

**SAVE OUR SCHOOLS**

# **Waiting for Gonski: A Review Essay**

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## Executive Summary

Ten years ago, the Review of Funding for Schooling was published. Widely referred to as the “Gonski Report”, it recommended a completely new approach to funding schools in Australia. It was based on a national resource standard for schools – an estimate of the resources required to educate students with no identified disadvantage - supplemented by funding loadings for various categories of disadvantaged students and schools. It took account of both Commonwealth and state and territory government funding for schools.

The Labor Government adopted the basic framework recommended by the Gonski report. It was implemented through the *Australian Education Act 2013*, the National Education Reform Agreement between the Commonwealth and three state and territory governments and memorandums of understanding with private schools. It planned a \$16 billion increase in school funding phased in over six years with over 80 per cent to go to public schools.

*Waiting for Gonski* by Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonner is a well-researched and well-written account of the history of the Gonski funding inquiry, the flawed implementation of the new funding model by the Labor Government and its destruction by successive Coalition governments. It reveals new information about the implementation of the Gonski model and should be read by anyone concerned about the state of school funding in Australia and inequity in education outcomes.

A particular strength of the book is its identification of continuing inequity in school education in Australia. It describes the large disparity in outcomes between rich and poor and the impact on school outcomes of the concentration of disadvantage, also highlighted in the Gonski Report.

The book’s central message is that Gonski failed. Its evidence is the decline in Australia’s school results in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the undiminished achievement gap between rich and poor, far bigger funding increases for private schools than for public schools and continuing high levels of social segregation between schools.

It argues that this failure was conceptual, as well as in implementation, because the Gonski Report accepted the basic contradiction of an education system in which a free publicly funded system existed in parallel with publicly funded private schools able to charge fees and select enrolments. Its solution is that governments fully fund private schools provided that they do not charge fees, are open to all students, and meet curriculum and transparency requirements. Apart from this, schools would be allowed to retain their special ethos and character. The authors claim that fully funding private schools under these arrangements will reduce social segregation and improve student outcomes.

Despite its strengths, the book has several severe limitations.

The proposed solution would allow religious schools contracted to governments to impose compulsory religious teaching and observance and to discriminate in hiring staff in order to

preserve their special ethos. As justification, the authors argue this no more or no less than private schools do at present.

However, this misses a crucial issue. At present, parents pay fees to access the special ethos and character of private schools but the proposal means that governments take responsibility for funding them in future. This means governments will fund religious education and support discrimination in hiring staff. It jettisons two fundamental principles of public schools – they are secular and non-discriminatory. It would introduce a different structural contradiction: some fully funded schools would be secular and others absolutely non-secular; some schools would be prohibited from discrimination in hiring staff while others would be allowed to discriminate. Parents, not governments, must pay for the special ethos of religious instruction and having their children taught only by teachers who support their faith.

The argument that government funding of private schools currently supports discrimination and a religious curriculum and values may be valid, even likely because of the over-funding of this sector. But this is not a reason to continue or extend government funding of such practices. It is a reason to look for an alternative method of funding private schools.

The proposal is also highly unrealistic. Catholic and Independent schools are massively over-funded and will remain so for the rest of the decade. It is inconceivable they would take up the offer of full public funding conditional on not charging fees because it would involve a substantial reduction in income per student under a fully needs-based model.

The authors also have unwarranted faith that fully funding private schools will increase student achievement. This faith is not supported by extensive Australian and overseas research evidence which shows that after allowing for differences in student background, private schools do no better than public schools in student achievement. Moreover, the evidence that recent declines in Australia's PISA results have largely occurred in private schools.

In the rush to condemn Gonski as a failure, the book ignores major achievements of the Gonski Report. The Report completely changed the terms of debate about school funding, it adopted far reaching national equity goals and designed a needs-based funding model to be applied nationally. The advocates of school choice were put on the defensive and had to resort to back room deals to extend their privileged funding.

On these achievements, Gonski didn't fail; it was governments that failed Gonski. The model was compromised from the start by Julia Gillard's edict that 'no school would lose a dollar of funding' and her later edict that every school would get an increase irrespective of need. This was compounded by special deals negotiated with the Catholic Church and private school organisations that further undermined the principle of needs-based funding. The Labor Government also substituted the strong Gonski equity goals with a weak equity goal of improving the results of disadvantaged students.

Then followed the destruction of key features of the model by the Abbott and Turnbull Governments. The Abbott Government didn't dare amend the Gonski principles contained

in legislation because they had widespread community support. However, it sabotaged their implementation by stopping the \$7.5 billion increase in funding planned for last two years of the six year phase-in. It also released the states from their commitment under the National School Reform Agreement that they would also increase their funding over the six years. These were followed by the Turnbull Government's arbitrary restriction of the Commonwealth funding role and more special deals for private schools. Abandoning any semblance of commitment to equity goals, the Morrison Government then embarked on an ideologically driven multi-billion dollar spending spree on private schools.

The result was to widen the resources gap between public schools, which do the heavy lifting in educating students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and private schools. If that money had been devoted to increased funding according to the Gonski model then Australia might have made some real progress towards its equity goals.

*Waiting for Gonski* misunderstands the fundamental cause of this resource disparity. This is the presumption that all private schools, including the wealthiest and most exclusive, are entitled to government funding and that the financial needs of schools should be assessed by the capacity of families to contribute financially to schools. These have been features of school funding policies for decades and have led to massive over-funding of private schools

Another limitation of the book is that its evidence that fully funding religious schools will boost student achievement and reduce achievement gaps is not convincing. It relies on the performance of the Canadian education system which has higher PISA results and greater equity in outcomes than Australia. However, Canada's superior performance is more likely due to other factors such as higher socio-economic status of families, much larger increases in funding and higher exclusion of students from PISA than in Australia. These factors are ignored by the authors in highlighting Canada as a success story in fully funding private schools.

The socio-economic status (SES) of students exerts a strong influence on student achievement in Canada and its average SES index score is significantly higher than Australia's, especially in Alberta and Ontario which are two of only three provinces where Catholic schools are fully funded by government. Funding per student adjusted for inflation in Canadian schools increased by three times that in Australian public schools between 2001-02 and 2016-17 and by four times in the three provinces where Catholic schools are fully funded. Canada also had a much higher student exclusion rate in PISA and lower coverage of eligible students than Australia.

Other countries such as New Zealand and Netherlands that fully fund religious schools also perform worse than Canada and no better than Australia in terms of average results and equity. Indeed, they perform worse than Australia on some measures.

*Waiting for Gonski* claims that needs-based funding is "practically impossible" in a system where government funds both fee-paying private schools and free public schools. However, the authors fail to consider how the current model could be reformed. There is an alternative to their proposal to fully fund private schools under contracted conditions. It is a Gonski Plus model.

A Gonski Plus model would be designed to achieve clear equity goals – it would aim to ensure that all students complete Year 12 or its equivalent and that students from different social groups achieve similar outcomes. This is fundamental to any funding system. If we don't know where we want to go, there is no path that will take us there.

A Gonski-Plus model of funding resolve the contradiction between the free public education sector and the government-funded fee paying private sector by strictly limiting government funding of the latter to filling the gap between a schooling resource standard and income from private sources. Schools whose private resources exceed the resource standard would not receive government funding. A Gonski Plus model would also include much higher funding loadings for disadvantaged students and schools to support greater equity in education.

Increased funding of public schools and elimination of the massive over-funding of private schools would better achieve a central goal of *Waiting for Gonski*, namely, reduction of social segregation in schools. It would result in more advantaged students being enrolled in public schools because private schools would have to increase fees to compensate for the loss of over-funding. This is a much preferred way to reduce social segregation than to entice more disadvantaged students into private schools by fully funding them. It also avoids governments fully funding religious instruction and discrimination in hiring staff that would occur by allowing schools to hold to their “special ethos”.

## 1. Introduction

Ten years ago, the Review of Funding for Schooling [2011] was published. Widely referred to as the “Gonski Report”, it recommended a completely new approach to funding schools. It was based on a national resource standard for schools supplemented by funding loadings for disadvantaged students and schools. It estimated this would require a \$5 billion increase in school funding. It also proposed to integrate Commonwealth and state and territory government funding for schools.

The Labor Government adopted the basic framework recommended by the Gonski report [Gillard & Garrett 2013]. It was implemented through the *Australian Education Act 2013*, the National Education Reform Agreement [COAG 2013] between the Commonwealth and three state and territory governments and memorandums of understanding with private schools. It planned a \$16 billion increase in school funding phased in over six years with over 80 per cent to go to public schools [Harrington 2013, Australian Government 2013].

*Waiting for Gonski* [Greenwell & Bonnor 2022] is a well-researched and well-written account of the history of the Gonski funding inquiry, implementation of the new funding model by the Labor Government and its destruction by successive Coalition governments. It reveals new information about the implementation of the Gonski model and should be read by anyone concerned about the state of school funding in Australia and inequity in education outcomes.

A particular strength of the book is its identification of continuing inequity in school education in Australia. It describes the large disparity in outcomes between rich and poor and the impact on school outcomes of the concentration of disadvantage, also highlighted in the Gonski Report.

The book’s central message is that Gonski failed: “the problems of Australian education have only worsened since the report was commissioned” [p. 7]. Its evidence is the decline in Australia’s school results in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the undiminished gap between rich and poor [6, 189-190, 235]. It also notes that private schools have received far bigger funding increases than public schools and that high social segregation remains a feature of the school system.

It says that Gonski failed because of “flaws in conception as well as execution” [12]. While the book well documents the implementation failures, it argues there was a conceptual failure behind them in the Gonski model itself. It says that the Gonski Report and the Gonski funding model failed to confront a longstanding structural contradiction between a free, publicly funded system and publicly funded private schools that can charge fees and select enrolments. The authors say this is the “original sin” accepted by Gonski [14].

The authors’ solution to this structural contradiction is that governments fully fund private schools on condition they do not charge fees, are open to all students and meet curriculum and transparency requirements. The level of public funding would be determined by the learning needs of students in the schools. The authors say this will reduce social segregation in schools and boost achievement by disadvantaged students [288, 299-302].

Despite its strengths, the book has several severe limitations. It ignores major achievements of the Gonski Report, especially its adoption of far reaching national equity goals. It claims that Gonski failed but it was governments that failed Gonski. It also fails to analyse some fundamental flaws in the funding of private schools that should be exposed because they have led to massive over-funding.

In addition, the proposal to fully fund private schools subject to conditions jettisons two fundamental principles of public education, namely that public schools are secular and non-discriminatory. It is also highly unrealistic, places unwarranted faith in private schools to increase student achievement and relies on unconvincing overseas evidence.

## **2. Major achievements of the Gonski Report are ignored**

The authors' judgement on the Gonski Report is harsh and unbalanced. To be sure, the Report can be criticised on several grounds [Cobbold 2021a] but the authors discount or understate major achievements of the Report. These achievements provide the foundation to build a fully needs-based model.

### **2.1 The Gonski Report changed the focus of education policy**

The book fails to recognise the fundamental shift in debates around school funding that occurred following the Gonski Report. Its impact was far-reaching and endures today.

For many years, school choice dominated the school funding debate. The Report changed the whole focus of school funding from increasing choice under the Howard Government's SES model to improving equity in education. It put equity in education front and centre. This meant that public schools would be much better funded to deal with the educational challenges that they faced, given that they enrolled the large majority of disadvantaged students and nearly all disadvantaged schools were public schools.

The Report made the biggest commitment to improving equity in education in the history of school funding in Australia. The advocates of school choice were put on the defensive as they were unable to effectively challenge the focus on equity, although some tried. They lost the public debate and had to rely on backroom deals to maintain their funding privileges.

### **2.2 Far reaching equity goals**

The Report adopted unique and challenging equity goals that were submitted by Save Our Schools (SOS) [2011a, 2011b]. It supported a minimum level of education for all students which it set at Year 12 or its equivalent and a social equity objective that differences in educational outcomes would not be the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. The latter goal implied that students from different social groups should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of outcomes. For example, low SES and Indigenous students should be expected to achieve similar average and range of outcomes to high SES students.

For the record, these goals were originally proposed to several Commonwealth and ACT Government education inquiries by the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations [2002, 2003, 2004]. The case for adopting them was outlined recently in a paper published in the *Journal School Leadership and Management* [Sahlberg & Cobbold 2021].



Adoption of these goals was a unique achievement. However, they were ignored by the Labor Government which substituted performance targets and economic goals together with a 'weak' equity goal of improving results for disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, the significance of the social equity goal is also ignored by *Waiting for Gonski* – the word "equity" does not even appear in the index.

This absence has profound implications. It means that the book takes a false path because it is not directed by clear equity objectives. It advocates a funding approach that will not achieve the Gonski goals of equity in education.

### **2.3 Needs-based funding models are in place**

The Report also broke with the past by designing an objective and consistent approach to funding schools based on need and established an integrated national approach to school funding across school sectors and jurisdictions. It established the principles and framework for a funding system to achieve greater equity in education. It recommended a needs-based model comprised of a base funding level and funding loadings for various categories of disadvantage. Public and private schools would be funded according to the same principles and framework, but funding of private schools would be adjusted for private sources of income. This provided a more objective and consistent basis for funding schools than previous approaches that reflected historical trends and special arrangements for private schools.

The Labor Government legislated a needs-based funding model that largely followed the recommendation of the Gonski Report. This legislation is still in place, despite the extensive sabotage by successive Coalition governments and their special funding deals for private school. In addition, all state and territory governments have introduced needs-based funding in various forms. Major factors behind disadvantage in school outcomes are still taken into account in determining how funding is distributed to schools even though the amount is not adequate.

This is a major achievement that is not recognised by the authors and should not be so lightly dismissed as "hardly" needs-based [316]. Indeed, they see the model as only a "palliative" because they say it served to compound social disadvantage and failed to challenge the unlevel playing field [107]. This is unfair, unbalanced and over-critical. The model directed additional funding to those most in need – under-resourced schools and disadvantaged students and schools. Larger funding loadings are applied to schools with higher concentrations of low SES students.

While the funding loadings were inadequate, a fact also ignored by the authors, the principle was a major achievement. It is fundamental to increasing social equity in education. It was a fundamental challenge to the privileges of private schools. Private school organisations saw the model as a threat because it promised large increases in funding for public schools which threatened their market share. Some, such as Independent Schools Victoria, went so far as to deny the impact of low socio-economic background on student achievement and argued that there should not be a low SES funding loading [Independent Schools Victoria 2011a: 25, 2011b: 5]. Abbott Government education minister, Christopher Pyne, followed up by trying unsuccessfully to eliminate it in a secret review exposed by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and SOS [Ferrari 2014a, 2014b, SOS 2014, AEU 2014].

The authors claim that school funding is less needs-based than when Gonski began its work. This is likely the case, but it is the result of the billion dollar special deals for private schools introduced by Labor and Coalition governments. This is not the fault of the Report. It is a bit rough to attribute this as a failure of Gonski when it was a failure of governments.

### **3. Governments failed Gonski**

#### **3.1 Implementation failures**

The book is highly critical of the Gonski panel in adhering to Gillard's first edict that no school would lose a dollar of funding and conceding continuing funding for high fee private schools. As the authors point out, the edict was not included in the terms of reference for the inquiry so the panel could have chosen to ignore it.

The Report outlined the case against funding for high income private schools but it was hobbled by the Gillard edict [Review of Funding for Schooling 2011: 84]. As the panel member Ken Boston later said, it was "an albatross around our necks" [Boston 2017]. There also appear to be other reasons for the lack of courage of the panel in asserting its independence. The book relates a damning admission from another panel member, Carmen Lawrence, that they didn't want to start "World War Three with some very wealthy people" [58]. Such cravenness in the face of the power of the wealthy is all too common in relation to school funding.

While we can be disappointed with the panel's lack of courage, it has to be recognised that the Gonski review was a government appointed inquiry composed of members with widely differing backgrounds including some with long service in private school organisation. There was no statutory protection of its independence as in the case of other inquiry-based bodies such as the Productivity Commission and its predecessors. It would have been a simple matter for Gillard to dismiss the inquiry had it shown signs of disobedience. As it was, despite kowtowing to her edict, Gillard refused to endorse the Report when it was published.

Two questions have to be asked: how likely is it that the panel would have written a consensus report that rejected Gillard's edict and how likely is it that the Parliament would have enacted legislation incorporating the principles of needs-based funding and funding loadings for various categories of under-privileged students? Both answers have to be "highly unlikely".

In these circumstances, it is illogical, indeed unbelievable, that the authors accuse the Gonski panel of shifting responsibility for its decision to continue funding wealthy private schools on to Gillard [71-72]. It was Gillard who made the political decision to assure private school organisations that they would not lose a dollar of funding and to publicly expect the panel to follow her edict.

The authors show the edict that "no school would lose a dollar of funding" was not enough for private school organisations – they wanted more and Gillard gave it to them in the form that "every school would get an increase". This promise that every school would be a winner fundamentally undermined the commitment to equity and ensured continuing inequity in funding. Wealthy private schools would continue to receive large amounts of

government funding which contributes to their large resource advantage over lower SES public and private schools

Other special deals for private schools also undermined the basic principle of needs-based funding. In the lead up to the 2010 election, Gillard made a secret deal with the Catholic Church to delay introduction of the new model until 2014 to give the Church what she called in her memoirs “a clear moment of political fightback if they wanted it” [Gillard 2014: 258]. This delay allowed private school organisations to escalate their demands and for Tony Abbott and Christopher Pyne to start their demolition program by inducing the conservative governments in Queensland, Western Australian and Northern Territory not to participate.

Gillard also made another secret deal with Catholic Church to guarantee Catholic schools would maintain their existing share of total school funding into the future. This deal was extended to Independent schools to ensure that private schools retained market share. It meant that private schools benefitted from any increase in funding for public schools. Public schools were not permitted to gain a funding advantage.

This concession was delivered by splitting the schedule of funding rates that applied under the previous SES model into separate schedules for primary and secondary schools. The primary school rates significantly exceeded the secondary rates over much of the SES score range which resulted in funding per primary student exceeding that for secondary students over a range of higher SES scores [Cobbold 2022].

All these special arrangements fundamentally undermined the principle of needs-based funding. They were compounded by continuing the system-weighted average funding arrangement whereby all schools in a private system would have the same SES score for determining their capacity to contribute. This arrangement was heavily criticised by the Gonski Report. It allowed school systems, most notably Catholic systems, to divert funding from higher need outer-metropolitan and regional schools to advantaged inner-city schools.

The book provides an illuminating account of the ruthless greed of private school organisations, particularly the Catholic Church under Cardinal Pell, in protecting and extending their funding privileges with the ardent support of the Coalition in opposition, and how Gillard caved-in to their demands. As the authors say, “private school lobbies fought tooth and nail to make sure the unlevel playing field remained unlevel, and they succeeded” [264]. This greed remains unabated. As they state:

At its heart, their demand was a refusal to accept that a common set of rules could be agreed through a fair, independent process, guided by expertise and extensive consultation, and that such rules should be applied equally to all without fear or favour. [58]

Gillard also made the fatal error of postponing \$7.5 billion of the planned \$10.3 billion increase in Commonwealth funding to the last two years of the six year phase-in. This made it hostage to a change of government. The book reveals this was due to strong resistance in the Labor Cabinet to full implementation of Gonski funding increase.

Gillard also dismissed the recommendation of the Gonski Report for an independent national schools resourcing body to develop the SRS and the loadings and to regularly review and update them. This decision proved fatal as it gave a green light to numerous special deals for private schools and contributed to the failure to develop a nationally integrated funding model.

### **3.2 Coalition sabotage**

The book also well describes how the new model was sabotaged by successive Coalition governments who opposed it from the start.

Abbott and Pyne abandoned the \$7.5 million funding increase planned for last two years of the six year phase-in plan. They also immediately abandoned the agreement that the states would increase their funding by \$5 billion and maintain their existing funding effort through indexation. Both Labor and Coalition state governments took advantage of this to cut funding for public schools, adjusted for inflation, while increasing funding for private schools.

The Turnbull Government destroyed the concept of an integrated national funding model by arbitrarily limiting the Commonwealth role. Private schools would be funded by the Commonwealth to 80 per cent of their SRS and the other 20 per cent by the states while public schools would be funded to 20 per cent of their SRS by the Commonwealth and 80 per cent by the states.

The Morrison Government followed with over \$5 billion in special deals for private schools from 2019 to 2029 including a new method of funding private schools that over-estimates financial need. The funding advantage of private schools will be further compounded by Commonwealth-State funding agreements which permit state governments to under-fund public schools by some \$74 billion from 2019 to 2029 [Cobbold 2021c].

## **4. The private school funding model is inherently flawed**

Beyond the implementation failures of the Labor Government and the sabotage by the Coalition, the authors criticise Gonski for failing to confront what they see as a structural contradiction at the heart of Australia's school funding system – the conceptual failure. The contradiction they identify is that there are two types of publicly funded schools: a free, secular public sector and publicly funded private religious schools that are able to charge fees which enables them to have more total resources than public schools and to select their enrolments. It constitutes an unlevel playing field favouring private schools through resource advantages, unregulated fees and selective enrolment practices. We have, they say, two kinds of taxpayer schools with “quite different funding, obligations, operations, purposes” (39).

This dual system of publicly funded schools with different obligations and regulations is the “original sin” of Australian education that has existed for over 40 years since the Karmel Report to the Whitlam Government in 1973. The authors claim:

...the Gonski Report left the structural element of the unlevel playing field largely unexamined and unchallenged, and instead advocated additional expenditure to mitigate and ameliorate their unfortunate consequences. [104]

As a result, the forces behind increasing social segregation in schools were not challenged and the unlevel playing field was “left intact” and “allowed to endure” [264, 267]. Indeed, that authors say that the Gonski Report “offered a prescription that would serve to compound the concentration of social disadvantage” [112]. On these grounds, the authors believe that Gonski was doomed to fail and “it is time to stop waiting for Gonski” [12].

The authors are quite correct in their analysis that government funding for private schools has ensured that they have more total income per student than public schools by virtue of their ability to charge fees to the limit of what their markets will bear. We can wholeheartedly agree with the authors’ view that governments should not ‘assist some children in enjoying greater opportunity than others’ [282]. There is no case to provide government funding to private schools whose resources exceed what society is prepared to provide for children enrolled in public schools. To devote public resources to extending the advantages obtained from a wealthy background over a student from a disadvantaged background is to enhance social inequity

Government funding that enables private schools to have far greater resources than public schools is the result of design faults in the system of funding private schools that are not addressed by *Waiting for Gonski*. The book fails to analyse two fundamental flaws that contributed to decades of massive over-funding of private schools. These are the assumption that all schools are entitled to taxpayer funding, including the wealthiest, most exclusive private schools, and that the resource needs of private schools should be assessed by the capacity of families to contribute financially.

The authors correctly point out that this so-called entitlement provides many private schools with more total resources per student than public schools and enhances privilege over reducing disadvantage in education. However, there is also another reason to dismiss the claim.

No one has a right to government funding for their preferred services because they pay taxes. This is not the purpose of taxation. Its purpose is to provide services of benefit to society such as public transport, police, paramedics, fire brigades, libraries, garbage removal, street repairs and public education regardless of whether or not they choose to use these services. People who do not avail themselves of publicly provided services are not entitled to claim a certain proportion of taxation revenue to fund their private choices. Governments do not subsidise families if they choose to use their own car instead of public transport, install home security devices instead of relying solely on police services, use private recreation and leisure facilities such as a backyard pool instead of the public swimming pool or buy their own books instead of using public libraries. Similarly, private schools are not entitled to public funding simply because their families pay taxes.

This is not to deny there is a case for government funding of some private schools whose resources are below what is needed to ensure an adequate education for all children. The basic principle behind government funding of private schools should be that no school operates with less total resources than a standard necessary to provide an education that falls below the level accepted as necessary for successful participation in society.

Governments have the responsibility to ensure that children should not be deprived of an adequate education because their parents enrol them in under-resourced schools.

The other fundamental flaw in the current system of funding private schools is that the financial need of schools is assessed by the capacity of families to contribute financially to schools. Capacity to contribute was a key feature of the Howard Government's SES funding model. All private schools received a base government grant that varies according to family capacity to contribute which was measured by the school's SES score based on the SES of the area in which families lived. Schools with a higher SES score received less government funding. This method of funding private schools was maintained by the Gonski funding model. The Morrison Government changed the measure of capacity to contribute to a Direct Measure of Income (DMI) of families based on Adjusted Taxable Income.

The problems associated with assessing the capacity to contribute of families are insuperable. The SES model, the Gonski model and the DMI model all result in massive over-funding of private schools because they under-estimate the capacity to contribute of families and ignore other sources of income of private schools as well as their assets [Cobbold 2020, 2021b). A major flaw of the DMI is that it ignores income received from grandparents or other family members to pay all or part of school fees and to make other purchases which free up income to pay school fees. For example, recent figures show that almost 60 per cent of first home buyers are receiving financial help from their parents and the average gift or loan is \$100,000 [Collett 2022]. This funding is not included in assessing the capacity of families to pay fees.

The DMI measure also ignores 50 per cent of income from capital gains and non-disclosed income in Australia or held in overseas bank accounts and tax havens. It also ignores the substantial income of schools obtained from donations as well as school assets. As a result, the financial need of schools is over-estimated and consequently they are over-funded by governments.

For all these reasons, the current approach to funding private schools is fundamentally flawed and results in massive over-funding that denies adequate funding for disadvantaged students and schools. An alternative approach is needed that eliminates the over-funding. Unfortunately, *Waiting for Gonski* takes the wrong path.

## **5. Fully funding private schools is the wrong path**

The solution advocated by *Waiting for Gonski* is to "level the playing field on which taxpayer funded schools operate" [13]. Their admirable goal is to end government funding of fee-charging private schools that provides them with a resource advantage over public schools. We agree this is fundamental to implementing an equitable school funding system.

To this end, the authors propose that full public funding be extended to all schools on the condition that schools do not charge fees, are open to all students and meet curriculum and transparency requirements similar to public schools [282, 292-293]. The level of public funding would be determined primarily by the learning needs of students in the schools. Schools would be permitted to retain their "special ethos" and "character". The conditions for full public funding would be spelled out in a public contract. They endorse a proposal

along these lines by Adrian Piccoli, former NSW minister for education and later director of the Gonski Institute for Education at the University of NSW:

Schools in all sectors would be entitled to public funding on condition that they would no longer charge fees, hence all fully-funded schools would be free. In return, all fully funded schools would be obliged to enrol applicants on a common and inclusive basis. They would be allowed to preserve their special ethos, but if they charge fees, they would cease receiving public funding. [285]

The authors claim that fully funding private schools would allow greater choice for families and break down the SES hierarchy of schools [p. 299]. It would enable more poor families to choose private schools that would otherwise be out of their reach and create a more balanced distribution of more able and less abled students and increase the diversity of enrolments in all schools [288]. This would reduce the impact of family and school SES on student achievement by lifting the horizons and chances of success of disadvantaged students and enhance overall student achievement in several ways [300-303].

There are several problems with the proposal:

- It involves public funding of religious instruction and discrimination in hiring staff;
- It is highly unlikely that school systems and schools will accept their total income per student being cut;
- It is unlikely to reduce social segregation or increase student achievement;
- The evidence from similar models overseas is unconvincing.

Apart from the above problems, it is likely that the authors' proposal would be strongly resisted by private school organisations. Many such proposals have been made over decades, including from individuals within the Catholic Church such as Michael Furtado [2006, 2020], but have failed to evince any measure of interest from Catholic and other religious systems.

### **5.1 Public funding of religious instruction and discrimination**

As noted above, *Waiting for Gonski* proposes that fully funded private schools would be permitted to preserve their "special ethos" and "character" [285, 292]. They could continue to impose compulsory religious instruction and observance and to discriminate in hiring staff. According to the authors, this is not an "insuperable obstacle" because fully funded private schools in other countries retain control of their curriculum and school culture [304-305].

The authors do not define what constitutes a special ethos or character of private schools eligible for full government funding. In principle, it could constitute a myriad of particular services for which parents pay fees. For example, it could include religious values and teaching, social status, selective student peers, a particular education philosophy, special curriculum such as creationism, narrow sex education as well as extra-curricular opportunities in the arts, sport, debating, etc.

Parents also pay fees to have access to schools that are privately owned and operated in the mistaken belief they are buying a "better" education and greater customer responsiveness.

They also pay to buy into an ‘old school tie’ network to enhance future employment. In the case of elite private schools, parents pay fees for a lifetime membership of a “special club” of the rich and powerful.

The role of government funding for private schools is not to subsidise the costs of such choices made by parents. It should be only to support the learning needs of students in under-resourced schools. Parents must bear the costs of choosing a “special ethos”. This is particularly the case with religious teaching and values and the large majority of private schools in Australia are religious schools.

The central purpose of religious schools is to instruct children in the tenets of their faith. They impose compulsory teaching of religion as part of their curriculum and compulsory participation in religious observances and activities. As the policy director of Christian Schools Australia recently stated, “what we do need is the ability as faith-based schools to be able to teach what we believe, to be able to ensure our schools can operate in accordance with those beliefs” [Om 2022]. The curriculum of religious schools variously includes topics that reflect values associated with their particular religion such as teaching creationism and literal interpretation of the Bible, immorality of same-sex relationships and marriage, abstinence from sex before marriage, male headship and female submission. It is totally abhorrent that schools should be fully funded by the taxpayer to indoctrinate students with such obnoxious values as part of their “special ethos”. If parents want this, they should pay for it. Governments should not pay for this under any circumstances.

Religious schools are also exempt from anti-discrimination legislation and can discriminate against staff who do not accept or act in accordance with the religious faith and beliefs of the school. For example, teachers can only be accredited to teach in Victorian Catholic schools if they have completed professional learning in the aims and objectives of the Catholic school, faith development and Catholic identity, culture and tradition including prayer, liturgy, scripture and Catholic social teaching [CECV]. The Queensland Catholic Education Commission requires teachers to participate annually in professional learning to support their understanding of the nature of the Church’s mission in the world, the identity and educational mission of the Catholic school within the mission of the Church, and their contribution as teachers to that mission [QCEC 2021]. The Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn only appoints teachers “who are supportive of the Catholic ethos of our schools, who bear witness to Christ and Christian values in their own lives and in their teaching” [Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn].

The recent controversy over the Morrison Government’s bill to protect religious freedom showed that Catholic, Anglican and Christian school organisations all want the right to employ only staff who are of the same faith as the school and who adhere to Christian values. For example, Catholic, Anglican and other Christian schools say preferencing teachers of their faith is a ‘religious right’ [Wootton 2021, Koziol 2021, Visentin 2021]. Once again, if parents want to enrol their children in a school that only employs teachers who support their faith, then they should pay for it. This special ethos of discrimination should never be funded by governments.



*Waiting for Gonski* is explicit in rejecting any form of discrimination against students by fully funded private schools. However, exemptions to the Sex Discrimination Act allow religious schools to lawfully discriminate against students on the ground of their sexual orientation, gender identity, marital or relationship status or pregnancy and because of their parents' sexual orientation or gender identity. Many want to continue to discriminate against gay and transgender students [McKee 2021, Karp 2021, Visentin 2022]. This raises the issue of whether such schools could claim their legal rights to discriminate while accepting full government funding.

It is ironic and very disappointing, that erstwhile advocates of public education should support full government funding of religious instruction of students and the right to discrimination against staff as part of their religious ethos. In all likelihood, some schools would also continue to informally discriminate against gay and transgender students. The authors justify allowing fully funded schools to maintain their special ethos because it would be “no more or no less than they do at present”:

The reality is that full public funding would change nothing on this score: it would neither grant religious schools any exemption that they do not already have; nor would it restrict the autonomy they currently enjoy. [305]

However, there is a crucial difference not acknowledged by the authors – at present parents pay fees to access the special ethos and character of private schools. *Waiting for Gonski* proposes that governments take full responsibility for funding religious instruction and discrimination in schools. As far as we can tell, it would be a unique policy initiative as governments do not fund such practices in other areas of public policy. Even if there are examples where this occurs, it is totally unacceptable. In regard to education policy, it would jettison two fundamental principles that apply to fully funded public schools - they are secular and non-discriminatory. It would introduce a structural contradiction in the fully funded school system: some schools would be prohibited from discriminating in hiring staff while others would be allowed to discriminate; some schools would be secular while others would be strictly non-secular.

The argument that government funding of private schools currently aids discrimination and a religious curriculum and values may be true, even likely because of their over-funding. However, this is not a reason to continue or extend government funding of such practices. Instead, it is a reason to look for an alternative method of funding private schools.

## **5.2 Private school systems and schools are unlikely to agree to have their income reduced**

At present, private schools are vastly over-funded by governments. As discussed above, the DMI method significantly under-estimates the capacity of families to contribute financially to schools and therefore over-estimates the financial need of schools. In addition, private schools are the beneficiaries of numerous special funding deals by the Commonwealth Government that are not based on need such as the Choice and Accountability Fund. Several state governments are also over-funding private schools. The over-funding is projected to continue for the rest of the decade and likely beyond.

The outcome of this over-funding together with fees, charges and other private income is that the total income per student in private schools significantly exceeds that of public schools. In 2020, the average income of Catholic schools was \$17,821 per student and \$24,338 per student in Independent schools compared to \$16,030 in public schools [ACARA]. The total income per student of Catholic and Independent schools exceeds that of public schools in all states and territories.

While the authors do not explain how learning needs would be assessed under their proposal, it can be assumed a Gonski type model would continue to be used. In this case, income per student in both Catholic and Independent schools would be substantially less if they were fully funded by the taxpayer strictly according to need. Their funding per student would likely be much less than that of public schools because they enrol only a small minority of disadvantaged students. Public schools enrol over 80 per cent of all disadvantaged students and 98 per cent of disadvantaged schools are public schools [derived from Thomson 2022].

It is inconceivable that private schools and systems would choose to give up their current and future resource advantage over public schools. They will never accept a reduction in their income per student, let alone an income less than that of public schools. Moreover, many schools will not want to give up charging fees as a way of excluding low SES students and maintaining their place in the social hierarchy of schools. It is no surprise that the CEO of Catholic Schools NSW has called the proposal a “flight of fantasy” [Patty 2021].

The authors do not say whether private school systems would continue to be block funded and permitted to distribute taxpayer funding to affiliated schools according to their own criteria. This privilege has allowed Catholic systems to re-distribute government funding intended for low SES and regional schools to those in well off inner-city suburbs as revealed by numerous reports by the National Audit Office [ANAO 2009, 2017] and others [Review of Funding for Schooling 2011, Greiner 2016, WAGO 2016, Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit 2019]. This practice is contrary to the principle of needs-based funding and has enabled Catholic schools to compete for market share with Independent schools in wealthier suburbs.

Further, the authors do not say whether schools could accept donations under their proposal. It is unlikely that private schools would give up this lucrative source of income.

### **5.3 It is unlikely to reduce social segregation or increase student achievement**

There is no disagreement with the observation of *Waiting for Gonski* about the extent of social segregation in Australian schools and its negative impact on student achievement. Where we disagree is the authors’ faith that fully funding private schools, subject to regulatory provisions in a public context, will resolve these problems. The evidence suggests that the proposal is more likely to reinforce social segregation in schools and fail to increase student achievement.

The first point to make, and one ignored by the authors, is that social segregation in schools is not only the result of government funding of private schools while allowing them to charge fees and control enrolments. There is extensive social segregation within the public and private school sectors caused by historical urban planning and housing policies.

Residential segregation is an important determinant of socio-economic segregation between schools. Fully funding religious schools will not overcome this. It means, for example, that public and private schools in the eastern suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne have high concentrations of high SES students while the western suburbs have high concentrations of low SES students.

The proposal is more likely to increase social segregation and extend the hierarchy of school status than reduce it. Fully funded private schools would have more rights than public schools as they would be able to retain their special ethos and character which they would exploit to give them a marketing advantage. Fully funded private schools would be akin to charter schools in the US and academies and “free” schools in England. It would inevitably lead to informal selective admission practices in high demand schools that have long bedevilled academies in England [West et.al. 2011; Millar 2017; Roberts & Danech 2021].

The bulk of evidence from the OECD and other research studies is that more choice generally leads to greater social segregation, not less, as well as greater inequality in student achievement [Musset 2012, Valenzuela et.al. 2014. OECD 2019c, Volante et.al. 2019]. While the performance of charter schools in the United States has been highly variable, their overall impact on student achievement has been no better than traditional public schools [Epple et.al. 2016]. A recent review of research studies on the performance of charter schools found that they have not been the panacea for the challenges facing education systems [Kho et. al. 2020: 540]. They also have increased social segregation between schools [Frankenberg et.al. 2019].

The authors place considerable faith in the ability of fully funded private schools to increase student achievement. The evidence suggests this faith is misplaced. There is a large volume of evidence from overseas and Australian studies demonstrating that public schools do as well as, or better than, private schools even though private schools serve a more advantaged population. For example, the OECD’s PISA 2018 report found that student achievement in public schools in OECD countries was higher than in private schools [OECD 2020: 158]. The Australian PISA 2018 report found that, after taking account of differences in student and school socio-economic background, public school students achieved higher results in mathematics than Catholic school students [Thomson et.al. 2019: 135]. It also found no difference in student results in reading and science between public, Catholic and Independent schools [Thomson et.al. 2019: 55, 198].

The evidence is that private schools in Australia do no better than public schools despite having far more human and material resources and being heavily favoured by government funding policies. Their large resource advantage and increased funding has not resulted in any significant increase in student achievement. Indeed, the PISA results which the authors rely on as evidence that Gonski failed actually show that reading achievement in Catholic and Independent schools declined by the equivalent of half a year of schooling between 2009 and 2018 while achievement in public schools did not change significantly [Thomson 2022]. The decline in science results in Catholic and independent schools was even bigger and much more than in public schools. The decline in mathematics was similar in all sectors.

All the evidence suggests that private schools are less efficient than public schools in using their resources. It further suggests that the authors' faith that greater diversity in private schools will increase student achievement is unwarranted.

#### **5.4 Fully funding religious schools overseas is not the success claimed**

The authors point to Canada and New Zealand as good examples where private schools are fully funded by government. In Canada, Catholic schools in three provinces are fully funded by government and they retain a fully Catholic character in terms of school curriculum and culture while accepting all enrolments and do not charge fees. The authors argue that fully funding Catholic schools in Canada has led to less segregation and greater equity in school outcomes than in Australia. They also note that England, Belgium, France, Netherlands and Scotland are countries which have accommodated church schools as part of the provision of free education. However, the evidence of greater success in terms of higher outcomes and greater equity in outcomes in such systems is contradictory and unconvincing.

Canada's average PISA results in 2018 were significantly higher than for Australia [OECD 2019a]. However, New Zealand and Netherlands also had significantly lower average results than Canada. New Zealand's results were similar to Australia's while reading results in Netherlands were well below those of Australia but its mathematics results were much higher than for Australia.

Canada, New Zealand and Netherlands all experienced large declines in PISA results since 2000. The declines in Canada were much smaller than in Australia but those in New Zealand and Netherlands were broadly similar to those in Australia. However, there was little change in Australia's reading and mathematics results from 2015 to 2018 while Canada had slightly larger declines and there were larger declines in the Netherlands.

Canada's equity performance is better than Australia's. Low SES students in Canada achieved higher average results than in Australia and the achievement gaps in Canada between low and high SES students is much lower than in Australia. However, the equity performance of New Zealand and Netherlands is similar to Australia's or worse. New Zealand's low SES results were similar to Australia's but those in Netherlands were much lower than Australia [OECD 2019b]. The achievement gaps in New Zealand were even higher than in Australia and Netherlands. It should also be noted that the equity performance of Belgium and France is significantly worse than Australia's while England's is similar.

These results suggest that fully funding religious schools is not the key explanatory factor behind Canada's performance. Other factors appear to contribute to the higher average results and smaller achievement gap in Canada.

Differences in the socio-economic status of students appears to be a significant factor. The PISA Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) score for all students is much higher in Canada than for Australia, New Zealand and Netherlands [OECD 2019b]. It is also much higher for low ESCS students. The gap in the ESCS index scores between high and low ESCS students is also much lower in Canada than the other countries and likely contributes to the lower smaller achievement gaps in Canada.

Differences in the socio-economic status of students also appear to exert a strong influence on the comparative results of Canadian provinces. Only three out of ten provinces (Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan) fully fund Catholic schools. Some 23-30 per cent of students in these provinces attend Catholic schools [Chmielewski & Mahara 2021: 7]. The average ESCS index scores for students in Alberta and Ontario were the highest of the ten provinces and they had the highest average scores in reading and science in PISA 2018, although Quebec, which has a much lower ESCS score, achieved the highest average mathematics results [O'Grady et.al. 2021, OECD 2019a]. Saskatchewan had the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest ESCS score and achieved the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest results in reading and science and the 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest in mathematics.

There was also a strong relationship between the results of low SES students and ESCS scores. Low SES students in Alberta and Ontario achieved the highest reading results in PISA 2018 of all the provinces but these provinces also had the highest ESCS index score for students in the lowest ESCS quartile. Saskatchewan had the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest ESCS score for the lowest ESCS quartile and the 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest reading result.

Thus, there appears to be a strong relationship between student SES and achievement in Canadian provinces. This is confirmed by a recent study of trends in provincial SES gradient over the PISA cycles from 2000 to 2018. It concluded: "Our analysis clearly reveals the presence of a strong SES gradient across the country that is stable over time" and that all provinces have "similar SES gradients" [Haeck & Levfevre 2021: 104, 105]. This suggests that fully funding Catholic schools has not been successful in overcoming the strong relationship between SES and student achievement.

It is also notable that the provinces with fully funded Catholic schools have not been any more successful than other provinces in reducing achievement gaps. Alberta had the equal largest achievement gap in reading between the lowest and highest SES quartiles of the ten provinces while Saskatchewan had the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest. The achievement gap in Ontario was higher than three other provinces and similar to that of another two. There were also very large achievement gaps between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> percentiles of student performance in reading in the three provinces.

Differences in funding is also likely to have contributed to the higher student performance in Canada compared to Australia. Between 2001-02 and 2016-17, funding per student in Canadian public schools, adjusted for inflation, increased by about three times that for public schools in Australia - 37 per cent compared to only 12 per cent for public schools in Australia. The increases in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan were even higher at 45 per cent or more [Haeck & Levfevre 2021: 93].

Another issue relating to Canada's better PISA performance is that an academic study conducted at the Institute of Education, University College London, questions Canada's reputation as an "education superpower" [Ankers et.al. 2021]. It showed that Canada had one of the highest exclusion rates for PISA 2015 in the OECD and it was larger than for Australia, New Zealand and Netherlands. Furthermore, it had the lowest coverage of eligible students in the OECD with a coverage of only 53 per cent compared to the average coverage across the OECD of 78 per cent, 72 per cent in Australia and 75 per cent in Netherlands. The analysis showed that if Canada had similar exclusion and participation rates to other high

achieving countries, its average PISA scores would fall below those of these other leading systems and be similar to Australia's. Its achievement gap between the 90-10<sup>th</sup> percentiles would increase to be close to the OECD average and the difference in achievement gaps between Canada and Australia would be halved.

It is also not evident that fully funding Catholic schools in the three Canadian provinces has reduced social segregation in schools. While social segregation in the three fully funded provinces is lower than in some provinces, it is higher than in others and it has not decreased since 2000 [Chmielewski & Mahara 2021: 17, 22]. Moreover, students in Catholic schools in Ontario come from higher-income and more educated neighbourhoods compared to their counterparts in secular public schools [7].

Netherlands is mentioned in the book as an example of where religious schools are fully funded by government but its impact is not examined. PISA results and research studies show that there has been no progress in reducing inequality and its class-based education system remains as entrenched as ever. For example, the selective Dutch gymnasia have flourished under government sponsored pro-choice, pro-market policies and are highly socially segregated [Merry & Boterman 2020].

In addition, the equity performance of other countries nominated by the authors as examples is also far worse than Australia's. Belgium, England, France and Scotland are certainly not high equity, high performing systems [OECD 2019a].

All this is hardly compelling evidence that fully funding Catholic schools within the public system will improve Australia's school outcomes or reduce inequity in education. *Waiting for Gonski* fails to analyse the factors behind Canada's overall better school performance and failed to examine the failures of other integrated systems. As a result, its case is not sustained.

## **6. Get Gonski back on track with a Gonski Plus model**

The authors fail to canvass alternatives to fully funding private schools. They fail to investigate how a fully needs-based funding system could be designed to overcome the "original sin". They simply throw up their hands and assert unjustifiably that needs-based funding is "practically impossible" in a "hybrid system" in which some schools are free and others charge fees [p. 281].

There is an alternative to the Gonski model and Labor's version of it. It is a Gonski Plus model, the basic elements of which were proposed to the Gonski panel in submissions by Save Our Schools and is outlined below [SOS 2011a, 2011b].

The prerequisite for a fully needs-based funding system is a clear statement of equity goals, something that *Waiting for Gonski* fails to enunciate. This is fundamental. If we don't know where we want to go, there is no path that will take us there. Equally, if we only have a vague notion of equity a multiplicity of paths will take us nowhere as in the case of *Waiting for Gonski*. The Gonski equity goals must be paramount. All students should complete Year 12 or its equivalent and students from different social groups should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of outcomes.

A Gonski Plus funding model would build on key features of the Gonski model, namely, the estimation of a base Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) plus loadings for various categories of disadvantaged students and schools. The estimation of the base SRS should be revised. The current method over-estimates the base SRS because the schools used as a benchmark include a large proportion of high cost private schools. This gives unwarranted base funding to many schools. Instead, the base SRS could be set as the cost of highly successful public schools with minimum disadvantage.

The disadvantage loadings should be increased significantly in line with research evidence. Instead of being about 20 per cent of the base SRS as at present, they should be 100 per cent or more as indicated by numerous research studies [Cobbold 2014, 2022]. This would provide a significant funding boost for public schools because over 80 per cent of disadvantaged students attend public schools and 98 per cent of disadvantaged schools are public schools.

The basic principle behind government funding of private schools in a Gonski Plus model is that no school operates with less total resources than the base SRS. Government funding for private schools should only fill the gap between private income and a revised base SRS. It would not assess parent capacity to contribute. Schools whose private income is above the base SRS should not be entitled to government funding because it extends their resource advantage over public schools as *Waiting for Gonski* so comprehensively demonstrates. Disadvantaged students would be entitled to various funding loadings.

The full difference between the basic SRS and private funding would only be available to schools that adopt inclusive, non-selective enrolment practices and provide access to a comprehensive curriculum. A discount factor would apply to the base SRS which varies according to the extent to which each private schools meets the same social obligations as a public school.

This model would provide the funding increase needed by public schools to deal with the challenges they face and eliminate the massive over-funding of private school. It would be a genuine needs-based funding model and would better achieve a central goal of *Waiting for Gonski*, namely, reduction in social segregation in schools. It would result in a more balanced student profile in public schools because it would end the privileged over-funding of private schools and force private schools to increase fees which would lead to more advantaged students being enrolled in public schools. This is a much preferred way to reduce social segregation than to entice disadvantaged students into private schools by fully funding them. It also avoids governments fully funding religious instruction of students and discrimination in hiring staff.

In practical terms, a Gonski Plus funding model provides a basis for teachers, parents, principals and other community groups to organise around better funding for public schools and greater equity in school outcomes. It provides a basis for solidarity between these groups and jointly organised activities. Fully funding private schools will create division amongst public school organisations and groups rather than promote solidarity.

In summary, the conclusion of *Waiting for Gonski* that the Gonski model failed is misplaced and unbalanced. Gonski didn't fail; successive governments failed Gonski. Despite its flaws, the Gonski Report was a major step forward in designing a funding system to improve equity in education. It went off the rails because of fundamental flaws in Labor's model and because successive Coalition governments demolished key features and introduced more special deals for private schools. The central challenge today is to get Gonski back on track with a Gonski Plus model.



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