

## DR. PAUL BROCK MEMORIAL MEDAL

### KEN BOSTON

31st August 2016

I congratulate and thank the NSW Branch of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders for establishing this award in memory of our great friend Paul Brock. It is a rare privilege for all of us to have known a man of his calibre.

It is a real privilege, too, to be the first recipient of this medal, in honour of a great thinker and educational leader. Paul's impact on education in Australia was profound. I accept the medal with pride, humility, sadness and a great sense of loss.

I have no doubt about what Paul would want me to talk about tonight, because it occupied much of our conversation and emails in the last five years of his life: Gonski. Paul had read every word of the Gonski Report; he was a passionate worker for its implementation; and many of his colleagues in that endeavor are here tonight.

I know Paul would want me to be challenging, if necessary to the point of being controversial. So I won't let him down.

Gonski is now history. The Gonski Panel submitted its report in December 2011, and the Government responded in February 2012. There have been two Federal elections since.

I would like to remind you of that history: what we were asked to do; what we found; what we recommended; what the Government did with the report; what happened as a result; and the current situation.

#### **What we were asked to do**

For the past four decades – most notably in the last two – public funding for school education has increased steadily, yet our national performance has continued to decline in absolute terms, and relatively in comparison with the other 38 OECD countries.

We have never spent more on education than at present, yet our achievement continues to deteriorate.

In that context, the Gonski Panel was asked to develop a funding system that is fair, transparent, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent outcomes for all Australian students, in order to achieve two things:

- First, to ensure that every young Australian has a fair go. We took this to mean, for example, that every child – regardless of language background, or family income and employment status, or ethnicity, or location and so on – should be given whatever support it takes to be, say, reading at minimum national standard by Year 3 (age 8).
- Second, in doing so, to maximize Australia's national stock of human capital (the clever country), by giving each child the opportunity to reach his or her full potential.

#### **What we found**

We found a clear relationship between aggregated social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes, which the funding arrangements for the past forty years have exacerbated.

We found that real equality of opportunity demands the strategic targeting of resources and support, which necessarily means the unequal distribution of resources and support in favor of need.

We found no evidence to suggest that teachers in our most disadvantaged and low-performing government, Catholic and independent schools are not as skilled as those in the most advantaged schools.

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We concluded that the issue in low-performing schools is not the quality of teachers in these schools but the magnitude of the task they are facing. These teachers work in the emergency wards of Australian education, yet they lack the battery of specialist support typical of an emergency ward in a hospital. Their numbers are inadequate for the job at hand, and the needed support from fully qualified personnel such as counselors, speech therapists, interpreters and school/family liaison officers cannot be funded.

For that reason, it seemed to us that the quality of education – as distinct from the quality of teachers - in our most disadvantaged and underperforming schools, is clearly and unacceptably inferior.

We concluded that education should be regarded as a strategic investment not a cost. It is in our national interest that every child – whether from a fourth generation Australian family with an income three times the national average, or from a family that has been unemployed for three generations, or from a newly arrived refugee family speaking no English – should be given the kind and amount of individual support necessary to ensure a fair go.

This means diverting funding that is currently being spent on low priorities to high priorities. By not doing so, we are consigning thousands of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to the dust-bin of underachievement, never realising their full potential, and ensuring that our national performance in education will continue to decline.

What we recommended

That the funding allocations for government school systems, for non- government school systems (Catholic, Lutheran etc) and independent schools should be built up from the bottom on the basis of the measured educational needs of each individual school, and no longer determined top-down by a political process of Commonwealth negotiation with state governments, independent school organizations, church leaders, teacher unions and others. To date school funding has been essentially a political settlement, sector-based and needs-blind.

That post-hoc equity programs, the most recent of which was New Partnerships, should be incorporated into the total needs-based funding.

That the loading of funding for non-government schools as a proportion of the AGSRC (Average Government Schools Recurrent Costs) should cease. This is the mechanism that ensures that funding of the non-government systemic and independent sectors increases with increasing costs in the government sector, without measurement of need.

We proposed a minimum level of public funding for all schools regardless of sector.

On top of that we proposed loadings for the different elements of aggregated social disadvantage – English language proficiency, low SES, school size and location, indigeneity, and children with disability.

We proposed that all government schools, and a small number of non-government schools in areas where there was no government provision, should receive full public funding.

We proposed that any additional public funding for other non-government schools should be on a scale relating to parental capacity to pay.

In other words, Gonski was a fundamental re-imagining of Australian education. We proposed a change from a funding allocation system that for forty years has been top-down, politically-driven, sector-based and needs-blind, to one that is built from the bottom up, educationally-driven, sector-blind and needs-based.

Few people at the time – including many politicians and commentators - fully comprehended the radical nature of that proposal. Paul Brock did, and he was an immediate advocate and supporter; so did Christopher Pyne, then shadow minister, who was vehemently opposed.

There were two other critically important recommendations:

First, that the resource level for each school should be expressed as a school resourcing standard (SRS) for each

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school, set at a level at which it has been shown - in schools with minimal levels of educational disadvantage - that high performance is achievable over time.

We took as our benchmark those schools in which at least 80 per cent of students were above national minimum standard for their year level in reading and numeracy in the most recent three years. This was highly aspirational: it was, and still is, about 16 per cent of schools. We saw the SRS not as a funding mechanism, but as the 'price' that had to be paid to bring all schools to standard.

The second was this. As a Commonwealth inquiry, we had developed a model, or concept, that needed to be fully tested and refined with the states and the non-government sectors before implementation. We had proposed certain boundaries to the loadings, but recognised that these had to be tested against hard data that the states and non-government sectors alone held.

We therefore proposed that a National Schools Resourcing Body (NSRB), similar in concept to the former Schools Commission, owned jointly by all the ministers just not the Commonwealth alone, and supported by an advisory group from all three sectors, should be established immediately to proceed with this necessary work.

#### **What the Labor Government did**

It immediately buried the concept of a National Schools Resourcing Body, disallowing any possibility of a jointly-owned round-table to test and develop the Gonski model.

Its drew up a National Education Reform Agreement (NERA), to be agreed by COAG, under which government schools systems would receive funding, while non-government systems and schools would be funded under a National Plan for School Improvement (NPSI).

This provided additional funding to all schools provided the state governments (under the NERA) and non-government schools and systems (under the NPSI) would undertake to apply the funding to projects approved under the headings of quality teaching, quality learning, empowered school leadership and meeting student need; provide greater transparency and accountability to school communities; and allocate funding according to the needs of their students.

Now, this was not what the Gonski Review recommended.

- It was not sector-blind needs-based funding.
- It continued to discriminate between government and non-government schools.
- It maintained the AGSRC, under which public funding for new places for children in disadvantaged government schools automatically generated public funding for non-government schools, without any consideration of disadvantage.
- And although empowered school leadership, greater accountability, greater transparency and so on and are all worthy objectives, Gonski was about funding for what happens in the classroom of each individual school – about money going through the school gate.

The NERA and NPSI contain needs-based loadings, but they were pulled out of the Canberra air, and negotiated in a hard-ball top-down fashion with the independent schools, the Catholic Education Commission, the AEU, and state treasuries. They are not founded on rigorous national evidence-based testing of the school resourcing standard or the loadings and indexation, to the extent envisaged by the Gonski Panel.

And yet this response to Gonski - which was far from implementing Gonski - was packaged as "Gonski Agreements" and "Gonski Funding". These terms are now widely accepted by the public, the media, and even the AEU as meaning that Labor (now in Opposition) is committed to implementing the Gonski reforms.

It is not. The Labor Government provided additional and very welcome funding for schools; in Opposition it has been an advocate for further funding (the so-called "last two years of Gonski Funding"); and it declares a commitment to

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needs-based funding. But the Labor Party has not committed to sector-blind funding; it has retained the principle of the AGSRC; and it has not committed to total school funding being built from the bottom up according to measured need.

In the run-up to the 2013 election, Prime Minister Rudd and Education Minister Shorten hawked this corruption of the Gonski Report around the country, doing deals with Premiers, bishops and the various education lobbies. These bi-lateral negotiations were not a public and open process, as would have been achieved by the NSRB; they dragged on for 21 months to the September 2013 election; and they led to a thoroughly unsatisfactory situation: agreements with some states and not with others, and – among participating states – different agreements and indexation arrangements.

Labor delivered more money for education, and that has been beneficial. But like the Federal Liberal National Party Coalition, Labor ducked the fundamental issue of addressing the relationship between aggregated social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes, and turned its back on the development of an enduring funding system that is fair, transparent, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent outcomes for all Australian students.

### **What has happened as a result**

NSW is different from the rest of the country. NSW has not only put all the NERA funding through the school gate, but has applied loadings for disadvantage through the Resource Allocation Model. Funding for government schools is being distributed on a measured needs basis. NSW has demonstrated, in the largest school system in the country, the feasibility of building school funding from the bottom up as envisaged by the Gonski Panel. All the indicators are showing encouraging signs of real improvement.

No other states have done this to anywhere near the same extent. Some are using NERA funding not to pursue the Gonski objectives, but for purposes that normally would be funded by state treasuries and state education departments. In Tasmania, for example, which had \$20m in NERA funding for 2014-15, only \$3.8M went through the school gate, \$2M was spent on special education, \$1M on VET in schools, \$2.5M on IT bandwidth and servers, \$3M on workforce development, and \$7.5M on K-12 curriculum development. These are all good things to do, but they are the ongoing business of state governments, and none of them addresses the problem Gonski was set up to solve.

The AEU “I give a Gonski” campaign, which was important in keeping the reforms alive, has now become identified with the defence of public schools rather than the promotion of needs-based funding across the independent, Catholic and government school sectors. Much has been lost as a result.

### **The current situation**

There is now no prospect of the Gonski Report being implemented as recommended. That became clear as early as 2012, when the government set aside the proposal for a National Schools Resourcing Body. Paul Brock was one of the first to recognize that Gonski was about to be torn apart at the seams.

We have lost the Gonski vision of the School Resourcing Standard being an efficient and effective price required to deliver agreed outcomes, and now regard it as no more than a resourcing mechanism.

Welcome though it has been, the so-called “Gonski Funding” has bought us no more than time. It will be temporarily beneficial for so long as it lasts, but it is strategically irrelevant for the longer term. The problem Gonski was seeking to address not only remains, but is yearly becoming more acute.

Given that the principle of the AGSRC has not been abandoned, the current increased funding for government schools will be taken as the cost of government schooling. Funding for the non-government sector will therefore continue to grow, regardless of need. The total cost of education will spiral needlessly even further.

The solution to Australia's education problem is not pouring more public money into education, but redistributing the existing funding strategically, to address the things that matter in the schools that need it. Far too much is spent in wealthy independent schools, where recurrent funding can be used to service loans on capital works, not necessarily

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to provide a better education, but to provide facilities to make the school more attractive than its other high fee-paying competitors.

It is surely unacceptable that the 20 most expensive independent schools in NSW receive more than \$111M per annum in public funding, when the gap in reading performance between the top 20 per cent and bottom 20 per cent of our 15 year-olds is equivalent to five years of schooling.

My view is that Australian education will not recover until we have a government prepared to establish an entirely new basis for our school funding arrangements. We need an educationally-driven, sector-blind, needs-based School Resourcing Standard for all schools; based on hard evidence; designed to achieve specified and measurable outcomes; applied to all school sectors; agreed by the states, territories and Commonwealth; and accepted nationally as the affordable, efficient and effective price of building our national stock of human capital.

I conclude with one final remark on the matter of equity and a fair go for all.

In my view, and it was Paul's view too, equity in education is not motivated fundamentally by a sense of fair play: it is a coldly rational investment decision made to achieve a specific return. It is about maximising the human capital of the nation. The 20 per cent of 15 year-olds currently reading at Year 3 level is like a lode of some precious metal that has been left to waste in the ground, when it could be recovered and enriched for far less cost than its value.

Similarly, the very modest support given by the Department to enable Paul Brock to continue to work during the course of his disease was an investment, not a cost. And it paid off a thousand-fold: the output was eighteen monographs, 200 professional papers and presentations, 130 books and many other book chapters and journal articles, as well as Paul's immense daily contribution to the work of the Department and to education nationally.

Quite extraordinary, truly heroic in its proportion and achievement, and none of it could have been done by anyone else. Given a fair go, in the face of immense adversity, Paul did it entirely on his own.

Out there, in government, Catholic and independent schools serving disadvantaged communities, there are many thousands of children who similarly will enrich this nation if only given a fair go – an initial and small leg up - to enable them also to do it entirely on their own.

Those of us who live to see that day will remember Paul Brock, and what he stood for.