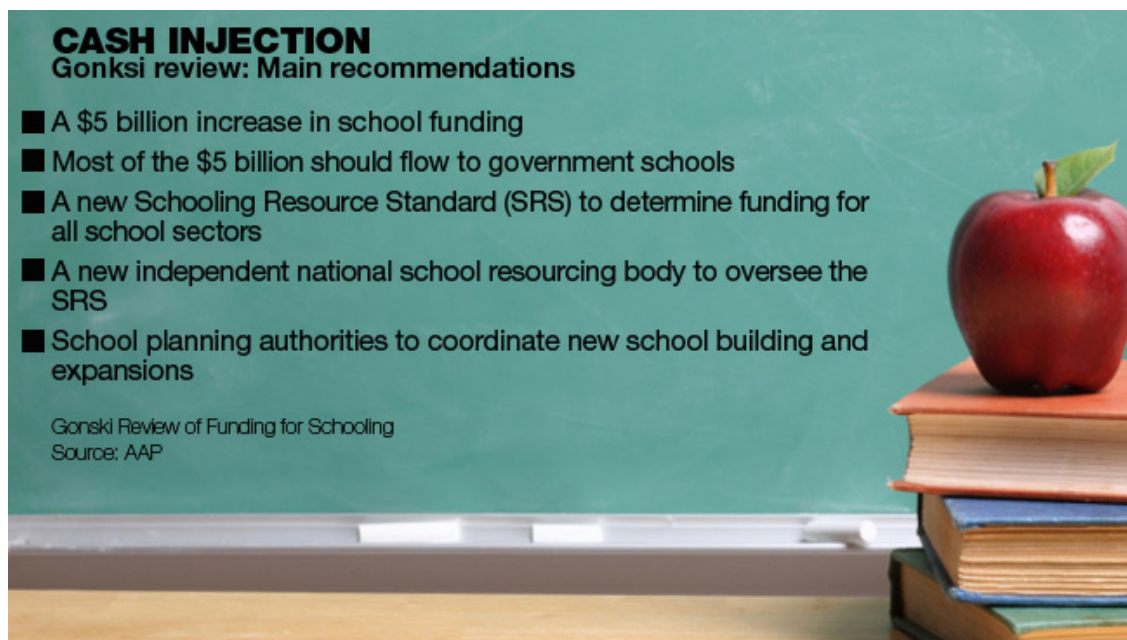# The Gonski funding model will allow the Federal Government to call the shots but schools must be free to succeed

By: Kevin Donnelly – February 27, 2013

THE Queensland, West Australian and Victorian premiers have every right to question the Commonwealth Government's plans to impose its will on schools.

Given the parlous state of the federal Budget, the premiers are also right to fear that Prime Minister Julia Gillard will use any new funding model to financially penalise the states by forcing them to carry the lion's share of funding.

The reality is, the Federal Government neither manages any schools nor employs any teachers yet will have its way through the new Gonski funding model and the accompanying National Plan for School Improvement.

It's also true that, since elected in 2007, the Gillard Government has imposed a highly centralised, inflexible and bureaucratic model of education on schools and classrooms.

Whether the national curriculum, national testing, making results public on the MySchool website, national teaching standards or national teacher registration, all roads lead to Canberra.

If the Labor Government is re-elected and if the states accept the new Gonski-inspired funding model, expect things to get a lot worse.

The proposed NPSI represents an even more inflexible and counterproductive approach.

Forcing schools, by tying implementation to funding, to develop school improvement plans, undertake annual reviews and make results public not only duplicates what states around Australia already require.

But the plan, especially the requirement that teachers develop time-consuming individualised learning plans for students, also imposes additional red tape and compliance costs that will turn teachers into bean counters, ticking boxes and filing reports.

There is an alternative.

Research both here and overseas concludes the most effective way to raise standards is to embrace what is known in the Catholic system as subsidiarity.

This refers to the principle that local autonomy and local control are preferable to schools being micromanaged by distant bureaucrats far removed from the day-to-day realities of the classroom.

As far as practicable, decisions should be made by those most affected and, as the Americans would say, closest to where the rubber hits the road.

Autonomy, diversity and flexibility explain why Catholic and independent schools achieve such strong results.

While the Gillard Government imposes a statist, command-and-control model of education on schools, overseas developments reflect a very different approach.

In Britain, after years of Labour government-inspired intervention and control, the Conservative Government is introducing "Free Schools".

US President Barack Obama is pushing what are described as "Charter Schools" in a bid to lift standards and to empower local communities.

Both Free Schools and Charter Schools allow decision-making in areas such as staffing, budgets and curriculum focus at the local level.

German researcher Ludger Woessmann analysed the characteristics of stronger-performing education systems as measured by international tests. In a series of papers written for the OECD, he concludes school autonomy is a vital ingredient.

DUS research by Caroline Hoxby and Andrew Coulson also provides evidence that autonomy strengthens educational outcomes and promotes innovation; especially among schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Not surprisingly, a 2011 OECD paper analysing the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment results concludes: "In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better."

Schools around Australia are approaching a tipping point.

Increased government intervention and control represented by Kevin Rudd's education revolution and Gillard's national crusade are overwhelming schools, exhausting teachers and stifling creativity and innovation.

The alternative is to grant schools the freedom and flexibility, within broad constraints, to get on with the job.