

When it comes to money, Gonski opposition doesn't add up

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The voters love Gonski. Astonishingly, every educational sector – public, Catholic and Independent – are also in favour. Labor, the Greens, most cross benchers, all state governments (except WA) are gung ho for Gonski. Teachers, principals, parents, teacher-educators, education researchers and unions are passionate about the scheme.

It seems the only people opposed are the federal LNP and a few right wing think tanks. So adamant is their opposition they are refusing to fund the last two years of the scheme although, as yet, we have not heard what they propose instead. There was a moment when it looked like they might be about to dump public education on the states and keep private schools for themselves, but that idea appears to have evaporated (pew!). The pressure on them to change their minds is intense and Labor cannot contain their glee at the prospect of a looming election fought over Gonski funding.

Which begs the question, why is our federal government so against the idea?

The most frequently used argument against Gonski is that we can't afford it. The Treasurer often expresses this by saying the scheme is "unfunded".

On one level, the federal government is right. Gonski is more expensive than it needs to be, but that is only because Julia Gillard tied the review committee's hands right from the start by decreeing no school would lose a dollar. Gonski is more expensive than it otherwise would be because it must continue to fund highly resourced schools at current levels even though, by rights, its needs-based formula would redistribute public money away from wealthier schools towards poorer ones.

In other words, the federal LNP is using the cost of publicly funding wealthy schools to justify not adequately funding poor schools.

This may explain why they quickly move from the "we can't afford it" argument to the "anyway money doesn't make any difference" argument. Unfortunately this has an even more obvious flaw.

If money doesn't make any difference to educational outcomes why the resistance to taking any public funding at all away from some of the wealthiest schools in Australia?

Just this week, St Catherine's School in Sydney has won the right to build a \$63 million aquatic centre, auditorium, research facility and multi-purpose hall over the protestations of its neighbours. This school charges fees of more than \$27,000 a year and received more than \$5 million in public funding in 2014. Scots College, which charges \$30,000 a year in fees and received \$6.3 million in public funding in 2014, made a profit last year of \$3.5 million (well, one can see how they would). Yet hardly anyone ever suggests removing a dollar in public money from schools like these.

Is the federal government really arguing that money only makes an educational difference to wealthy kids but has absolutely no effect on poor ones?

Education Minister Simon Birmingham has offered "proof" that money doesn't make a difference by arguing that some schools have seen their results improve while their funding declined. Education experts were quick to demolish his evidence as "flimsy". Indeed, for schools that are already well-resourced a small funding cut probably would make no difference. I strongly doubt the loss of an aquatic centre, fly-tower or orchestra pit at St Catherine's would send their girls into an academic tailspin.

When you put more money into schools that are inadequately resourced you are much more likely to see it make a real difference than when you merely top up the already over-flowing coffers of schools teaching kids who are already doing well. That – dear guardians of the public purse – is where the waste is. For a better return on investment we need to invest more wisely – hence, in fact, Gonski.

As for the federal Coalition's preferred "solutions" to the six-year gap between our highest and lowest achievers – namely "improving teacher quality" and "school autonomy" – both are also flawed.

First, I await with interest suggestions on how to improve teacher quality (let's put aside for a moment how insulting the very term is to our current crop of teachers) without it costing more money.

Second, Australia has undertaken a perfect controlled experiment on school autonomy over the past 20 years. Since Jeff Kennett, Victoria has had one of the most devolved (aka autonomous) public school systems in the OECD. NSW has one of the most centralised. Is there an enormous difference between student achievement in NSW and Victoria? There is not. After 20 years, if school autonomy helped, surely we would have seen some evidence by now?

So why do the Feds still oppose Gonski? My guess is politics, ideology and, yes, class warfare – but as billionaire Warren Buffet famously said "There's class warfare, all right, but its my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."

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