

SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON SCHOOL FUNDING INVESTMENT - INQUIRY INTO THE EFFECT OF REDUCED COMMONWEALTH FUNDING FOR THE STATE AND TERRITORY PROVIDED SCHOOLS

WA Council of State School Organisations Inc. Submission – 4th March, 2016

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school children in Western Australia. WACSSO provides services and representation at State and National level to approximately 645 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs) in Western Australia. WACSSO is largely a volunteer organisation made up of Councillors (representatives) from each education district in Western Australia and as such, the organisation has a wide representative reach across the state.

We are pleased to have been invited to provide a submission to this inquiry. This submission deals with the four terms of reference within the scope of the organisation's representation of parents of public school students across the state.

a) The impact of the cuts announced in the 2014-15 Budget and confirmed in the 2015-16 Mid-year Economic and Fiscal Outlook;

As a representative organisation, WACSSO staff and state councillors are regularly contacted by parents and P&Cs with regard to a range of issues, including more frequently in recent years funding pressures on schools, due to political financial decisions at a state and federal level. Likewise, from time to time in response to budgetary and policy decisions taken by government, WACSSO seeks information and opinions from its affiliates. As a result, WACSSO has gained considerable anecdotal evidence from schools about the benefits of needs-based funding supplied to targeted schools through the National Partnerships for Low SES Schools, Literacy and Numeracy and Improving Teacher Quality Programme.

The Education Community viewed the National Partnerships programs as a precursor to the improvements that could be expected under the full Gonski Agreement. The Final report on analysis of activity and evaluation effort in the Smarter Schools National Partnershipsⁱ concluded that National Partnerships programs in schools supported "improved school leadership, contributing to improving teacher quality, strengthening student engagement and are contributing to higher levels of student attainment in literacy and numeracy." It is disappointing given the positive outcomes that were clearly being achieved for students through National Partnerships, that the funding did not continue as intended through the full Gonski agreement.

In Western Australia, one metropolitan primary school that received funding under the National Partnerships implemented teacher coaching, modelling, one on one assistance and technological support. NAPLAN scores jumped significantly following implementation of these measures but dropped back as new staff came in to the school who did not have access to the support and coaching, as the funding had ceased with the end of the Partnerships program. Also, during the program, the school introduced the Multilit literacy initiative, with successful results. This program is still provided at the school, but at a reduced coverage, only for children with the highest need, as the funding ended. For this school, the full Gonski agreement would mean the level of support and positive results achieved through the National Partnerships would be a permanent situation, not an aspiration.

It is important to note that in 2013 the Western Australian government conscientiously objected to the terms of the Gonski Agreement (now called the National Plan for School Improvement) and did not sign, resulting in the state receiving only two-thirds of its intended share of funding. It is disappointing that the National Plan for School Improvement agreement will be abandoned in 2018 under the current government, forgoing the final two intended funding-heavy years, in favour of a model of Commonwealth school funding that increases at the rate of inflation, as reflected by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). How can it be guaranteed that the rate of funding growth for education will even keep pace with the growth of student population and actual changes in the costs of schooling?

Further, the Mid-year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) 2015-16 shows a 2% increase in the total education budget for 2015-16 however evidently from the forward estimates this is to be counteracted in 2016-17 and 2017-18 with consecutive 1% efficienciesⁱⁱ. The current outlook for Commonwealth education funding does not in any way reflect the recommendations within the universally accepted 2011 Federal Review of Funding For Schooling (Gonski) report that Australia needed to significantly increase investment in education to ensure equity in educational opportunity for all children, with the bulk of the increase flowing to government schools.ⁱⁱⁱ Recent figures published by Save Our Schools showing that between 1998-99 and 2013-14, government funding (Commonwealth and state/territory) per private school student, adjusted for inflation, increased, by 39% compared with only 17% for public schools^{iv}, makes the case even stronger for the full-rollout of Gonski funding.

Moving to reduce funding to government schools at a time when Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing data for Australia is showing a decline in maths, reading and science when compared to 65 OECD nations^v and when Australian students' maths results have declined steadily since 2003, with the proportion of Australian students performing at the top levels declining significantly while more students are failing to meet the international benchmark, is counter intuitive and simply should not occur. The alarming statistical trends do not stop there. PISA results showed no shrinkage of the large gap between the most advantaged and least advantaged students over ten years, with disadvantaged students approximately 2.5 years behind their advantaged peers in maths. Further, data shows that Australian 15-year-olds' scores on reading, maths and scientific literacy have recorded statistically significant declines since 2000, while other countries have shown improvement.

The longstanding argument that simply ‘throwing’ money at education does not improve outcomes is supported. However the recommendations in the Gonski report contained so much more than just funding factors. Three years into Gonski funding in Australia, the model, in spite of a less than perfect rollout, has led to new and expanded programs in schools across the country that are witnessing improvements in student outcomes^{vi}. WACSSO would like to see this continue well into the future and for Western Australian students to benefit from the full extent of Gonski.

b) The impact on schools and students in regional, rural and remote areas

Disadvantage arises in many forms and has significant impacts on a child’s current and future life. Addressing disadvantage must be seriously considered when funding education in rural and remote areas. This idea is universally accepted including by both the Commonwealth Government in its acceptance of the Gonski Report and the Western Australian Government in its endorsement of the Teese Report and subsequent rollout of the Student-Centred Funding Model, which includes specific loadings for locality and number of enrolments^{vii} (Rural and remote locations generally educate less children due to smaller population sizes.)

Students being educated in rural and remote locations by way of environment face a variety of factors that create disadvantage in education. *These include:*

- Restricted curriculum diversity and choice of course pathways;
- Quality of school based resources and the maintenance and upgrading of those resources;
- Access to and high cost of quality information technologies;
- Access to specialized teachers and services;
- Securing teachers of a high quality and opportunity for teacher professional development;
- Availability and cost of external educational activities such as school camps, work placement, careers expos, sporting opportunities, excursions etc;
- Boarding away from home;
- Distance;
- Low socioeconomic contributors.

A paper from the University of Western Australia’s Institute of Advanced studies found “serious geographical disparities in education standards - both within urban Australia and between urban and rural/remote young people.”^{viii} The research found that rural and remote students achieved lower educational outcomes than their urban counterparts and were less likely to finish school. They also had fewer opportunities with regard to course choice and selection. This comes as no surprise, and it is a situation that the commonwealth funding allocation should be actively working to address. The paper’s author, Fred Argy recommended “a coordinated federal/state assault on education inequalities, targeted at disadvantage in early childhood, public schooling and VET...”^{ix} in order to improve equity and increase workforce productivity in the long term.

WACSSO hears real examples of the impacts of rural and remote education regularly. One family’s story highlights the cost pressures that many families face when seeking the best possible educational experience for their children: “We pay over \$400 per week to send our daughter to the Residential College in Esperance. She did not want to go so early in Year 10, she wanted to wait until Year 11 like her sister, but unfortunately our district high school cannot offer what the larger high

school can. They try but there is just not enough money to support specialist teachers, career opportunities and extension classes. Our eldest girl got into university so boarding at the residential college was great for her but we can't afford to send them both away at once so she is deferring for a year and working hard to save some money so she can go to Uni. My husband and I both work, it's a lot of financial pressure but well worth it, however what about other families? What's the solution for their kids?"^x

WACSSO Policy states that all students, regardless of where a person lives there is a responsibility for governments to ensure adequate resources to provide educational needs for students in rural and remote areas^{xi}.

c) The impact on students acquiring the job skills of the future, including science, technology, engineering, arts and maths

According to OECD Director for Education and Skills Andreas Schleicher in a new report^{xii} on low-performing students, "...poor performance at school has long-term consequences for both individuals and nations. Students who perform poorly at age 15 face a high risk of dropping out of school altogether; and when a large share of the population lacks basic skills, a country's long-term economic growth is severely compromised." Schleicher asserts that the cost benefit of investment in improving student outcomes far outweighs the investment itself. This is supported by 2012 PricewaterhouseCoopers report analysing the economic impact of Australia's declining educational performance. The report puts a price tag of \$1.5 trillion in productivity costs between 2012 and 2092 if the OECD research-projected decline in outcomes was to continue^{xiii}. The report estimates that the value to Australia of reforming its education system would be an aggregate gain of \$3.6 trillion over the lifetime of the generation born in 2012. Lower Government costs; increased workforce productivity; an improved ability to address social, environmental and economic challenges including the ageing population, climate change and the resources boom; and reduced crime and greater civic engagement are just some of the individual benefits that comprise this significant collective worth.

There is universal acceptance that early intervention is the key to improving educational outcomes in children. Such is the reason that early childhood education has been a strong focus by government in recent years, highlighted by the recent Commonwealth, State and Territory commitment to the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. Commonwealth Government policy background information states that "... participating in a quality early childhood education programme can significantly increase positive educational and life outcomes for children, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds."^{xiv} It is incredibly important for students to receive the best possible educational opportunities early in their educational experience, as a foundation to life-long learning and the acquisition of complex concepts and theories required for advancement in STEM and other career paths. A recent report by the Australian Industry Group, which compiled survey results of 300 employers, found that 93 per cent of respondents identified low levels of literacy and numeracy as having an impact on their business, with 9 per cent stating the deficits led to financial miscalculations.^{xv}

d) Other related matters / conclusion

The ideological shift away from the needs-based formula proposed by Gonski at a time where Education authorities across the world agree that targeted funding at areas of need is a real concern. Serious investment in education based on best practise educational funding theory is required if Australia is committed to closing the educational outcomes gap between our most disadvantaged and advantaged students. The bipartisan agreement must be honoured with the full understanding that impacts to a child's education outlast a term of government.

ⁱ Atelier Learning Solutions Pty Ltd. 2012. Final report on analysis of activity and evaluation effort in the smarter schools national partnerships - Phase 1 of the National Evaluation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships.

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/phase_1_evaluation_final_report.pdf

ⁱⁱ Commonwealth of Australia. 2015. Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2015-16. Table 3.24: Estimates of Australian Government general government sector expenses by function and sub-function, p73. http://www.budget.gov.au/2015-16/content/myefo/download/MYEFO_2015-16_Final.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Government. 2011. Review of Funding for Schooling – Final Report, p xv.

^{iv} Save Our Schools. 2016. New Figures Show that Government Funding Has Massively Favoured Private Schools.

<http://www.saveourschools.com.au/>

^v PISA. 2013. How Australia measures up Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

^{vi} I Give A Gonski. 2016. Success Stories. http://www.igiveagonski.com.au/success_stories

^{vii} Government of Western Australia. 2014. Student-Centred Funding Model and one line budgets - a new way of resourcing and working. <http://www.education.wa.edu.au/>

^{viii} Fred Argy, Institute of Advanced Studies. 2007. Education Inequalities in Australia. <http://www.ias.uwa.edu.au/new-critic/five/educationinequalities>

^{ix} Fred Argy, Institute of Advanced Studies. 2007. Education Inequalities in Australia. <http://www.ias.uwa.edu.au/new-critic/five/educationinequalities>

^x WA Council of State School Organisations. 2016. Parent Testimony.

^{xi} Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. 2013. Policy, p25. G.4 Education in Rural and Remote Areas.

^{xii} OECD. 2016. Low-Performing Students - Why They Fall Behind and How To Help Them Succeed. P3. http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/low-performing-students_9789264250246-en

^{xiii} PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC). 2012. Improving productivity through education, p3

^{xiv} Australian Government, Department of Education and Training. 2016. Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.

<https://www.education.gov.au/universal-access-early-childhood-education>

^{xv} Australian Industry Group. 2016. Tackling Foundation Skills in the Workforce. <http://www.aigroup.com.au/>

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