight security in Canberra. I was among the assembled group. After signing confidentiality agreements and relinquishing mobile phones, we were allocated some time to consider the contents of the report prior to briefings by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, David Gonski, AC and also Peter Garrett—the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth.

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Given that there has not been a comprehensive review of funding of schools in Australia since 1973, the anticipation from a broad range of stakeholders was high. The PM gave high praise to the Gonski Report likening it to a set of specifications to construct a school system of Ferrari status. However, her analogy of Australian education currently being like a second-hand car which resembled a ‘bomb’, was not well received by Gonski. He was quick to respond that Australian education was above average and that he had found in his tours of schools and meetings with key stakeholders, that Australian educators were committed and passionate and were delivering quality educational outcomes.

The perception of Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) is that the Review Panel has delivered an intelligent, clearly articulated and transparent set of recommendations accompanied by a model for providing an appropriate level of funding to all Australian students, independent of whether they were being educated in the government or non-government sector. Gonski expressed that the Review Panel had endeavoured to be ‘sector blind’ in the development of their recommendations and that arresting the decade-long slide of education standards was of prime importance.

The *Programme for international student assessment* (PISA) demonstrates this slide between 2000 and 2009. In 2000, Australia was ranked second in the world in Reading; yet by 2009 this ranking had slipped to seventh. A similar trend may

be noted in Science, with Australia slipping from third to seventh. However, the greatest decline was in Mathematics where Australia fell from sixth to thirteenth place. While many students continue to perform at a high level in Australia there is a long ‘tail’ of underperformance which significantly impacts the national PISA average.

Gonski’s report proposes a \$5 billion increase in educational spending. This represents an overall increase of approximately 15% to the current education spending in Australia. The Review Panel noted that, on average, 3.5% of GDP is spent by OECD countries on education. Australia lags behind this average with an investment of 3.0% of GDP on education. The report highlights the need to address this shortfall, noting:

Studies have shown that it is both the quality of education (measured by student outcomes) and its quantity (years spent in schooling) which contribute to a country’s economic growth and the wellbeing of its population.²

For the proposed recommendations from the Review Panel to move from a set of proposals to tangible improvements in student outcomes in Australia, the Government will need to address a range of matters. Finding the funds, over time, for implementation of the 41 recommendations will be first and foremost, as both the Prime Minister and Minister Peter Garrett reiterated, within the constraints of the Federal Government’s commitment to returning the budget to surplus in 2013. Further, there will need to be a period of extensive consultation and negotiation with all stakeholders regarding the development and implementation of a new School Resource Standard (SRS). In addition, it must be noted that finding additional money to drive an improvement in educational outcomes may be in vain, if funds are not directed to strategies in the teaching and learning domain.

The Australian educational landscape is complex with many interest groups—Federal and State governments and opposition parties, state and private school providers, teachers unions, and parent

lobby groups. The rhetoric in the media highlights a broad range of perspectives ranging from highly supportive to extremely critical. The Review Panel's recommendations are sound. There is something in the recommendations for all educational sectors; however, it is now critical for the government to respond in detail to the recommendations made in the report by the Review Panel. The common response at the launch of the report in Canberra was that 'the devil is in the details'.

In essence the report primarily recommended the creation of a School Resource Standard (SRS), against which all Australian schools would receive funding. Federal, state and territory government funding would be combined when determining a school's allocation against the standard. Government schools would receive the full value of the SRS in funding, while most non-government schools would receive a portion of the value of the SRS, depending on their socio-economic status (SES). Non-government special schools, majority indigenous schools, schools which served remote communities where there were no other schools, and schools with no capacity to charge fees would receive 100 per cent of the value of the SRS. The Review Panel estimated that the value of the SRS was approximately \$8000 per primary student and \$10,500 per secondary student in 2009 dollars.

They also estimated that the most disadvantaged non-government schools would receive funding at 90 per cent of the SRS, while the least disadvantaged schools would receive between 20 to 25 per cent of the SRS. All non-government schools would be assumed to provide a minimum of 10 per cent of the value of the SRS through private income. It was recommended that the measurement of socio-economic disadvantage be based on the current SES model until a new, improved model could be developed. The Review Panel also recommended that the replacement model measure the capacity of non-government school parents to contribute resources to a school, rather than the amount of resources actually received by schools.

Apart from the base level of funding, schools would receive additional loadings for being located in remote communities or for having, small populations; indigenous students; and students with poor English-language skills. They estimated that schools would receive the equivalent of between 40 and 100 per cent of the value of SRS for each indigenous student, depending on the proportion of indigenous students at the school. Schools with a high proportion of students with limited English language proficiency would receive between 15 and 25 per cent of the value of the SRS per student.

The Review Panel also noted that additional funding for students with disabilities would be provided, but this was provisional on agreement by the states and territories of consistent definitions of disabilities and their severity, and that as a consequence, it was currently impossible to estimate the value of any loadings for students with disabilities. The Review Panel recommended that all of the loadings be made available to all schools, regardless of sector.

Christian schools in Australia rely on appropriate levels of government funding to operate. Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) welcomes the following elements of the Review Panel report: The overall level of funding for schools; improved funding arrangements for all students with disabilities regardless of the school they attend; more accurate measures of the cost of educating a student to an acceptable level; funding certainty for a twelve year period with annual indexation; and equal recognition of government and non-government education providers as contributing to building social capital in Australia.

Higher funding levels alone will not lift Australia's educational standing. School improvement is to a significant degree dependent on the quality of teaching and learning occurring in classrooms.³ Countries such as Finland and the Asian tigers of South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai—China, have set the example.⁴ Adventist schools in Australia look forward to strategically utilising funding to support its passionate educators in the delivery of excellent teaching and learning practices while expanding our focus on eternal outcomes. **TEACH**

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Endnotes

¹ *Review of funding for schooling, the final report* (2011). Canberra, ACT: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ *McKinsey report* (2007). How the world's best performing school systems come out on top.

⁴ Jensen, B. (2012). *Catching up: Learning from the best schools in East Asia*. Melbourne, Vic: Grattan Institute Report No 2012.3.