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EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM

Bölcsészettudományi Kar

# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Oktatáspolitikai Ausztráliában: A Gonski jelentés*

*Education Policy in Australia: The Gonski Report*

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**2017**

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## Abstract

It has been well established that the introduction of political reforms of any kind is a complex, time-consuming and generally fruitless effort. This paper will focus on the state of Australian education and more specifically on the last Labour government's failed attempt at reconstructing the nation's school resourcing system from the ground up.

In 2012, the term 'Gonski Report' became a household name in Australia. The independent review of the country's school resourcing system created a political and public frenzy that dominated public discussion for years. This paper will explore and attempt to unfold the contents of the review and the events that surrounded it and utilize this peculiar story as an example of how a big and ambitious plan for education reform can turn into something completely different thanks to the wheels of politics and conflicting government interests.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most important economic investments any country could make is in education and the human capital it provides. There are many factors that contribute to the effectiveness of schooling and one of those is school resourcing (Freebairn).

School funding was and is a topic that divides Australia. Starting from 2008, significant steps were taken by the incoming new government towards introducing major educational reforms. One of the most important acts of the government was the initiation of an independent review of the Australian funding arrangements for schooling. An expert panel was formed, and chaired by David Gonski, the final review became unofficially known as the Gonski Report. The report was released in 2012 and immediately garnered considerable support, some criticism and ignited a public and political ‘battle’ of sorts which is still present today.

This paper will explore the road that led to the review and events following it. A comprehensive summary of the Gonski Report will portray the state of Australian education and the main recommendations and findings of the review which led to the conclusion that Australia’s school resourcing system needed major changes.

Unfortunately, big ideas are not always actualized, especially when it comes to policy making, as evidenced by this paper. Many forces rallied up against the proposed changes and the phenomenon and ramifications of the Gonski Report further solidified the notion that long-entrenched political mechanisms and conventions are hard to overcome even in the face of apparent disadvantage.

## 2. Politics and education policy leading up to the Gonski Report

### 2.1. The Howard Government

Australia was led by the Coalition (Liberal-National Coalition) between 1996 and 2007 with John Howard acting as Prime Minister. The Howard Government has been characterized as "inert" and as one with but a few substantial reforms "that left Australia more divided and entrenched in privilege and inequality" (Secombe). Jeff Kennett even went as far to say that Howard during his 10 year administration "didn't harm the country (. . .) but he didn't leave a lasting legacy either" (Lazaro).

Trevor Cobbold, in a paper compiled for the Australian Education Union, laid out the shortcomings of the Howard Government's education policies. According to Cobbold, one of the main areas of concern was the increased privatisation of schooling. Under Howard's administration, the number of private schools considerably increased, while the number of public schools decreased. This divide was further supported by increased federal funding for the private school sector. The reasoning behind the government's policies was that "increased choice and competition will improve student achievement" (Cobbold 10). In reality, international research clearly shows that the two are not necessarily interconnected. Secondly, the Howard Government did not recognise the high social inequities and the gap in academic achievement between students from low and high socioeconomic statuses. According to the report, "the primary effect of the Howard Government's school education policies is to increase the social divide and privilege in Australian education" (Cobbold 14).



## 2.2. The Rudd and Gillard Governments

In the 2007 federal elections the Australian Labour Party (ALP), led by Kevin Rudd, defeated the incumbent Howard administration (“Rudd sworn in”). The new Prime Minister appointed his running mate, the hon. Julia Gillard, as his Deputy Prime Minister, as well as the minister for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). In 2010, she became the first female Prime Minister of Australia after an interesting turn of events within the Labour Party (Coorey and Lester). She led the country until 2013 when Rudd was elected as leader of the ALP and became Prime Minister for the second time (Griffiths).

Despite the apparent political turmoil and change in leadership within the Labour government, the administration made considerable strides in the field of education and several new programs, policies, and projects were introduced during their 6 years in office.

In January 2007, Kevin Rudd, then ALP leader and his Shadow Minister for Education and Training, Stephen Smith, released a paper titled “The Australian economy needs an education revolution” in which they discuss “the critical link between long term prosperity, productivity growth and human capital investment”. In this paper, Labor argues that for Australia to begin a third wave of economic reform, following those of the 1980s and 90s, must make an investment in human capital which will lead to “a competitive, innovative, knowledge-based economy that can compete and win in global markets” (Rudd and Smith 3). The paper calls for a “new national vision”, an “education revolution” and urgent policy changes in response to Australia’s falling productivity growth (Rudd and Smith 27). This paper marked the first step in launching the ALP’s education revolution.

The second step being the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Melbourne Declaration) released in December 2008. This Declaration was made by all Australian Education Ministers at the time, including Julia Gillard, wherein they set the fundamental goals for Australian schooling in the future “acknowledging the major changes in the world that are placing new demands on Australian education” (Melbourne Declaration 4). These goals include that firstly, “Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; secondly, that “all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens” (7). Not only did the Declaration set the goals for the future of education in Australia but it also acted as “a commitment for action”, i.e. “the Australian government and the state and territory governments commit to working with all school sectors to ensure that schools engage young Australians (. . .) and to provide them with rich learning, personal development and citizenship opportunities” (10). The Australian Education Ministers commit “to a new level of collaboration in these eight inter-related areas”:

- “developing stronger partnerships
- supporting quality teaching and school leadership
- strengthening early childhood education
- enhancing middle years development
- supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions
- promoting world-class curriculum and assessment
- improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- strengthening accountability and transparency (10)”

The Declaration also made a point to recognize the importance of preparing the youth of Australia for what many call the “Asian Century” (Kirby) by increasing the number of students speaking Asian languages and promoting cross-cultural communication (Melbourne Declaration 9). The ministers promised to support the Declaration by releasing an action plan early next year (18).

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs’ (MCEETYA) Four-year Plan, released in March 2009, outlined the government’s key strategies and initiatives for the period of 2009-2012 in accordance with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and other National Partnership Agreements (NPA), e.g. the NPA on Literacy and Numeracy, NPA on Low Socioeconomic Status and NPA on Improving Teacher Quality. The plan outlines the actions the governments intend to take in the above mentioned eight inter-related areas. These mostly manifest in the form of National Partnership Agreements (agreements between the Commonwealth of Australia and the states and territories), however, it also includes the establishment of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) “to deliver key national reforms in curriculum and assessment”, and the introduction of a “nationally comparable school reporting system” (the future *My School* website) in order to measure and track the improvement of student outcomes (MCEETYA four-year plan).

In addition to the establishment of ACARA, the National Assessment Program (NAP), originally founded in 1999, was overhauled to reflect the new fundamental educational goals of the country (“About NAPLAN”). The Melbourne Declaration states that the assessment of student progress should be “rigorous and comprehensive”; also, that more emphasis should be placed on literacy and numeracy skills (Melbourne Declaration 14). These two skills are

currently assessed by NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy). The first NAPLAN tests were administered in 2008 and “this was the first time all students in Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 were assessed in literacy and numeracy using the same year level tests” (“NAPLAN infographic”) . The test is carried out annually and it benefits teachers, schools, school systems and governments equally. NAPLAN provides “valuable data to support good teaching and learning, and school improvement” (“NAPLAN infographic”).

In 2010, the *My School* website, a site dedicated to collecting and displaying vital information on Australian schools, was launched. Although the site had a rocky start as it crashed on its first day due to high demand (“*My School* site a victim”) it has since provided invaluable information on approximately ten thousand Australian schools, such as individual school profiles, NAPLAN results, school finances and student attendance just to name a few (“About *My School*”). The website was generally well received especially among parents who welcomed the access to school data and statistics, however, many teachers and school principals opposed the site stating that “it did not give an appropriate description of their schools” (“Principals unite against”). Despite the critics and difficulties with the site launch it is undeniable that “it has been a major innovator and driver for change nationally” (Knapp).

### 2.3. Announcing the funding review

The Hon. Julia Gillard MP in a speech given at the Sydney Institute on 15 April 2010 announced and commissioned a review of funding arrangements for the Australian education sector (Gillard). The aim of the review was to propose a new funding framework that is “transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent educational outcomes for all Australian students” (Gonski et al. xi). In her speech, Gillard stressed the importance of a new funding model that can address the emerging trends in Australian

schooling such as “increasing inequity”, “growing school population”, “evolving teaching practices”, disproportionately allocated funds, etc. The scope of the review extended to every government and non-government school and took into consideration the complexities of allocating funding in each state and territory since the methodologies differ within each jurisdiction. Gillard also made assurances for schools not to fear the review and pledged that “no school will lose a dollar of funding” as a result of the review (Gillard).

The panel entrusted with compiling this open, independent and transparent review was led by David Gonski, an Australian public figure, businessman and philanthropist; the final review thus became unofficially known as the Gonski Report. The panel presented its findings to the government in November 2011 and the report was released to the public in February 2012 (“What’s in the Gonski report?”).

### 3. Review of Funding for Schooling - Final Report – A Summary

The over 250-page-long report is structured in a clear and easy to follow way. Firstly, it provides a general overview of Australia’s schooling system, student performance, current funding model and arrangements, etc. Secondly, it presents the panel’s proposals for a new funding model. Throughout the report, the panel highlights its 26 principal findings, and based on these findings it introduces its 41 recommendations for the government to consider. Extensive research was studied whilst compiling the report, some carried out by international agencies such as the OECD, some commissioned by the panel exclusively for this report. The panel reviewed over 7000 written submissions, visited 39 schools and 71 education groups as part of the 18-month review process (Gonski et al. xi and Hall). The following chapter gives an extensive summary of the report.

### 3.1. Schooling in Australia

“Australia’s schooling system is divided into three sectors”: government (public) schools educating 66 per cent of students; and non-government (private) schools; these include Catholic schools educating 20 per cent and independent schools educating 14 per cent of all students. In 2010, there were around 3.5 million students in Australia, educated in 9468 schools. (Gonski et al. 4).

State-run schools “date back to a landmark legislation that was passed by 1880” in all colonies of Australia which “created free, compulsory, and secular education for all students” (5). Each state and territory is responsible for “the overall administration and policy of government schools” and “for registering and regulating all schools in their respective states or territories” (5). In 2010, over two-thirds of government schools were primary schools, the rest being secondary schools, combined schools and special schools.

In Australia, “providing universal access to free education for all students is the responsibility of state and territory governments”, not the federal government (5). This distinction will also be important when discussing the funding of schools. Australian states have the “power to make their own laws over matters not controlled by the Commonwealth”. In addition, they “have their own constitutions, as well as a structure of legislature, executive and judiciary”. The system is complex and any prospective national education policies would also need to be passed in each state’s parliament (“How the Government Works”).

Catholic schools date back to the first half of the 19th century in Australia (Gonski et al. 6). The general purpose of Catholic schools has remained mostly unchanged throughout the years: they are to “provide holistic education that includes religious instruction” (6). Most

Catholic schools “charge modest fees to be accessible to all students”, including those who may not be Catholic, and they “operate under Catholic Education Commissions (. . .), who provide advocacy and representation, and oversee the distribution of government funding for schools” (6).

As for independent schools, they “are usually established and developed by community groups, sometimes with religious affiliations, to meet particular schooling needs”. There is a high level of diversity in the independent school sector. Around 85 per cent of independent school students “attend schools that provide religious education” (e.g. Anglican, Lutheran, Jewish, etc.) or “promote a particular educational philosophy or philosophical affiliation” (7). The remaining schools are non-denominational. Independent school fees are at the discretion of the institutions, however, most “offer bursaries and scholarships for high-achieving but disadvantaged students” (7).

### 3.2. Student profile within the schooling sectors

“Each schooling sector caters for (. . .) students from a variety of regions, and social and cultural backgrounds”; however, it is evident that educational disadvantage is present across all schooling sectors (9). According to data collected by the ACARA, there are a disproportionate number of students “from the most disadvantaged backgrounds attending government schools” (9). In 2010, an alarming percentage of government school students (36%) were “from the lowest quarter of socio-educational advantage compared to 21 per cent of Catholic school students and 13 per cent of independent school students” (9). In contrast, “almost half of all independent school students fall into the top quarter of socio-educational advantage” (11). This apparent imbalance in the distribution of students based on socio-

educational advantage has impacted the ability of government schools to provide the same quality education for all students. This trend is further exacerbated by “the high degree of choice” within the Australian schooling system (11). Although many families support the numerous options the Australian schooling system offers, due to the high enrolment fees of independent (private) schools students from disadvantaged backgrounds are ‘forced’ to attend government schools (12).

### 3.3. School resourcing

According to OECD research, government spending in Australia is “relatively low in comparison to other members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries” (qtd in Gonski et al. 13). Furthermore, the OECD estimates that “public expenditure on (. . .) education was 3 per cent of the GDP in 2008, compared to the OECD average of 3.5 per cent of the GDP”. Public resourcing is provided by the “Australian Government and state and territory governments” (13). Government schools receive most of their funding from state and territory governments, Catholic schools receive the bulk of their funding from the Australian government, and independent schools on average have the highest level of private income (14). Furthermore, “parents and members of the community” are an important funding partner and “make a significant contribution towards the total income of schools, predominantly in the non-government school sector” (16).

### 3.4. Schooling performance and outcomes

Research is clear about “the many economic and social benefits of high-performing schooling systems”, e.g. a study conducted by Hanushek and Woessman found that higher educational achievement led to significantly bigger economic returns in developed countries.



The quality of the schooling system is often measured by standardized test results, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Australia's own National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Gonski et al. 19).

Australia has a "relatively high performing schooling system"; still, there are several areas of concern (19). Australia's mean PISA scores ranked significantly above the OECD average in 2009, however, "the country's average rankings have declined over the past decade" (20). Student achievement declined in all three domains, i.e. reading, scientific and mathematical literacy; the slippage is most pronounced in the last domain with a fall from 47 to 38 per cent (21). It is also important to note that "Australia has a high degree of performance inequality" which is indicated by the difference in PISA scores of the lowest and highest performing students (22).

There is no clear evidence to explain the decline in performance and rankings in PISA; however, there is evidence that indicates what makes the highest performing countries successful. Based on research by Caldwell and Harris these factors contribute to high-performing schooling systems: "attracting and retaining the best teachers"; "adopting a national curriculum"; "student engagement and motivation"; "using funding where it can make the most difference", etc. (qtd in Gonski et al. 23). Based on NAPLAN results, a significant improvement in the average levels of performance can be observed. Despite these results, "an unacceptable percentage of students are not meeting the nationally agreed minimum standard of achievement in literacy and numeracy" (24). There is considerable variation in performance across Australia's education sectors, and its states and territories. In both PISA and NAPLAN assessments, the independent sector achieved the highest results, followed by the Catholic sector, and the government sector (25).

While “the quality of schooling systems is often measured by standardized assessments” (19), “the outcomes of schooling are broader than just academic skills” (33). Students must not only master the core skills but also develop their general capabilities, such as a “capacity for problem solving and decision making, creative and critical thinking, collaboration, technology, and innovation” (33).

Australia’s students “are on average performing well”, however, “this ‘on average’ performance masks both a decline in overall performance across the entire distribution of students and the significant underperformance of students from lower socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds” (34). Australia needs to address this decline and ensure that all students leave school with good key foundational skills and a capacity to contribute to the nation’s prosperity. Australia must encourage “a culture of high expectations” for all their students but must also put more effort into closing the gap between sectors, states, and territories where levels do not meet the expectations (34).

### 3.5. Year 12 or equivalent attainment

“Year 12 attainment is associated with numerous positive outcomes for the individual, society, and the economy”; since the government has recognized this they have taken steps to improve Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates (ABS qtd in Gonski et al. 29). The National Education Agreement (operative from 1 January 2009) includes two targets that specifically relate to Year 12 attainment. Firstly, “to lift the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate to 90 per cent by 2015” (National Education Agreement 4). Secondly, “to at least halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020” (4). “Completing Year 12 has been estimated to return a 15 per cent increase in lifelong earnings”, and contributes to

economic development and improved living conditions (Gonski et al. 29). The Intergenerational Report 2010, *Australia to 2050: Future challenges*, states that “over the next 40 years Australia needs to achieve a productivity growth of 1.6 per cent per annum to sustain its GDP growth” which would “demand increased student performance and Year 12 or equivalent attainment” (qtd in Gonski 32).

### 3.6. Current funding arrangements

Schooling and the funding of schooling in Australia “runs as a partnership between the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and the non-government school sector” (Gonski et al. 37). This partnership was most recently solidified by the Melbourne Declaration in 2008, a declaration by all Australian education ministers stating the educational goals for young Australians, as well as the National Education Agreement, which contains the outcomes, outputs and performance indicators, and clarifies the roles and responsibilities that guide each level of government (National Education Agreement 3) and whose “objective is that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to effectively participate in society and employment in a globalized economy” (4).

The current funding arrangements are “complex and vary substantially between different school sectors, states, and jurisdictions” (Gonski et al. 42). The primary funders of government schools are the state and territory governments who fund schools “based on a variety of formulas to determine a school’s recurrent or base allocation, and then add weightings and multipliers for students facing disadvantage” (42). Under the *Schools Assistance Act* of 2008, the Australian Government became the primary public funder for independent schools. Funding includes three main allotments: recurrent, capital, and targeted.

Other income, such as parental fees and fundraising activities are also important contributors (37).

One discernible feature of the current system is that “funding is often provided in an uncoordinated way” resulting in funding not being allocated to where it is most needed, e.g. to disadvantaged students (48). Consequently, Australia must seek to “achieve greater coordination in the way schools are financed across all schooling sectors” (49).

The panel believes that the current funding framework for recurrent expenses, the Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC), is “no longer an appropriate funding mechanism” (55), therefore, a new funding framework should replace it which would provide “greater transparency and coherence in funding allocation”, and would improve the accountability of those responsible for resourcing (52). The standard would be designed to reflect the complexity and variations in funding within individual schools and those parts of a system. The new Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) would be subject to “expert, periodic, and independent review” to reflect the nature of the ever-changing needs of schools (69). The introduction of this new resourcing tool is one of the cornerstones of the review.

In regards to capital funding, i.e. funding for the “maintenance of school capital and for major capital works”, the same patterns can be observed as for recurrent funding; the system is complex, and until recently very little data was available on this issue (87). The panel found that “there is an uneven investment in capital and infrastructure in schools” (87). The lack of data, transparency, and accountability “makes it hard for school communities to understand their capital funding rights and needs” (96). To address these issues, all levels of

government must ensure that capital funding is responsive to each schools' and communities' needs (101).

### 3.7. Equity and disadvantage

Gonski et al. defined “equity in schooling as ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions” (105). Based on PISA results, Australia “is categorized as a system achieving only average equity” (105). In effect, “students from disadvantaged backgrounds are consistently achieving educational outcomes lower than their peers” (105). The panel greatly supports the idea that all students be granted the same opportunities regardless of where they live or what school they attend, therefore, “fairness and inclusion were central to the panel’s deliberations” whilst compiling this review.

So why is equity so important? Field, Kuczera, and Pont state that “maintaining a fair and inclusive education system is one of the most powerful levers available to make society more equitable”. The economic benefits of having an equal society are undeniable. Firstly, “people without skills (. . .) generate higher costs for countries” (Gonski et al. 108). In addition, they have “higher unemployment risks and less stable jobs” (108). Research clearly indicates that investing in high quality education for all, including disadvantaged students, reaps countless benefits not only for individuals but for the country as well (Field, Kuczera and Pont).

According to a report commissioned by the panel, the estimated state, territory, and Australian government expenditure on disadvantaged students was \$4.4 billion in 2009-2010 (Gonski et al. 132). However, the main finding of the report is that the existing resourcing is

not distributed evenly between “the five factors of disadvantage” (low socioeconomic background, disability, Indigeneity, remoteness, English language proficiency) (111). In addition, due to lack of data, transparency, and accountability there are no assurances that the money goes where it is most needed (Gonski et al. 135).

### 3.8. Proposed funding architecture

The main objective of the review was to propose new and improved funding arrangements for the Australian education system. The panel’s recommendations are based on extensive research and discussions, and are guided by the following fundamental principles:

- “Funding should be allocated in a fair, logical, and practical way, and on the basis of need
- Funding should be sufficient to ensure that all students receive a high quality education
- Funding arrangements should be more transparent and recipients should be accountable for the proper use of public funds
- Funding arrangements should complement and help educational outcomes improve, especially for disadvantaged students” (149)

As previously mentioned, the panel believes that replacing the existing resourcing standard, AGSRC, would be more financially sustainable and educationally effective for the country (153). The new resource standard would comprise “per student dollar amounts for primary and secondary school students plus loadings (supplementary funding) for additional costs or disadvantage” and it would introduce a ‘student outcome benchmark’ and ‘reference schools’ that already reach the desired levels of literacy and numeracy. In addition, it would

“increase the focus of funding policy on achievement of outcomes, evidence, performance, and accountability”. The new standard would be “indexed and review annually” and would only cover recurrent costs, not capital costs (154). With regards to capital costs, the panel suggests the establishment of School Planning Authorities, a School Growth Fund, and School Infrastructure Development Grants in each state and territory, which would all contribute to measuring funding needs and allocate available funds accordingly (185).

The new resource standard and proposed funding model was appropriately modelled and tested (207). Ultimately, it was deemed feasible and workable and it was concluded that the new framework would accomplish the goals of the review. “The modelling results indicated that (. . .) the additional cost to governments would have been about \$5 billion” if it had been implemented in 2009, and as a result “all sectors would have received increased government funding”, with the highest level increase for the government sector (208). As expected, the model could only be implemented after further testing, discussions, and clarification, however, the panel believed the model could have been enforced as early as 2014 (209).

#### 4. Government and public response to the Gonski Report

As previously mentioned, the report was released to the public in February 2012 along with the government’s initial response. In their response, the government stated that further “testing and development” of the proposed new funding system would be needed before any significant steps could be taken (Australian Government). It was not only the Australian Government but also state and territory governments needed more time to process and deliberate on the findings and recommendations of the review, therefore, the government

urged everyone to “take the next steps in this reform process thoroughly and with care”. In conclusion, the Australian Government stated that they are “determined to seize the opportunity to deliver education reforms (. . .) that provide a world class education” for all their students (Australian Government).

During the coming months, while the public was waiting for the government’s full response, many weighed in on the report. Lamb wrote that “there was understandable praise from advocates of public education for the report’s detailed evaluation of disadvantage in government schools” (qtd in Fletcher 11). In addition, the review found an unconditional supporter in the Australian Education Union (AEU) who launched their “I Give a Gonski” campaign (which is still active today) which called for “the urgent implementation of the Gonski Report (“I give a Gonski campaign”).

*The Conversation* interviewed several experts to share their opinion on the report itself and what they think the government should do next. In general, all experts supported the proposed new funding system (SRS) and urged the government to start the process of implementing it to give the much needed financial support many public schools lacked. Greg Thompson, a lecturer at Murdoch University, commends the report for recognising the true failings of the current system, i.e. it fails the most disadvantaged. However, he also fears that politics and political agendas will once again distract from the real issues (Palmer).

Others were more tentative with their support or rather, more skeptical about the possible implementation of the new system. For example, Jack Keating, the Leader of the Education Policy and Leadership Unit, stated “the report should be welcomed by all three school sectors (. . .) although this is unlikely” (Keating). Still, Keating commends Gonski et



al. for “attempting to shift the focus of school funding and governance away from the relations between public and private schools to inter-governmental relations” (Keating).

Fletcher writes that while criticisms did not directly attack the new funding system, they were vocal about their concerns on how the new policy would affect the funding of the non-government schools (Fletcher 12). In a report prepared by the Public Policy Institute of Australian Catholic University, the PPI criticized the Report’s stance on funding for independent schools and also questioned the need whether Federal and state and territory funding responsibilities should be realigned (Public Policy Institute 10).

#### 5. Politics and education policies after the Gonski Report

After the government’s initial response the public had to wait many months before they released their full response and subsequent proposal for any future policies. In September 2012, it was reported that “the Australian Government through its National Plan for School Improvement (NPSI) (. . .) had accepted the core recurrent funding recommendations” of the Gonski Report (Harrington). Apart from the main details of the plan very little was made public and much of the government’s response was released through the media. *The Australian* reported that the government rejected a key recommendation of the Gonski Report, namely, the establishment of the National Schools Resourcing Body, an independent authority overseeing the funding of the education sector. Peter Garrett, School Education Minister at the time, said that “governments were best placed to make decisions about the resourcing of schools” (Ferrari and Perpetch). The completed NPSI report was released in April 2013 and was regarded by many (and rightly so) as a “watered-down” version and only partial implementation of the Gonski Report (Main).

In their proposal, the Commonwealth asked every state and Territory to sign up to the new education reforms. On 23 April 2013, after extensive negotiations between the state and the Australian Government, New South Wales signed on for the NPSI plan. They were later joined by South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and the National Catholic Education Commission (“Gonski row”). The actual legislation behind the reforms, the Australian Education Act 2013, was passed in June 2013, not long before the 2013 elections were held (“Progress meeting on better schools plan”).

On 7 September 2013 the Coalition won the federal elections. The Abbott Government’s Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, declared in November that they will “go back to the drawing board”, claiming Labor's so-called Gonski reforms are a “shambles” and “impossible to implement”, just months after the Coalition promised to keep the newly passed funding arrangements (Wilson). Furthermore, Mr. Pyne said there would have to be changes to the recent education reform laws passed by Labor, but denied he was killing off the Gonski reforms because “there is no such thing as the Gonski model; there was never any attempt to implement Gonski” (Wilson). In another turn of events, after serious backlash from the public and the states, the Abbott Government “agreed to honour agreements Labor had made with four states and the ACT to introduce school funding reforms recommended by the Gonski review over the next four years” (“Impossible to guarantee”).

It is crucial to note that none of the education reforms the recent governments rolled out are actually based on the report’s essential recommendations; they indeed are watered-down versions of it as Main stated. In an essay published by *Inside Story*, Ken Boston, one of the panel members of the review, reiterates the shortfalls of both governments. He lists the many differences between what the panel proposed and what the government did: no National

Schools Resourcing Body, the funding is not “sector-blind, or needs-based”, “it continued to discriminate between government and non-government schools;” etc. (Boston). Boston admitted that new reforms “empowered school leadership, greater accountability, transparency and so on are all worthy objectives”, however, “Gonski was about funding for what happens in the classrooms of each individual school – about money going through the school gate” and neither governments delivered on this (Boston).

In his essay, Boston also mentions a positive example: New South Wales, who have put aside doubts about handing over responsibility and accountability and they managed to put “all funding through the school gate” (Boston). NSW also introduced the Resource Allocation Model (RAM) that adopts many of the funding measures recommended by the Gonski Report New South Wales “has demonstrated (. . .) the feasibility of building school funding from the bottom up as envisaged by the panel” (Boston). So far, all research and studies highlight the positive impact of these new need-based and targeted funding measures (Fletcher 19).

## 6. Conclusion

A thorough examination of the events following the release of the review prove that the implementation of education reform is a complex and tedious process that requires many months of planning and negotiations and it is highly probable that the end result will not resemble the base material.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened in the case of the Gonski Report. Outside forces, conflicting interests and public scrutiny all steered the conversation away from the primary aim of the review, i.e. “to ensure schools are appropriately resourced to provide an internationally acceptable standard of education for all (Australian) students” (Gonski et al.

108). Governments must learn from their mistakes and follow up on their promises, especially when the future of our children and the prosperity of our country is at stake. Governments must focus on delivering effective policies for the good of the country rather than using the promise of them as props during elections.

Even though the fundamental recommendations of the panel will probably never be realised as intended, the terms ‘Gonski Report’ and ‘I give a Gonski’ will live on as a symbol for the pursuit of educational reform in Australia.

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