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## **Education, the Golden Ticket**

A year ago Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service was given the opportunity to submit our ideas on school funding to the Gonski Review. At the time we contended that parents of students at state government schools are disproportionately bearing both the costs of education and the brunt of the current system's shortcomings. Since then our stance has not changed, and unfortunately neither has the situation for many students struggling to stay in school. Education remains the ticket to life opportunity: without it, a bit of bad luck can too easily set a negative life course.

In my many years as a front line social worker and now as a researcher, I've become far too familiar with the effects of poorly organised funding on our most disadvantaged students and their families. Sure, we have free education for all; that's what local high schools are for, right? Trouble is, they are not free and often not local either. Cash-strapped state schools now invoice parents for what they call 'essential payments'. I've lost count of the number of times I've heard from my colleagues working with people in financial difficulty stories of how they are called upon to support these people to pay for camps and calculators so their kids can really participate in education and feel like they belong – to not fall behind their better resourced peers.

These 'essential payments' largely replace the former, euphemistically termed, 'voluntary contributions' (which often weren't voluntary); but pose similar questions about why parents are paying for 'essentials' in a 'free' system. The answer is that government schools now rely on parent payments for a significant percentage of their revenue. State schools now blatantly reflect the wealth, or lack of it, of their school community. While some schools can raise a million dollars, others struggle to raise a few thousand. And it shows.

To add insult to injury, the concept of choice has so pervaded education that, in Victoria anyway, parents can choose to bypass the local school in favour of a more well-endowed one a few suburbs away, further entrenching the divide between successful and struggling schools. Because of course the greatest resource of a school is actually its students – and so the cycle continues.

Whatever additional subsidies are currently provided to schools in low socio-economic areas, they are clearly not enough to overcome this inequality between government schools. It was 'not a level playing field' when the Senate looked at these questions in 1999 and it is even less of one now. Market-based competition and choice are simply not effective underpinnings for an equitable education system. The resources of many of our government



Charity gives, justice changes.

schools, often serving neighbourhoods themselves depleted by unemployment and poverty, must be replenished.

I hope the Gonski Review will address these critical issues. And while most of the current discussion rightly centres on the funding differential between government and non-government schools, the inequities within the government system are also symptoms of the funding arrangements being looked at in the review. There are hopeful signs that the Gonski Review will recognise the fundamental principle that funding should go to where the needs are greatest. Enough evidence has been amassed now. The illogical, inconsistent, and unfair school funding system has been named for what it is: a product of historical, geographic and political forces that is no longer serving the nation as it should.

The rift between the haves and the have-nots of education threatens to split open our society. Research, and even simple observation, tells us that young people lacking the ticket to opportunity can become soured, demoralised and angry by missing out time and again. The kids themselves suffer; as do we as a society.

Any response to the Gonski Review must vigorously tackle the compounding inequity across multiple levels of our education system. Policies that set schools and school systems up against each other in a competitive education market, and then give some schools or sectors undue advantages, can never succeed in addressing the low education participation in disadvantaged areas. Policies which fail to monitor or moderate rising education costs, or the degree to which parents are required to subsidise these, will continue to force some students to forgo educational experiences.

The Federal government has gone about this the right way with a comprehensive review process. Now it needs to take courage and follow through. Publically available resources are always limited and therefore school funding must go first to where it is most needed. Government has a clear responsibility to go where the market cannot, and to ensure educational access for all, and especially for the students whose families cannot afford to buy an education for their child. The opportunity for decisive action is here: to re-set the course of education as a common good which government holds in trust for the community.

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