

Our *children* Our *concern*

Senate Inquiry into the Development and Implementation of National School Funding Arrangements and School Reform.

March 2014

Parents Victoria expects our Federal Government to support a schools funding system which will deliver learning opportunities for every young Victorian and

Australian. It is our strong belief that Victorian public schools must be well-resourced

and appropriately funded so that they can provide access to a free, high quality and secular education for all our students, irrespective of where they live or their family's income.

Supporting, valuing and funding such a system will benefit Australia's economy and society now and well into the future.

Our public schools educate students from many and diverse backgrounds. Each of these young people bring their own unique set of skills, and challenges, with them each day and it is imperative that schools are able to provide every opportunity for students to reach their academic and social pinnacles by expanding these skills and helping them overcome their challenges. To do this properly schools require appropriate funding to level the playing field for every young person. Barriers such as disability, ethnicity, remoteness, English as a second language, postcode and the family's financial capacity must not restrict student learning. A properly funded and resourced system would allow schools and teachers to have the resources required to render these barriers non-existent.

Funding must be made on a needs basis to ensure that the students with the greatest, including additional, needs have these met. Parents Victoria firmly believes that government funding should be prioritised to public schools. Funding of programs in the independent school sector is the responsibility of the individual school and the parents who choose to have their children educated outside of the public system.

Where funding is to be made to the independent school sector it should also be allocated according to need.

The 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling (commonly known as the Gonski Report) identified a minimum resource standard for all Australian school students (regardless of schooling sector) plus loadings for Indigenous students, students with disability, small schools, remote schools, students with limited English and students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Parents in Victorian Public Schools have been waiting, since the announcement of the recommendations of the funding review, to see extra dollars arrive in their schools' budgets. An agreement was reached and signed between the Federal Government and Victorian State Government in 2013 promising increased funding from the Federal Government over a six year period, matching \$1 for every additional \$2 the Victorian Government invested in our public schools. As far as parents are concerned, that agreement is still binding and it is expected the Coalition Government will honour it, given that it was also an election promise made by the then opposition leader.

While waiting for this commitment to be honoured, the academic and social gaps have widened even more between schools and individual students, often based on nothing more than postcodes. With many parents finding it harder to equip their children to attend school there is an immediate impact on these children's learning opportunities. Parents Victoria and its constituents believe that this could be alleviated with the full implementation of the promised funding formula. This will not only help these particular children now, but will reduce the societal costs to government in the long run.

The process of determining the new schools funding model was a long and involved one. The review was conducted by experts in their educational fields who consulted widely with stakeholders in the national education arena. The Gonski Review was the biggest study of school funding in 37 years with more than 7,000 submissions from parents, teachers, education researchers, economists and other stakeholders, including Parents Victoria representatives. The expenditure priorities of the Gonski Report are consistent with the Commonwealth Government's Students First Program and its four pillars for school improvement. Thus we have every confidence that the funding formula coming out of the review and which was agreed to last year, offers the best solution to address the needs of every current and future student in Victoria.

"The Gonski model's focus on equity means that children with learning difficulties and disabilities, indigenous students, those in remote areas or from non-English speaking backgrounds would all benefit. More teachers' aides, full time counsellors and other support staff could be employed as a result." Peter Garrigan, President, Australian Council of State School Organisations.

There is a need to ensure transparency throughout the distribution of funding process. It is imperative that every dollar allocated to schools reaches them. And consequently that every dollar coming into the school is accounted for and reaches the student for whom it is intended. Parents Victoria expects governments and schools to be accountable for how this increased funding is allocated and for it to be reported locally to school communities.

The purpose of the Gonski review was to achieve greater educational equity for all Australian students. Parents Victoria strongly believes that it is time to close the gap between the educational opportunities of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds. For this to happen there must be a significant change in not only the amount of funding made available to schools, but in the distribution of it. True equity will happen harmoniously when all schools are funded based on need and are not competing against other schools, or other sectors, for their funding.

Parents Victoria hopes that in response to this review, the Select Committee will recommend that the Australian Government deliver the six year transitional funding model implementing the minimum resource standard (plus loadings) as per the Review of School Funding (2011). Having an assured amount of funding over a six year cycle will allow schools to plan for continuous, sustainable improvement in the education of our nation's children.

Now is the time to show all Australian children that they are valued and will be invested in by the Australian Government and people through a fair, equitable and realistic school funding model.

Relevant Parents Victoria Policy

B. Funding of education

B.1 Priority for Government Schools

Parents Victoria believes that the first responsibility of all governments is to offer a first class Government school education to all children.

- (a) The prior obligation for Australian Government funding of schools must be to achieve Government schools of the highest standard.
- (b) Funds for schools should receive a higher priority than spending on tertiary institutions.
- (c) Government school parents should be involved at all levels of decision making - National, State, Regional, Local.

B.2 Federal Government Funding

Parents Victoria welcomes the improvements in Government schools affected by Federal funds made available on the recommendations of the Commonwealth Schools Commission.

Parents Victoria urges the Federal Government to reaffirm its commitment to improving standards of Primary, Post-Primary and Special Government schools.

- (a) Recurrent funding should recognise the need for continued improvement in the areas of staffing - teachers, specialists, ancillary - and direct grants to schools.
- (b) Important Schools Commission initiatives in education in the areas of Disadvantaged Schools, Special Education, Development, Innovations, School Based Decision-making should be maintained and strengthened.
- (c) Sufficient funds should be provided to enable State Education Departments to forward plan to meet urgent new and upgrading building needs.

B.3 Public Funding of Schools

Parents Victoria believes that aid to schools from public funds should only be granted on the following conditions:

- (a) Funding is based on the criteria of need established by independent statutory authorities.
- (b) Public funds are not used for any religious indoctrination.
- (c) Funds at the school level are administered by a School Council elected by and from the school community of parents, staff and, where appropriate, students, and members of the wider community.
- (d) Any school which receives public funds has an open enrolment policy - this means there can be no exclusion of students on the basis of race, religion, financial status or ability.
- (e) The school accepts responsibility for meeting the full range of educational needs of students.
- (f) School facilities are available through the School Council for community use.
- (g) The creation of a new school does not downgrade the quality of education provided at the existing neighbourhood schools and does not encourage the uneconomic use of public funds.
- (h) The School Council is publicly accountable to its community and to the appropriate Government body for its use of public funds.

B.4 Aid to Non-Government Schools

Parents Victoria believes that a system of equal per capita grants to non-government schools is inequitable and unjust.

Parents Victoria advises Federal and State Ministers and Departments of Education that parents in Government schools strongly object to ever-increasing amounts of public funds being granted to private schools which fail to meet the conditions set out in B.3 of this policy.

B.5 Grants to Schools

Parents Victoria believes that the needs of each school are different.

- (a) Direct funding or otherwise should take account of these differences.
- (b) Direct grants to Primary and Post-Primary schools should be substantially increased. Primary school grants should be increased to a level comparative with that of Post-Primary schools. In particular, grants to Primary schools should be increased to at least 50% of grants to Post Primary schools.
- (c) All direct grants to schools should be annually and automatically increased by the same amount as increases in the Consumer Price Index.
- (d) All Special Schools should be provided with grants to employ permanent speech and language teachers; speech therapists as required for diagnosis; nursing aides; teacher aides and a gardener.
- (e) All country schools should be granted realistic telephone allowances, especially country Special Schools which require to keep in contact with the Children's Hospital and Department of Education Special Services located in Melbourne.
- (f) If the Department requires schools to pay for their own energy costs (i.e. gas, heating oil, electricity); the allowance paid to schools should be sufficient to cover this and be indexed to Consumer Price Index.