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Funding consensus of school sectors the real test

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*Reforms for at-risk students recommended in the Gonski review must not be delayed, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

The review of funding for schooling, chaired by David Gonski, could be the start of much-needed reform to education. Its recommendations for a new national funding model for all schools have already had an impact but the hard trade-offs lie ahead.

In the past, Australian school education has suffered from two key problems. First, too much education debate has focused on the divide between government and non-government schools at the cost of improved learning and teaching.

Second, there is a great disconnect between expenditure and results. Between 2000 and 2009, expenditure increased more than 40 per cent but our international performance declined. These trends point to serious problems. The Gonski review offers a chance to begin to address them.

Gonski's recommendations rectify the largest problems with our funding models: inconsistencies in how they are applied to schools and inadequate funding of concentrated educational disadvantage.

Inconsistencies were created when some schools were given special deals to exempt them from the model that was applied to all other schools. Changes to the funding of students with disabilities and special learning needs are also welcome and were one of the few areas where stakeholders generally agreed on the need for reform.

But fixing the inconsistencies is easy. A more important change is the focus on equity. The funding model recognises it costs more to effectively educate students who are disadvantaged in numerous areas of schooling and are in schools with many other disadvantaged children. While it is undeniable that money has not been spent efficiently in school education, these schools have the greatest need for additional funds.

It is sad that the biggest debate in Australian education for decades has been the division between government and non-government schools. It is a testament to the achievement of Gonski and his panel that the review has so far won support from all sectors.

But consensus won't be easy when it becomes clear how much each school (and sector) receives.

If the Minister for School Education, Peter Garrett, is successful in this daunting task, if we can finally focus on a student's learning rather than the school they attend, he will achieve a worthy legacy.

Some are still trying to play the old game: to drive a wedge between the government and non-government sectors by stoking fears of unfair treatment, rising fees and lost money. These people need to realise they are damaging our school children. There are so many important reforms that need to be made we cannot still be distracted by pointless bickering between government and non-government schools.

Gonski has correctly said reform of funding alone will not trigger improvements. It was not in his remit to state how additional funds should be spent. But he demonstrated reform was necessary.

If Australia were to follow the example of the best systems in East Asia teachers would engage in classroom observation two to three times a week (five times for a beginning teacher), an hour of peer feedback and an hour working collaboratively with other teachers to improve learning.

Reforms would cost about \$4.4 billion each year, less than what Gonski has proposed.

The main costs come in creating time in each teacher's day to undertake these activities. More precise costs can be estimated with further work with schools in each system. In addition, other reforms will be needed..

The average Australian secondary school has about 300 students and 24 full-time teachers. While deciphering exact numbers from the Gonski review is difficult, Gonski reforms would increase funding to the average school by at least \$500,000, taking total funding to more than \$3 million.

The commonwealth will never succeed at the Council of Australian Governments without putting some money on the table. The last time it tried to get COAG on board for systemic reform of national funding models was the 2010 health agreement, which was hardly easy, quick or cheap.

The government response to Gonski has been troubling.

For the first time in decades, self-interest was put aside to support a consistent funding model across school sectors. For the government to respond by emphasising the need to maintain the surplus is a lost opportunity. The new funding scheme will not kick in until 2014. Any delay will further set back those students that Gonski and the government have said are disadvantaged.

Gonski has stressed the need to better fund disadvantaged students. The government too has highlighted the need to address inequities in our schools.

The latest round of National Assessment Program -- Literacy and Numeracy showed more than 145,000 students were performing at or below minimum literacy levels. These are at-risk students, many of whom attend schools Gonski has said are providing an education of insufficient quality.

Reforms introduced in 2014 would provide a lift for many of these students. For some, it will be too late. Last year, about 40,000 students dropped out of schools without taking up work or further study. A further delay would mean even more students are lost.

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