

What Can Money Do?

By Bill Hannan

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With the exceptions, admittedly notable, of the Opposition and the Government, the Gonski review of school funding has been well received. Christopher Pyne with his customary venom condemned it as yet another campaign in an unending class war. The Government was not hostile but was studiously non-committal about funding, which was after all the point of the matter. No doubt, the elite schools lobby was keeping its powder dry in case the government's promise that they would not be worse off would turn out that they would not be better off either, but they were not their usual shrill selves. In their lamb-like way, the Catholics followed suit. Government school lobbies on the other hand were openly enthusiastic; and the media, normally pro-choice and wealth, were this time either subdued or downright enthusiastic. Few in the media put it better than Stephen Long, the ABC's economics commentator. The key to the report, he wrote, is not in its carefully-guarded language but in its data from which one can justly conclude that 'the public money that goes to elite private schools is subsidising the sons and daughters of the plutocracy' and that 'government schools (and quite possibly many Catholic schools) are significantly underfunded'. 'It is also clear', Long added, 'that the decline in Australia's school performance on international rankings coincides with a skewing of Federal Government money away from government schools and towards independent schools—instituted by the Howard government and continued under Rudd and Gillard'. This picture of inequality, already much noted but so well drawn by Gonski's charts and graphs, is a huge challenge to our national principles and particularly to our treatment of children. Our rhetoric promises the best for all young people. Our practice continues the selective ways of the past. During the century that embedded universal primary schooling (up to the 1970s) secondary schooling was open only to the wealthy and to meritorious others. The very spread of public secondary schooling was vigorously resisted by the schools of the plutocracy, with Christopher Pyne-like labels such as 'creeping socialism'. By the 1970s, however, universal secondary schooling was beginning to be seen as a public goal. It was unfortunate that in rescuing Catholic schools from collapse, the Whitlam and succeeding governments also chose to subsidise over-rich private schools, but at the time that did not seem to most to be counter to the ideal of good schools for all. It took a couple of decades for the libertarian doctrines of choice and market forces, bolstered paradoxically by the rhetoric of disadvantage, to undermine that ideal. But undermined it was, with the result that the old selective ways are still with us in slightly changed forms. An extreme notion of liberty has silenced the voices of equality and fraternity. Can changes in funding do much to alter educational selection or counteract the worst side-effects of private capital and choice applied to schooling? Doubtful. Gonski has proposed a persuasive simplification of the present obtuse funding system, in the hope that transparency might bring about a bit more justice, but he has been forced to pursue greater equality through a large increase of funds for schooling those who miss out, the so-called 'disadvantaged' groups, identified in the review (and for the umpteenth time) as either, or both, poor, indigenous, disabled, in remote locations or of non-English speaking background. Most of the new money recommended by Gonski—but not yet acknowledged by governments—would go to schools where the 'disadvantaged' congregate. Since disadvantaged schools are typically those avoided by families exercising choice, the idea is that extra money properly spent will improve the school's performance, which is by definition low, and perhaps, but not necessarily, its image, which depends only partly on academic performance. Educational disadvantage is not a new idea, as Gonski's review of our schooling history demonstrates, but it is forcefully outlined and becomes an argument for putting more money where it's needed. Yet since being a 'disadvantaged' school has in

itself become a disadvantage, it might be a good idea to break the idea down, rather than aggregate its elements, or perhaps to do away with it altogether. Are students with various disabilities, properly funded, bound to be disadvantaged in schooling? Why should we consider being bi-lingual, as most ESL students are, a disadvantage? Are either of these circumstances comparable to indigeneity or living in remote locations? Which leaves poverty, a circumstance that can sometimes be remedied simply by money but which can also be associated with the more intractable circumstance of lack of educational drive or stimulus in the home. Rather than lump these together under the rubric of disadvantage, it seems to me better to refer to each as specific programs. This is after all the way extra funding should be allocated. Providing general grants for 'disadvantage' has not worked. Measures for properly funding a disabled student, running a top ESL program, reducing or compensating for the now considerable costs of schooling, do work. Where we lack ideas it seems is in educating indigenous students, students in remote locations and students with inadequate drive from home. Let us imagine an urban school with few indigenous students and, obviously, none living in a remote area. Call it Pariah College because it has a lot of poor students and more than the usual number of disabled students, so that a lot of local parents avoid it. What can money do? Unless the local community changes its prejudices, it cannot expect a different mix of students. With enough money, however, it can have great provision for disabilities and a red-hot ESL program with a dispensation from the Anglocentric NAPLAN. It should also, as our forefathers promised, be free. It should feed its students and staff well, as happens in at least some other countries. Money could achieve these changes without having to imagine completely new programs. After that we get into more difficult territory, requiring ideas and political will. Pariah College needs to be well run. Everyone concerned with it, staff, parents, governors, bureaucrats, has to be optimistic, to think educable rather than disadvantaged. Its governance needs to be much better connected to the community and to people of influence in it than the usual school council is. The council will decide whether to put all its faith in a principal or in a leadership group and should have the power in consultation with the school leaders to appoint and remove staff. Money doesn't buy good teachers but it can be used to reward them. All staff should get extra pay simply because they commit to a school with seriously low performance. They should have time to pursue further knowledge and qualifications and to share their experience with teachers generally. They should have five-star accommodation, individual offices, the latest technology, a top chef, personal trainers, housing near the college if they want it and so forth, just as though they were in a rich school. They should also have aides to relieve them of a lot of routine jobs and help with tutoring individual students. And so on—you get the picture. Pariah College should be able to develop its own specific curricula. State, national or international frameworks should be seen as guides, to be used if they fit and ignored if they don't. It should be lavishly staffed in areas such as arts, crafts, trades, sports, languages where options may be many and classes very small. In other words it should be staffed like a large, rich school, not a small, poor school—more like the elite schools that, as Stephen Long says 'spend millions each year to give their students the best: top class sporting ovals and stadia, swimming pools, libraries, and in some cases music rooms replete with Steinways'. Pariah College should also be responsible for its own testing and reporting, supervised and guaranteed by an expert external group provided (i.e. approved and paid) by state authorities and answerable to both state authorities and the school council. It may, indeed almost certainly will, need to break from the traditional straitjackets of school organisation and school times. Calculating so many teachers for so many students in standard class groupings is stupid. The proper measures are not class sizes and fixed time lessons. Time on task and student grouping for particular tasks should determine both staffing and times. Some learning can happen in very large groups—watching a film is an obvious example, as is massed singing—some in groups of ten, fifteen, twenty or so, some in very small groups, some as individuals. School architects now seem to understand this, so someone must be

briefing them, but it is not in the common consciousness, probably because it is not at all common in practice. Much the same can be said of time. For most at Pariah College the school day, indeed the school week, should probably be longer. Whether these are useful or merely fantastical detail, the general picture is clear: Pariah College should be well governed, well led, well staffed, well organised, well taught, well resourced and responsibly autonomous. This is by and large what Gonski suggests about the internal life of 'disadvantaged' schools. What of external influences? Our college is after all a pariah partly because of government policies. Today's governments praise selection, promote choice and publish figures that sort the alpacas from the sheep from the goats. In this world, low performance corresponds to 'disadvantage' as measured by socio-economic and language background (except in the handful of highly selective academic schools where the proportions of non- English speaking background students is astonishingly high: 77 per cent at Melbourne High, none indigenous, 89 per cent at MacRob, again none indigenous). I don't see this policy framework changing. Both major parties love it, parents look to it and appear to act on it, and in any case it confirms, or only slightly modifies, existing rumour and prejudice. In this context the promised implementing of a detailed national curriculum won't improve the lot of 'disadvantaged' schools or their students. It may worsen it. Thus, the biggest external improvement could be for the federal government to forget about educational policy and confine itself to handing over lots of money and collecting statistics (based in the case of performance on a wide variety of sample tests); and for state governments to encourage schools to run themselves. Money is usually a good substitute for policy. Had the state departments already sorted out their ideas on funding, school staffing, school governance, school autonomy and school facilities, we wouldn't have needed more from Gonski than a sensible streamlining of the way funds are calculated and distributed. Had the ALP not panicked by promising rich schools that they wouldn't miss out, Gonski might have been able to recommend a bit less immediate spending, but it is extremely hard to work out how much money would be needed to correct our present serious inequalities. Unfortunately, money is our only hope. The dysfunctional system we now have with its layers of private, public, parish, posh, pretentious, popular, and pariah is not likely to change all that much. Whether pariah schools improve their image, which tends to be what they now try for, is of minor consequence. Whether they continue to be named or avoided as 'disadvantaged' is also of minor consequence. The key task is to raise educational standards for everyone, but especially, as Gonski says, for those who presently miss out. Money for people who see all students as educable, have sound ideas about how to educate them and the freedom to realise their vision could bring about some change for the better. Bill Hannan was a teacher, textbook writer, union editor, curriculum innovator and senior official in Victoria until the 1980s. Some of his writings on schooling are in *Democratic Curriculum* (Allen & Unwin 1985) and *The Best of Times* (Lexis 2009).