*Trevor Cobbold’s*[*recent review of Waiting for Gonski, how Australia failed its schools*](https://johnmenadue.com/trevor-cobbold-a-review-of-waiting-for-gonski/)*, will resonate with many. He is generous in his praise, forthright in his criticisms, and remains focused on his preferred policy options for the future. But his critique side-steps the big problems facing Australia’s schools, and he fails to recognise the key ingredients in any solution to the inequality (and ineffectiveness) of Australia’s school system.*

In the process, he also makes a series of misleading claims which could leave the casual reader with a quite mistaken impression of the argument we make in the book. Here are four:

* 1. Cobbold suggests that our view is that private schools perform better than public schools. To be very clear, it is not. In fact, we present extensive evidence that achievement across the sectors is very similar: firstly, in documenting the Gonski report’s finding to this effect; secondly in a break-out box specifically devoted to more recent evidence pointing to the same conclusion (on page 239).
  2. Cobbold states that “In the rush to condemn Gonski as a failure, the book ignores major achievements of the Report. It completely changed the terms of public debate about school funding.” Far from ignoring this achievement, two whole chapters of the book are largely devoted to it: in one, we argue that Gonski had so successfully changed the conversation that it forced Abbott and Pyne’s humiliating triple-backflip in late 2013, when they were forced to reinstate Gonski funding against their will; in another chapter, we examine how Malcolm Turnbull’s Gonski 2.0 was a surrender to the reality that the principles of needs-based funding now defined the political centre and that in the process some schools should lose funding.
  3. Cobbold claims “Waiting for Gonski misunderstands the fundamental causes” of resource disparities between schools, proceeding on the false presumption “that all private schools, including the wealthiest and most exclusive, are entitled to government funding.” In fact, the exact opposite is the case. One of our major criticisms of the Gonski report is that it endorsed continued public funding of even the most exclusive high-fee private schools. By contrast, we propose that if a school charges fees it should receive no public funding at all.
  4. In a similar vein, we devote considerable space to criticising Gonski for endorsing the Howard Government arrangements which encourage private schools to raise fees as high as they please no matter how much public funding they receive. Cobbold wrongly claims we fail to address this issue.

Readers looking for a reliable guide to the argument of Waiting for Gonski will find themselves much better served by [Rachel Wilson’s review](https://theconversation.com/still-waiting-for-gonski-a-great-book-about-the-sorry-tale-of-school-funding-178016) in The Conversation or [Sally Larsen’s review](https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=13217) for the Australian Association for Research in Education. On the one hand, Cobbold significantly misrepresents Waiting for Gonski. On the other, he fails to address its central argument, even in his [24 page review essay](https://saveourschools.com.au/funding/waiting-for-gonski-a-review-essay/). As a result, he never really grapples with the basic rationale for our constructive proposals for the future of Australian education.

And he seems disinterested in the longer story which explains how and why we got to where we are today. In no small measure, Waiting for Gonski is a story of the unresolved problems which have dogged Australia’s schools for 150 years. The Gonski Review is simply the most recent effort to deal with some, but not all, of these problems. Just like the Karmel Review in the 1970s, it hoped that some resolution of school funding inequities might see the end of fractious debates about Australia’s schools. Just like Karmel, it knew about the wider unlevel playing field problems in Australia’s hybrid public/private system, but also just like Karmel it didn’t resolve them.

Over this period Australia’s school system has become far more socially segregated than most comparable countries. It is astonishing that, in his full review, Cobbold goes out of his way to attribute this to geography and housing policies, seemingly ignoring the wider and deeper impact of competition and choice, Australian style. While location is partly responsible, 95 per cent of Australian schools compete with at least one other school. And this competition takes place on decidedly uneven terrain. Taxpayer-fueled resource advantages position some schools to attract the children of more affluent families, while unregulated fees mean non-government schools are inaccessible for low-income families. At the same time, some schools can pick and choose who they enrol (and expel) while other schools take all-comers. The consequence is that Australian schools are characterised by either poverty or privilege to a much greater extent than in similar countries.

This segregation is bad in itself. It undermines social cohesion, shared understanding and social mobility, as well as the experience of school itself. Moreover, the Gonski report demonstrated that concentrating disadvantaged young people together in the same schools, in the manner we do, is also hugely harmful to academic achievement. And in the book we show how, a decade later, these negative ‘peer effects’ or ‘compositional effects’ continue to undermine student learning and opportunity in profound ways.

So while needs-based funding is absolutely crucial to enhancing educational opportunity, by itself it is not enough. Australia also has to create a more inclusive school system, one in which there is much less social segregation. This is why we conclude Waiting for Gonski by proposing a level playing field in which all schools face commensurate public obligations in return for public funding. Publicly funded schools would not be permitted to charge entrance fees, nor would they be allowed to have exclusive or selective enrolment practices other than those strictly defined to support their special ethos. Any schools that wished to continue charging fees would lose their public funding.

Only by removing the structural drivers of social segregation will we address the hugely damaging impact of negative peer effects on student learning. It sounds hard but, as we point out, many countries offer Australia examples we can learn from. Canada (where education is a provincial responsibility) is a particularly significant case. In provinces like Ontario and Alberta the Catholic systems are fully publicly funded and free; only about 5 per cent of students attend fee-charging schools; and there is a much stronger socio-economic mix across schools. Canada consistently outperforms Australia in international tests like PISA, with Ontario and Alberta right up the top, and they have smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds. Tellingly, compared to their Australian peers, Canadian kids from disadvantaged backgrounds also indicate a stronger belonging to school and more optimism about the future.

Cobbold takes issue with our use of the example of Canada, and this is welcome. Caution in using international comparisons is always required as there are so many variables that could explain differing outcomes. But Canada is interesting precisely because it is similar to Australia in so many ways, including its multicultural make-up, history of European conquest, vast land mass, relative affluence and ‘Washminster’ political culture. Cobbold’s main objection is that, in recent decades, funding levels have increased much faster in Canada than in Australia. But the objection rather illustrates our point. Canadian expenditure on education is still similar to Australia’s. Canada’s much more inclusive and socially mixed school system is the most obvious difference which would explain superior academic achievement.

But the significance of the Canadian evidence will be lost on those, like Cobbold, who fail to acknowledge the power of peer effects on student learning, and fail to attend to the ways in which our school system creates and exacerbates concentrations of disadvantage and privilege. This is where Cobbold on the one hand, and we as authors of Waiting for Gonski on the other, part company. Trevor is a widely quoted (including by us) authority on school funding and much of what goes with it. But unlike school-based people, he doesn’t seem to value the essential message about peer impacts on student achievement, on school profiles and success, and on the achievement (or otherwise) of the whole system. In his extended review he laments the fact that ‘equity’ doesn’t appear in the book’s index – an odd criticism for a book that is all about equity. But his extended review mentions peers just once. By omission, Trevor plays down the significance of the unlevel playing field.

Like the Gonski review itself, Cobbold is fundamentally committed to Australia’s unique dual system of taxpayer funded schools, some free and comprehensive, others fee-charging and selective. Cobbold’s most substantial argument for the status quo is a variant of the old argument against state aid: “Parents, not governments, must pay for the special ethos of religious instruction and having their children taught only by teachers who support their faith.” But note that Cobbold is not arguing that state aid should be abolished. Like just about everybody else he knows that will never happen. He is just arguing for the status quo in which church schools are mostly publicly funded, but also get to charge fees on top.

It is unclear how this in any way addresses secularist concerns about public funding of church schools. In practice, all it means is that non-government schools exclude the poor. Thus, for example, poor Catholics generally do not go to Catholic schools – they go to public schools, and Catholic schools are middle class in character as much as they are religious. Church schools continue to be mostly funded by the taxpayer and meanwhile we have created a socio-economic hierarchy in every Australian town and suburb with high-fee schools at the top, low-fee schools in the middle and free schools down the bottom.

In political terms, Cobbold may believe that parents who choose a school which reflects their conscientiously held beliefs should face an effective financial penalty, but you can be sure those parents don’t. What they know is they have to make an out-of-pocket contribution to their kids’ education while many of their neighbours don’t (some of whom might even be wealthier). It’s just the kind of scenario which generates expectations that the payers will enjoy a benefit in return – better resourcing at their child’s private school.

This is the problem: the user-pays element in our funding system exists in direct contradiction of hope that resources will be allocated according to need. We have been trying and failing to introduce a needs-based funding, across a dual system of partly and fully publicly funded schools, for half a century, ever since the Whitlam Government. Maybe it’s time to accept that the experiment has failed? Maybe it’s time to entertain the possibility of a grand bargain in which non-government schools are fully funded to the level of equivalent public schools, while also taking on the obligation to provide a free, inclusive education to young people from all walks of life. The alternative is to accept the school framework as it is, with its continuing failure and ever-widening gaps between the haves and have-nots. Even if, sometime in the 2030s, public schools are finally brought up to the schooling resource standard, and overfunding of private schools is eliminated, low-SES schools will continue to be marginalised, the blessed will still pay fees to get into higher-SES schools, the achievement gap will continue to grow and we’ll still be routinely wringing our hands when all the indicators point to Australian school underachievement.

**Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor** are the authors of *Waiting for Gonski: How Australia failed its schools*published by UNSW Press.

A person smiling for the camera

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

CHRIS BONNOR

Chris Bonnor is an education researcher and writer.

A picture containing wall, person, indoor, smiling

Description automatically generated

TOM GREENWELL

Tom Greenwell teaches history and politics in the ACT public education system. He writes about Australian education policy for Inside Story and The Canberra Times