

Gonski review: another wasted opportunity

By Zyngier David

The Gonski Review sought to create a new funding system for Australian schooling, because what we currently have is a mess. It was to be transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent outcomes for all students.

Gonski's recommendations for a resource based funding model starts with a false premise. Since the Karmel Report 39 years ago we have witnessed a slow but ever increasing movement of taxpayer's dollars from public schools to the private sector, all apparently on the basis of Commonwealth provision for school education on the principle of "need".

The Gonski Review has accepted as holy writ that if parents decide not to send their child to the local public school, then the rest of the country is required to subsidise that choice.

The cost of choice

Why should a struggling worker on an average wage of \$50,000 be asked to contribute to the education of the children of doctors and lawyers who have the financial capacity to choose to attend schools charging \$25,000 after tax per student per annum. That worker doesn't have the luxury of choice that the middle class have.

When we choose to use a tollway to shorten our trip, instead of the perfectly well made and safe public roads, we don't expect that cost to be subsidised by others. When we choose to have surgery in a private hospital instead of going to a public ward, we also don't expect a subsidy for that either. When we choose to fly business class when we could also go cattle class for much less, do we expect those in economy to help us out with that choice?

An education marketplace

Since the mid 1990s we have seen the adoption of neo-conservative policies by both Liberal and Labor in this country emanating from the USA and England.



Education Minister Petter Garrett and David Gonski at the launch of the review into school funding.
AAP/Tracy Neary

In education under the mantra of parental choice, we have witnessed a flight of the middle class from local public school as a result of an unrelenting campaign of derision of public schools and their teachers as lacking in values; being poorly trained; with undisciplined classes running amok with drugs; bullying; and dud teachers who need to be axed.

Middle class flight

At the same time more federal funds have been transferred from the public school system into the private sector, ostensibly to reduce school fees and thereby encourage the middle class to leave those families without money in sinks of disadvantage. But no independent school has ever reduced their fees. On the contrary each year their fees typically far outstrip cost-of-living increases.

Many public schools have started to lose their middle-class families. This leads to social and cultural deficits created by this loss further making it difficult to cater for all students. The result is that schools in poorer areas have become residualised. Professor Richard Teese calls these “sink schools”, stripped of numbers and resources and repositories of failure.

If it can be done in health ...

If only it was about more money. Extra funding [to the tune of \$5 billion] would be most welcome in supporting the needs of the most disadvantaged children in this country. If the government wants to bring in a budget surplus and put taxpayers' money where it is most needed, all it needs to do is stop funding the current practice of middle class welfare as it did with the removal of the Health Insurance Rebate.

But there is no guarantee that without changing what we are doing in schools, how schools are organised and how we actually teach children from communities of disadvantage will more of the same actually make much difference.