

Stephen O'Doherty, The Gonski Review – February 21st, 2012

Katherine Spackman: Welcome to the political spot I'm Katherine Spackman. It's been described as the biggest review of school funding since 1973 and has been 18 months in the making. The Gonski review was handed down this week with 41 recommendations for a new funding model to prioritise spending on the education of disadvantaged and low performing students. Stephen O'Doherty from Christian Schools Australia joins me now to talk about the review. Welcome to the program Stephen.

Stephen O'Doherty: Hi Katherine.

Katherine Spackman: I've described very briefly what the review discussed but can you elaborate more on the recommendations?

Stephen O'Doherty: Well, it really has taken the opportunity to have a close, hard look at Australia's quite unique hybrid system of funding. Partnership system of funding, if you like. You've got state governments, commonwealth governments, and also parents to a greater or lesser degree, all contributing to the education of Australia's kids. And what's one of the really good things about the report is it acknowledges the place of those groups, and other community for benefit or public benefit organisations, like churches in contributing to education over the years. Disturbingly, it's found that Australia's education standards compared to OECD standards and other similar countries have gone backwards in the last 10 years, and they argue that a massive re-investment in education is necessary. They put the amount of 5 billion dollars onto that, to come from state and commonwealth governments, and everybody within the sector has very much welcomed that assessment and asked the government to implement at least the additional funding.

Katherine Spackman: Is there any particular reason why it's gone backward in the last 10 years?

Stephen O'Doherty: Well, one of the things the report has done is to confirm the benefit of directing funding to where it's needed most. Australia is not doing very well in the equity stakes. We're not doing well in getting good educational outcomes for kids from poorer backgrounds. Poorer socio-economic backgrounds, poorer backgrounds where in view of their remoteness and so on. So we need to allocate resources to those students. Our funding system in the past has been based on inputs – the expectation that money will just keep flowing, almost regardless of the outputs that we're measuring. We haven't had a very good way. It's been an ad-hoc system of directing funding to where it's needed most, and we also need to make sure we're investing very heavily in teacher training and leadership training. So Gonski has put his finger on all of those issues, and it's very welcome that he's addressing them.

Katherine Spackman: Representing independent schools, how will this potentially affect schools that are with Christian Schools Australia?

Stephen O'Doherty: Well one of the biggest achievements of Gonski is to deliver on the very deliberate promise of Julia Gillard. Nobody should be under any illusions. And I think the Christian Community of Schools certainly feels this very deeply. There was the prospect for the ideological and divisive approach of groups like the Education Union or the Greens, to win out in any group you

are funding. That approach basically says: “independent schools shouldn't be funded, particularly religious education schools shouldn't receive funding, because they have a religious special character, and our money shouldn't be spent on religiously based education.” That's the argument. Some of the argument. Julia Gillard, when she was education minister said, “we are turning our back on that divisiveness.” And in Fact, Kevin Rudd, when he was prime minister said exactly the same thing. This period from when Rudd was elected as opposition leader then Prime Minister, through Gillard's term as education minister and then prime Minister has been a period when Labour has turned its back on divisiveness. And David Gonski's report, very clearly has none of that ideology in it. It is clearly a sector blind report. It talks about funding kids, not funding sectors or systems. We think that it's a tremendous achievement for doing that.

Katherine Spackman: Will it mean more money potentially going to Christian Schools, or a fairer allocation of resources?

Stephen O'Doherty: Well, yes, there are fairer allocations. Firstly, this is something that the Christian Schools sector has been campaigning for for a long time. Kids with disabilities will get the same additional funding, if the government adopts the Gonski report, irrespective of which school or system attend. Now this has meant that in the past, many parents of disabled kids have not had a realistic choice for Christian or faith-based schooling for their students with disabilities. Now, the funding will follow the child, so disadvantaged students will have a greater opportunity to choose a faith based schooling, and that's just fantastic. We applaud that recommendation. That will over time, and fairly quickly, I think, broaden the base of the number of kids who are able to come to Christian and other faith based schools. Secondly, the report probably acts in a way that advantages those schools, well, let's say it doesn't disadvantage those schools that have a lower fee structure, and serve poorer populations of communities – more disadvantaged communities. Now that's where most of our our Christian communities operate. I don't know if SES numbers mean very much to you, but with an SES score of 94 average, Christian Schools that I represent, have a lower SES than the Catholic school system, and a lower SES than the government schools system and so we are demonstrably serving populations of less advantage. Those schools should do better under a Gonski future if the government adopts these principles, and importantly, if it adds the 5 Billion dollars extra. None of this is possible without the money that David Gonski has said is needed in order to provide these great benefits.

Katherine Spackman: On that point, the politics surrounding this issue – it's been described in the media somewhat that Julia Gillard's comments as a good insight really fails to endorse the approach, so it suggests or puts in doubt whether they will go through with this 5 billion dollar funding. Do you think Julia Gillard has the political will go through with really reforming education?

Stephen O'Doherty: I don't have any doubt that she has the political will, and whatever other commentary that there is around the prime minister, I have worked with her from the time when she was education minister, right through to the present day. Where this week I attended the launch where she spoke about the Gonski

report, and she's been the one driving the reform of education. She's achieved more reform than many others have in the past, and that includes in areas like curriculum, building the education revolution, whatever you think about, it's actually been fantastic for our schools, and in this area of funding, she's gone further than most people have gone in a couple of decades. So she's got the will. She's certainly got the understanding of the sector, and I think she's been remarkable in the way that she has held through to this non-divisive approach to policy making. Whether she can get the money is a different question. It's a related question obviously, but I don't think that the commentators that are criticising her have fully understood the extent that this has been a personal agenda of the PM. And also, once you start a ball like this rolling, it's very hard to unravel it. This has been a well received report. Whoever's in government will have this as the benchmark against which future education funding policy is measured. And while the opposition has been criticising some aspects of the policy, there's actually a lot in the Gonski report that the opposition would agree with.

Katherine Spackman: Stephen there was a recommendation in the report about having fully funded schools. Was this news to you? What does your organisation think of this idea?

Stephen O'Doherty: Well, we're delighted. We argued for fully funded schools in our submission, and what David Gonski has done is to suggest that there should be full funding for schools that serve particular populations of disadvantaged students. Now to give you a couple of examples, there should be full funding for example, for a school that serves indigenous populations in remote areas, or specifically serves a remote population and there are no other schooling options. Or it could be for kids who are not suited to other forms of schooling. Kids who have dropped out of mainstream and need special attention in order to go through to their Higher School Certificate or equivalent qualification. We've got a number of schools operating in that area right now in suburbs in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and around the country. These are fantastic ministries for Christian schools, and I spoke with David Gonski this week about whether he anticipated that these schools could have a special religious character as well as serving those populations, and he said that in his mind, yes they could, that there would be no barrier to this. If this proposal does get up it will give us some great opportunities to bring Christian schooling into very disadvantaged communities

Katherine Spackman: That was Stephen O'Doherty from Christian Schools Australia, talking about the Gonski Review.