

## Opinion Piece

# GONSKI REVIEW INVESTMENT NEEDED NOW

by Anglicare Australia Deputy Director, Roland Manderson

There's a lot in the media about Gonski, and giving a Gonski, and paying for Gonski (I do wonder what Mr David Gonski AC thinks about the way his name has been appropriated). And now the suggestion that Gonski means that some schools and students will miss out as resources get focussed to other, possibly more disadvantaged, schools or students.

There's also a lot being said about literacy and numeracy rankings, and how well, or how poorly, Australia ranks against others in the developed world for these indicators alone. And how we have to close that gap if we are to succeed in the Asian century.

But it's both more complicated and simpler than the current debate suggests.

Almost all the evidence that comes in from across the Anglicare network is that the kids who are living in out-of-home care and those from the families we see in difficulty don't do so well at school: that those schools in areas of entrenched disadvantage have lots of kids who struggle to stay engaged; and that 'multiple disadvantage' isn't just a social welfare term, it is the experience of living in complicated and difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, it almost goes without saying, those who don't connect up to a good education – in some form or another – don't do as well in in adult life.

So it's not a question of simply getting smarter teachers or tweaking the curriculum. If we are to address the education and life chances gap, it is a question of investing more in those young people who are up against it, and in their schools.

That seems to be the key evidence of the Gonski review of school funding.

The issue is clouded by a number of views and interests. Like all issues around social investment, directing resources in one direction means not directing them in another. That's why it's called direction. And directing resources to the most disadvantaged, least affluent and most challenged means, in the end, directing relatively less to those who have more and need less. That's the responsibility of Government. And if there is any resistance to that shift, this is the argument we should be having, in an election year, at a broader political level. One would think.

But what to do with the extra investment is complicated.

Over the past 10 to 15 years we've seen a big focus on numeracy and literacy teaching and testing. So far the result of this initiative seems to have made little difference, with continuing poor outcomes for the most disadvantaged kids, and relatively poorer

performance at the top end as well. So focussing on these narrow goals for schooling, although it seems obvious, doesn't appear to be working.

Over the same period, Federal education funding to non-government schools has supported the growth of that sector. There has been a big shift away from public schools right across Australia, with disadvantage becoming concentrated in some government schools. And this means poorer educational outcome for all students, right across the spectrum, not just those who are left behind.

It's also damaging us socially because it is building a tolerance for inequity and division. As one of the most affluent societies of our overdeveloped world, we risk losing our way by failing to invest in the greater good when we have the chance.

If we are to act on the Gonski review, we want to make a difference. We want to use it to ensure there is an opportunity for all our young people. As many who work in Anglicare services know, there is not that opportunity now.

One of the 'counter-Gonski' arguments is that it's not about school funding, it's about teachers. There would be something in that argument, maybe, if as a society we valued teachers that highly. There are already many great teachers who work in our most challenging schools who simply don't feel that love or support. We can agree that all students need great teachers. That's not the argument. But it takes significant investment to attract, retain and support great teachers - particularly in the schools where they are needed most. Ultimately then, it still comes down to funding and where that funding is directed.

And it is not just about schools and teachers. For engagement to be possible, as we know, that also means really strong youth services around the edges for many young people, family support, safe and secure housing, and enough food on the table. It means alternative educational settings for those young people for whom one of the biggest barriers to education is school itself.

The Australian Education Bill 2012, presently before Parliament, makes reference to links between industry and education. It frames the benefits of a good school education for all as economic. But as argued above, the greatest risk of failing to include all our young people is social, cultural and spiritual. It's for that reason the work of the Not-for-profit sector, of services such as ours, is such an important a part of schooling.

The investment suggested by the Gonski review is needed now. It is a targeted investment in the future of all of us. However, much of the current political debate over implementation plays on people's fears about what they may lose. We need to challenge this. We need to know whether politicians of all persuasions and the Australian public at large care enough about equity in education and the achievement of excellent educational outcomes for all students, not just those whose families can afford it, to put their money where their mouth is.

As those who work in the Anglicare network know well, poor outcomes from school rebound on people and their families, and their communities.

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