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NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Six propositions for Gonski 2.0

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How can money make an educational difference? In his submission to the second Gonski review, *Dean Ashenden* offered some suggestions

The issues paper released in September by the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools began with an undertaking to “focus on practical measures that work,” but continued to pose much broader questions. What should success for schools and students look like? How can funding be better used at the school or classroom level? How can we support ongoing improvement? What are the barriers to that improvement? What institutional or governance arrangements should be put in place?

My submission to the review accepted that “practical measures,” readily undertaken in schools, have a part to play. It also argued that such measures will succeed only to the extent that the review panel can find good answers to its wider

questions.

1. ALLOCATING RESOURCES ACCORDING TO NEED IS AS IMPORTANT WITHIN SCHOOLS AS BETWEEN THEM

The arrival in schools of additional, needs-based funding will bring with it significant problems as well as great possibilities.

One risk is that schools will see this “extra” funding as an opportunity to do “extra” things. In the worst case, “enrichment” and “remedial” programs will address need while an undisturbed mainstream program — less than rich and routinely leaving some or many students behind — will go on generating the need. At best, using supplementary funding to do merely supplementary things will be an opportunity missed.

A challenge for the review will be to find ways of encouraging schools to use new money to free up old — that is, to support “doing a Gonski” *within* each school as well as between schools by shifting teaching time and effort from areas of relatively low need to areas of high need.

The review asks: “Are there barriers to implementing improvements?” The answer in this area is an emphatic yes. There are cultural barriers created by habitual ways of organising teachers’ work and by legitimate concerns about the implications of doing things differently. There are also structural and therefore political barriers in the rules governing class sizes and teaching loads

that make it difficult or impossible for schools to reallocate effort by (for example) putting more students in some classes so that there can be fewer in other classes.

2. IN TRYING TO IMPROVE THEIR “PERFORMANCE,” SCHOOLS MAY BE ROWING AGAINST A SYSTEMIC TIDE

Research commissioned by the first Gonski review found that a relatively low proportion of Australian students are in schools with socially mixed enrolments and a relatively high proportion in schools with concentrations of disadvantaged students (on the one side) and advantaged (on the other).

An Australian Council for Educational Research study looked at the same question via an index of “school variance.” It found an increase in variance in Australian schools from 18 to 24 per cent between 2000 and 2009; over the same period, school variance in Finland rose from just 8 to 9 per cent. Other research has identified a rising incidence of both ethnic and social-class segmentation.

These developments underlie problems in performance. The gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students is far greater in Australia than in many OECD countries, and Australia was the only OECD country to see an increase in the performance gap between schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students and

schools with high numbers of advantaged students between 2000 and 2009.

This research looked mainly at the consequences of segmentation for the academic performance of students in disadvantaged schools. But in a recent analysis, Melbourne University's John Hattie has argued that students in schools with high concentrations of advantaged students are also underperforming because (as he puts it) the schools are "cruising."

An effective way to improve "performance" would be to arrest and reverse the trend to segmentation. To the extent that it is not arrested and reversed, schools are being asked to row against a systemic tide.

The federal government's recent decision to introduce needs-based, sector-blind funding is an important step towards tackling the problem of segmentation. But it alone may not be equal to the task.

Several of the key structural drivers of segmentation remain. These include: the division between fee-charging and free schools; the absence of a ceiling on school expenditure; and a regulatory regime that permits some schools (in both government and non-government sectors) to select students on various grounds but requires other schools to take all comers, and that gives some Australian families an exceptionally wide choice of

schools but others little or no choice at all. This is more than just a problem for “academic” performance.

3. ACADEMIC OUTCOMES IN FUNDAMENTAL AREAS ARE NOT THE ONLY OUTCOMES THAT MATTER FUNDAMENTALLY

Much attention is being given to defining, teaching and assessing new kinds of “outcomes,” variously referred to as generic, cross-curriculum or twenty-first-century skills. They range from “collaborative problem-solving” and “learning to learn” to “applying deep understandings of key disciplinary concepts.”

Less attention is given to a category of learning regarded by many parents and others as fundamental to schooling: the development of values, attitudes, and ways of seeing oneself and others.

The role of the school in this area of learning is limited but real, and more challenging than delivery of the academic curriculum. It is not just a matter of running anti-bullying programs or establishing a student representative council; the educational task is to make the entire “hidden” curriculum explicit, and to make a sustained effort to align it with fundamental social and educational goals.

Much of this hidden curriculum exists in the relationships among the students themselves. The school is *the* place where children and young people

spend extended periods of time together, and where they therefore do a lot of growing up, of themselves and of each other.

What students learn from and about each other depends crucially on who the other students are.

Who goes to school with whom? Some schools have a great deal of control over the who (as noted in the previous section) while other schools have little say at all, and the upshot is something that no one intended.

When economics writer Ross Gittins notes that Jewish kids go to one school, Islamic kids to another, and poses the trick question, “What did the rich kid say to the poor kid?” (answer: nothing, they never met), he is drawing attention to a social problem, but also an educational impoverishment, for all concerned.

Diversity is a fundamental social principle, but it should also be a core educational value. That value can be taught, but even the best teaching in this domain is no substitute for, or counter to, what many students see and experience. The fact that research and national policy have turned their attention to rising social segmentation mainly because of its impact on academic outcomes suggests that the “what works” agenda can encourage an unfortunate myopia.

4. OUTCOMES OF SCHOOLING MATTER, BUT SO DOES THE EXPERIENCE ITSELF

Schooling is unavoidably a preparation for life after

school, but it is not only that. Twelve years is, after all, one fifth or more of most working lives. To most parents it is as important that their sons and daughters really look forward to going to school each day as it is that they make good progress in the formal curriculum. Its importance to students themselves is obvious.

How many *do* look forward to going to school? Why or why not? How far does that differ from one school or kind of school to another? Is the “performance” of schools in this vital area improving, or the reverse? How does it relate to their “performance” in other domains?

Answers to questions such as these do exist, but within systems, and often in less than robust form. Nationally, schools can use standard instruments to collect data on student, parent and staff satisfaction, and under the terms of the National Education Agreement they are required to “report on it,” and to include a link to the MySchool home page in the section of their annual reports dealing with school satisfaction.

“Satisfaction” is a limited concept. The questions posed in the standard survey instrument are anodyne, and don’t allow students to say at least some of what they see, think and feel about their experience at their school. Data thus collected would not support national aggregation.

The case for a robust, national collection of direct

feedback from students as the basis for an *experience-of-school* key performance indicator is that:

- what students experience is more fundamental than — indeed, is the point of — what the school provides (“school quality”)
- the students themselves are the experts: data on attendance, engagement, retention, suspensions and the like are all important, but all depend upon inference; none can be as direct or specific as what students themselves say
- the feedback would contribute to a broader, more realistic account of “performance,” and make possible analysis of the relationship between key performance elements.

5. SCHOOLING AS CURRENTLY ORGANISED CANNOT DELIVER THE EXPERIENCES OR THE OUTCOMES THAT INCREASINGLY MATTER

It was suggested above that resources, including particularly teaching effort, should be reallocated.

Here I suggest that it should also be *reorganised*.

In a widely discussed paper, Geoff Masters, head of the Australian Council for Educational Research, contrasts what schools are now asked to do with what they *do* do:

- Current curricula are often dominated by factual and procedural knowledge rather than deep understandings and their application to real-world problems as demanded in many workplaces.

- Subjects are often taught in isolation from each other, at a time when cross-disciplinary solutions are needed.
- Passive, reproductive learning and the solution of standard problem types prevail when creativity and innovative solutions to new problems are called for.
- Assessment provides information about subject achievement when employers want information about ability to work in teams, use technology, communicate, solve problems and learn on the job.
- Students often learn in isolation and in competition with each other, when workplaces demand teamwork, and interpersonal and communication skills.
- Curricula are designed for delivery in traditional classroom settings at a time when new technologies are transforming how courses are delivered and learning takes place.

Masters is here calling for a new category of outcomes (as noted in section 3 above) to be taught and assessed. But he is also calling for a different *organisation* of work in schools — and, it should be emphasised, of the work of *learning* (rather than of *teaching*).

One implication of this analysis is that more of the work of learning should be managed by the students themselves — that they need to do more “teaching” of each other, and more work in collaboration and in learning to collaborate. But

the primary reorganisation required is (as Masters and many others have long advocated) of the relationship between each student and *his or her* curriculum.

Students can only work at full tilt to the extent that the work they are asked to do makes sense, is engaging, and is above all doable — but not too easily doable. Students should be working as often as possible in their “zone of proximal development,” and the work of learning should wherever possible be organised as a series of “developmental continua.”

That this is not easy to achieve is obvious. It is possible only in fits and starts within the typical organisation of people, time, space and task — a group of twenty or more students, often three, four or even five “learning years” apart, brought together for just forty-five minutes to work on a more or less common task in ways necessarily orchestrated by the teacher — that is, within a “grammar of schooling” formed in its essential features early in the twentieth century.

The phrase “grammar of schooling” was coined to refer to “the regular structures and rules” of schools that function “in the way grammar organises meaning in language.” In these terms, what Masters and many others are looking for is a different grammar of schooling.

The elements of a different grammar can be found

in many places: in special programs and schools for students who could not or would not swim in the mainstream; in efforts to work out how the digital technologies can be deployed to increase (rather than decrease) the productivity of schooling; in efforts to devise new kinds of assessments and new ways to integrate them into the learning process; and in a few thoroughly reconfigured mainstream schools, past and present.

Programs and work of this kind are proliferating. They are important in themselves and in what can be learned from them. But an obsolete grammar still confines them to one or other of schooling's margins — the earlier years; the low-status or non-core areas of the curriculum; and programs for “non-academic” or “difficult” students.

The task for schools and systems over the coming decades is to form these elements into a new compound, one that answers to Masters's criteria — cross-disciplinary, collaborative, project- and workshop-based, high-tech, and organised to ensure the continuous growth of each student — and is capable of displacing an anachronistic grammar.

6. SCHOOLS CANNOT REORGANISE THEMSELVES BY THEMSELVES

The prevailing grammar is deeply embedded in the culture of schooling, in habitual ways of thinking and doing things.

It is also the case, however, that this culture is

supported by structural arrangements and defended by associated interest groups and institutions. These include:

- an influential segment of selective schools (both government and non-government), well served by the received grammar
- tertiary selection systems which codify and, in high-status areas, insist on that grammar
- industrial agreements and associated ways of allocating resources that take for granted “classes,” “lesson periods,” and a workforce dominated by a single category of education worker, the “teacher,” and embed them in quasi-legal regulation
- a physical infrastructure centred on “the classroom”
- an “effectiveness” industry, which has tended to obscure the fact of a specific grammar by taking the current one as given.

The combination of these well-defended structures with widely shared habits and assumptions has kept the familiar grammar in its dominant position long after the circumstances to which it belonged have disappeared, to the frustration of many working in and around schools.

A new grammar of schooling will not be moved from the margins to the mainstream of schooling by diffusion or persuasion or by the efforts of schools and innovators alone. Structural reform will be required too.

WHAT COULD THE REVIEW DO?

The review should see its recommendations on specific “practical measures that work” within the larger task of developing a more productive grammar of schooling, and of moving that grammar from the margins to the mainstream.

Specifically, the Review should:

1. recommend that schools be permitted to increasingly allocate core as well as supplementary resources (teaching effort particularly) according to need
2. propose that the government consider further reforms to funding, and to the regulation of student selection, that build on needs-based, sector-blind funding to increase diversity within each school and reduce disparities between schools
3. suggest that the government give consideration to changing the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia so as to give parity with academic/cognitive outcomes to:
 - the character and quality of students’ *experience* of school
 - *diversity* within each school — as distinct from the invidious demographic comparisons currently offered on the MySchool site — and disparities between schools
 - students’ *social perceptions and values*
4. propose a sustained, high-level conversation between the industrial parties to consider:

- for the near-term, ways of encouraging more needs-based allocation of resources within schools (for example, by shifting from a maximum size for each class to a maximum average class size);
- for the longer-term, ways and means of driving substantial change in the organisation of learning and teaching

5. recommend an investigation into whether and how the impact on school curricula of selection for highly competitive courses, and courses in the strongly sequential disciplines, is being and could be reduced by means including replacing the TER with more broadly-based assessments of capability

6. suggest that:

- substantial change in the grammar of schooling demands a clear, sustained strategic direction and coordination of effort
- this is unlikely to emerge from Australia's complex school governance arrangements
- the government should therefore propose the creation of a national agency to lead the development of a long-range strategy for schooling through authoritative, policy focused and consultative analysis, review and recommendation of the kind exemplified in the international sphere by the OECD. ●

This is an edited version of Dean Ashenden's submission to the Review to Achieve Educational

Excellence in Australian Schools.

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