



## **Why Gonski is wrongski**

by Kevin Donnelly

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School funding and the best way to raise standards and make Australian students more internationally competitive, based on tests like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), are all front and centre in terms of political and public debates. Especially, since the current funding model runs out at the end of 2013 and Gillard has nominated education as a key issue in the next federal election.

One approach, best illustrated by Prime Minister Gillard's speech to the National Press Club on September 3, when she gave the government's response to the Gonski review of school funding and detailed her National Plan for School Improvement, is to say government know best.

Unlike President Reagan who famously said, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help", the federal ALP government is committed to a statist, centralised and bureaucratic approach to public policy. Even though the federal government does not manage any schools or employ any staff, since the 2007 election the Rudd/Gillard education revolution (now rebadged as Gillard's moral crusade) has involved forcing states to comply with a range of ALP-inspired educational initiatives and policies.

By tying compliance to funding, the government has imposed a national curriculum, national testing, national teacher registration and certification, national teacher training standards and, in its most recent form, Gillard's National Plan for School Improvement. Under the ALP government, all roads lead to Canberra.

The flaws and weaknesses in adopting a statist, top-down approach to education are manifest, as proven by the cost overruns and mismanagement associated with the billion-dollar Building the Education Revolution fiasco. As noted by Auditor-General's report, compared to government schools, Catholic and independent schools, because of their autonomy and flexibility, were able to achieve more cost-effective and educationally worthwhile outcomes.

In her speech to the National Press Club, although failing to provide details of the new Gonski inspired funding model, such as the quantum of funding available, the split between state and federal governments and the amount related to indexation, Gillard provided details of her government's plans to overcome educational

disadvantage and to ensure that Australian students performed in the top 5 countries in the PISA test by 2025.

Central to the Prime Minister's vision is forcing schools to complete annual improvement plans, teachers having annual performance reviews and making schools provide personalised learning plans for so-called disadvantaged students. In addition to needlessly duplicating what the majority of states and territories are already doing, the Gillard plan represents an added layer of bureaucratic interference that will drown schools and teachers in red tape and increased micromanagement.

There is an alternative. The most effective way to strengthen schools and to improve outcomes is to adopt a more market-driven approach to education; one where the system is characterised by autonomy, diversity, competition and choice. Best illustrated by the idea of subsidiarity championed by Catholic schools, the ideal is one where decisions are made by those closest to the school and its community.

The evidence supporting a market-driven model of education is manifest. As proven by research undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research's Gary Marks non-government schools outperform government schools in areas like national testing and Year 12 examinations because they have the autonomy and flexibility to manage themselves and to best reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities.

Contrary to what critics like Angelo Gavrielatos, the President of the Australian Education Union (AEU) argues, it's also the case that non-government schools outperform government schools, even after adjusting for students' socioeconomic background.

Overseas researchers Ludger Woessman and Eric Hanushek, after identifying the characteristics of stronger performing education systems as measured by international tests, also argue that competition, autonomy and choice associated with the presence of non-government schools lead to stronger outcomes.

Instead of arguing that non-government schools should be denied funding, Woessmann and Hanushek argue that such schools should be properly resourced when they state, "students in countries where public funding is equalised between privately and publicly operated schools perform significantly better than students in counties where privately operated schools received less funding".

Andrew Coulson, from the US-based Cato Institute, after undertaking a meta-analysis of over 100 studies evaluating the relative performance of government and non-government schools, concludes, "the private sector outperforms the government sector in the overwhelming majority of cases".

That school choice, a situation where schools are given autonomy and parents the power to choose between different schools, is the best way to improve results, especially for disadvantaged students, explains why the UK Conservative government is replacing the Blair government's inflexible, command-and-control model of education with what are described as Free Schools.

According UK Secretary of Education Michael Gove, “In this country, the ability of schools to decide their own ethos and chart their own destiny has been severely constrained by government guidance, ministerial interference and too much bureaucracy... We want every school to be able to shape its own character, frame its own ethos and develop its own specialisms, free from either central or local bureaucratic constraint”.

It’s ironic that one of the programs introduced by the Gillard government is what is known as the Empowering Local Schools program and that in her Press Club speech the Prime Minister argues that under her government, “Principals will be empowered to lead their schools, making decisions that get improvements unencumbered by stifling bureaucracy”.

Ironic, because at the same time the rhetoric is about autonomy and empowering schools the Gillard led government, both with its so-called education revolution and now with its moral crusade, is stifling schools with increased regulation and micromanagement and weakening non-government schools by undermining their autonomy and refusing to guarantee proper funding post 2013.

*Dr Kevin Donnelly is Director of Melbourne-based Education Standards Institute and author of [Educating your child: it’s not rocket science.](#)*