

SUBMISSION TO

NATIONAL COMMISSION OF AUDIT

2013



AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL INC.

PO Box 5011, Launceston, TAS 7250

Phone: (03) 6334 8886

Email: admin@austparents.edu.au

26 November 2013



Submission to the 2013 National Commission of Audit

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the national organisation representing the parents of students attending Catholic and independent schools. We take this opportunity to make a brief submission to the national Commission of Audit as its members undertake a 'review of the scope, efficiency and functions of the Commonwealth government'.

The APC notes that no area of Commonwealth expenditure is to be immune from the 'full scale review of the activities of the Commonwealth government' undertaken by the Commission.

APC says, however, that current promises and national agreements for Commonwealth funding for school education should not be reduced nor should the government resile from its proposals and policies to innovate, monitor and support school improvement.

Since the 1960s the Commonwealth has increased its involvement in the schooling portfolio to the extent that, as reflected in the final report of the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling and expressed in agreements forged through COAG, responsibility for school education is national and shared between the Commonwealth and the states and territories.

Responsibility is also shared by the non-government schooling sector which contributes some \$7 billion a year to the national schooling enterprise, takes much of the responsibility for the infrastructure of non-government schools and educates some 35 % of the schooling population in Australia. We note here that, despite these contributions to the schooling enterprise, the non-government sector has no representation on the major national decision making body regarding school education policy, the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC). It should have.

Changes in train for the distribution of Commonwealth funds to schooling, commitments by the Government at the September 2013 election to increases in the funding for schooling over the life of the Parliament and the Commonwealth's determination to look towards the improvement of schooling outcomes for all students, mandate that the Commonwealth must not reduce its funding or resile from its role to innovate, report on and support improved schooling outcomes for students.

At the same time, however, APC has for some time questioned whether the huge public investment made in education in Australia is used as effectively and efficiently as it could be. To this end we believe it might be timely for expenditure on schooling to be the subject of a forensic audit to ensure that any existing inefficiencies in spending can be addressed and the money reallocated to areas that have a direct impact on teaching and learning in classrooms and the engagement of parents in their children's learning.

There should be no doubt that effective school education is a national imperative, key to the future of Australia and its citizens and that Australia needs to lift its performance in schooling achievement as against other advanced countries.



While the APC has reservations about how the calculation and roll out of the new funding arrangements for schooling will work for the non-government sector, the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), its implementation as a universal benchmark plus additional funds for disadvantage should allow the opportunity for a focus on students and their educational needs regardless of sector.

We particularly point to the urgent need to address the significant inequities that exist in the funding of students with disabilities between the government and non-government sectors.

In addition to this, the cost pressures in respect of the delivery of schooling will build as the learning required by young Australians undergoes the changes that will be required for them to participate fully in the 21st century economy. Technology and the provision of training (for principals, teachers and school communities who support student learning) and IT infrastructure for schools will need to be a priority if we are to build a globally competitive workforce.

That may eventually require information technology to be a funding need in and of itself, similar to capital funding, to be incorporated into a future schools funding formula.

Together with the long held Coalition policy for increasing choice and diversity, these elements represent coalition concepts and directions for schooling policy as articulated by the Minister for Education in his speech to the Independent Education Union (IEU) on 3 October 2013 (<http://ministers.education.gov.au/>).

While it is acknowledged that funding is not the cure-all for improvements in outcomes for students, neither is it feasible to expect the required lifting of the outcomes of schooling to occur without judiciously placed funding and the monitoring of outcomes.

The Commonwealth, although not an owner or provider of schools, is now the dominant distributor of public funds for all public sector services in Australia. It is clearly in a position to contribute substantially to the lifting and monitoring of outcomes through agreements with the states and territories and the capacity to provide policy and direction which can improve the quality of teaching and learning. The Commonwealth must also maintain its critical role as a driver of schooling policy and innovation.

Moreover, parents of the one and a half million school students in the non-government schooling sector, in addition to their own efforts and contributions to the schools chosen, rely on the Commonwealth to ensure that every non-government school student receives an equitable share in public funds available for schooling. States and territories, as competing owners and funders of the state systems, are not necessarily reliable in this regard or committed to honesty in expenditure reporting.

Schooling should be about opportunities for all students to achieve optimal outcomes, not about competition between sectors and/or schools. We need every school to be excellent, with students being well taught by quality teachers who are well led. It appears from recent research by the Grattan Institute that market forces of competition and autonomy are not the overarching criterion for success in improving student performance (*The Myth of*



Markets in School Education (<http://grattan.edu.au>). Highly effective teachers and school leaders, quality teaching and learning and the availability of necessary resources are essential.

The Government has developed and consulted on policies with potential to lift school performance. These will not be achieved without the promised additional investment in schooling.

Coalition policy is clearly stated as part of the Real Solutions plan, which states:

“Our Policy for Schools will

- “Deliver stable, simple and sustainable funding to all Australian schools.
- “Develop ‘best practice’ guidelines to improve admission standards into teaching courses
- “Improve teacher training programmes by ensuring a greater focus on practical skills
- “Work with the states to promote alternative pathways into teaching
- “End federal Labor’s schools takeover and dismantle Labor’s ‘command and control’ feature
- “Provide local communities with a greater say by encouraging around 1,500 existing public schools to become independent public schools by 2017. We will establish a \$70 million ‘Independent Public Schools Fund’ to help this occur
- “Match Commonwealth funding for students with disability for 12 months while a new ‘loading formula’ is developed for these students. We believe students with disabilities deserve better support
- “Protect schools by providing \$18 million to continue the Secure Schools Programme
- “Restore the focus of science, technology, engineering and mathematics in primary and secondary schools
- “Maintain funding for the ‘Primary Connections: Linking Science with Literacy’ science education programme and the ‘Science by Doing’ programme
- “Improve the take-up of foreign languages with initiatives targeted at foreign language teaching recruitment, teacher training courses, working with the States and trialling programmes from pre-school to years 11 and 12
- “Review the national curriculum and refocus the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
- “Improve NAPLAN turnaround times for results
- “Develop a new school leadership programme modelled around MBA-style executive education
- “Assist student literacy in remote areas by investing \$22 million in flexible teaching methods for local primary schools.”

APC also notes the considerable body of evidence that emphasises high quality schooling needs to be supported by strong community engagement. APC and the Australian Council of



State School Organisations (ACSSO) have much to offer from their research and experience in the engagement of parents in their children's school education, an element neglected in schooling policy and one with a demonstrated potential to lift student achievement, especially in disadvantaged communities.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), in a 2012 research paper prepared for the Family School and Community Partnerships Bureau, found that: positive parent engagement is the missing piece of the Australian schooling reform jigsaw; without a concurrent focus on this, school-focused reforms may not deliver the magnitude of change expected; and there is less investment in this area of education reform in Australia than the evidence warrants.

Finally, the APC urges the Commission to ensure that the promises and agreements for school improvement and additional funding for school education over the life of this government be honoured and that no cuts to Commonwealth funding for school education be instigated.
