

# Stand-out Messages from *Need to Succeed's* Symposium, 'What next for fairer school funding?' Sydney 23 Oct 2014

## Introduction

I attended the symposium as a guest of Need to Succeed, representing Broulee Public School P&C Gonski Sub-Committee.

Need to Succeed (NTS) was launched to support the implementation of needs-based, sector-neutral school funding as recommended in the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling (the "Gonski" review). The NTS is a broad-based group with supporters including educators from all sectors, not-for-profits, parents and professional associations. Supporters are united in the view that the current model of funding is no longer answering students' needs, with data showing the performance of Australian students has declined.

The symposium brought together people from various sectors – principals, teachers, P&C members and students from public, independent and Catholic schools, academics, private companies working in leadership training, teacher union representatives, charities, and other education advocates.

I would like to thank *Need to Succeed*, and all those who have contributed their time and effort to organise this symposium, and especially the speakers who presented their position and thinking on this complex issue. I was inspired to meet and listen to Dr Ken Boston and Kathryn Greiner, and I congratulate them on their continued efforts to advocate for fairer and more effective funding of schools across Australia.

I've presented the highlights of what I felt were the most important messages, and included some of my own reflections on these as well [*in square brackets*].

## The Stand-out Messages

**Dr Ken Boston AO** and **Kathryn Greiner AO** spoke openly about their experiences of working on the Gonski Review panel. Ms Greiner said the debate of the issues within the panel was fierce and thorough and the intellectual rigour of the processes was intense. Her lasting impressions from visiting a range of Australian schools were of the poor quality of state school facilities compared to well-resourced private schools, and the 'benign neglect of disability' in funding structures.

Dr Boston made the point that the main problem with Australian schools' poor overall performance is not 'quality teaching', but 'quality of education'. He explained that he saw great quality teaching and teachers doing their best, but those working with limited resources were unable to provide the same quality of education as schools that were well-funded. He reiterated that Australia's poor performance cannot be blamed on teachers: there is not enough tiered support for children with extra needs.

Some schools have a bigger battle than others, because many children don't have the opportunity to receive basic social skills and support at home from their parents that would set them up for their schooling experiences. 'They are the Emergency Wards of education and we need to fund them properly', says Dr Boston.

*[Parents are the first educators, and research shows that the impact of the first three years of a child's life is critical in setting up brain connections and pathways for higher learning. Parents*

*have a significant impact on their children's readiness for learning – some children are luckier than others. Some parents can provide their children with daily opportunities for speaking, listening, conversation, a wide vocabulary, self control (handling feelings), social skills (how to respond and play with others), physical skills to develop co-ordination as well as ensure the basics of routine, good diet, exercise and sleep. Well-educated parents tend to do this better than those parents who have not received these advantages through their own family. Hence some children need much more help when they arrive in Kindergarten. It's critical that early childhood education (preschool) gets proper government support, too.]*

Dr Boston stated that every 8 year old needs to be able to read properly or the rest of their schooling will suffer. We need to be able to make sure every young Australian can reach all the benchmarks by Year 3. Some children will need more help to get there. *[If we can achieve this when children are in primary schools, the problems in secondary schools will be less.]*

'We are advocating equality of **opportunity**, not equality of **outcomes**. Spreading resources equally will not change the situation', said Dr Boston.

For every child to receive the quality education they need to be great future citizens, Australia needs a fairer distribution of educational funds according to each child's needs. 'The **child** should be the unit of funding, with additions for disadvantage', Dr Boston said. The funding has to be 'sector-blind' and needs-based. *[No matter what school a disadvantaged child goes to, the funding should go with each child, including the extra loadings for the 5 identified categories of need - disability, migrant, indigenous, low socio-economic and regional. Public schools currently teach about 80% of disadvantaged students, so funding would be redistributed more fairly to public schools if it were based on need. This would mean public schools would have an increase in resources to bring them in line with other schools which are achieving good educational outcomes.]*

Dr Boston explained that the gap in performance between the bottom 20% of children and the top 20% has become five years at Year 9 level. 'This is a waste of human resources. Australia cannot afford to let any child slip through the cracks,' he said.

Dr Boston commended the NSW government for their support and implementation of the Gonski Review's recommendations in NSW.

**Dr Lisa O'Brien, CEO of The Smith Family**, explained that the evidence is clear - education can break the cycle of inter-generational poverty. *[If Australia invests in educating this generation of potential parents, we will see benefits into the future for generations to come.]*

**NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli** praised Barry O'Farrell for his vision in signing up for the Gonski funding for NSW. He called it a 'massively significant event' in politics. He told the symposium that Barry O'Farrell had lobbied fiercely for the Gonski funding changes, supported by his (then) Treasurer, Mike Baird.

Mr Piccoli reiterated that the NSW government is implementing not just the money, but also the reforms recommended by the Gonski Review. He said that principals of schools he had visited were excited and targeting the Gonski funding to suit the needs of their students through a variety of programs which are already showing great results.

As well as the need for funding and proper resourcing of schools, Mr Piccoli said that ongoing teacher performance evaluation and courageous leadership by principals were two other important factors in improving educational outcomes.

A school principal asked Mr Piccoli about accountability changes, and Mr Piccoli commented that principals should not have to waste time reporting on small buckets of funding, but instead give evaluation of broader overall achievements. The public need to see that the money is being spent effectively.

**Bernie Shepherd and Chris Bonner**, two ex-principals and strong education advocates, presented their findings that over the past 5 years the achievement gap between the rich and the poor in Australia has widened. Chris Bonner reiterated that David Gonski had said that a child's educational outcomes 'should not be the result of wealth, income, power or possessions.' Sadly, Australia's equity in education is worsening.

Bernie Shepherd pointed out that the spread of socio-educational disadvantage over school sectors did not match the funding given to these sectors. He said that although government schools were responsible for teaching most of the disadvantaged students [*about 80%*], the funding increases to each sector did not match the needs. The Catholic and Independent schools sectors had received much higher funding increases than government schools in the past few years. Needs-based and sector-blind funding would address this issue.

Dr Ken Boston commented that the Federal Coalition government has stated that more money does not guarantee outcomes. The evidence before us points to the fact that money is not being spent in the right areas. He said that nothing the Federal Coalition government has done in following its own policy will lift children's learning outcomes. [*The issue of equity in education funding must be addressed or Australia will continue to show poor results in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) tests as children from disadvantaged homes will continue to be left behind without extra assistance.*]

Dr Ken Boston believes that 'sooner or later the full Gonski will come or this country will go to the dogs!' He also said that if the government had not been forced to stand by the demands that 'no school should lose a dollar', implementing the full Gonski reforms for Australia would have cost less than half of what has been estimated. [*Because of the power of lobby groups' influence on politicians to maintain the inequitable and complex funding arrangements that allow preferential funding for private schools, it would be difficult to achieve the funding reforms that are needed to flow to disadvantaged children without the agreement that 'no school would lose a dollar'.*]

There were many other speakers and panellists who contributed to the discussion. **Lila Mularczyk, Principal of Merrylands HS** in Western Sydney, described the problems that exist in low socio-economic urban secondary schools, and programs that her school is implementing with Gonski funding with great success. **Margaret Vickers, Adjunct Professor, School of Education, University of Western Sydney** said that although secondary school completion was up from 82% to 85%, full engagement was down from 74% to 72.5%. She said that as many as 7% of young people were totally disconnected – not in education or training, and not even applying for unemployment benefits or looking for work.

**Jesse Rowan, Chairperson, Broulee Public School P&C Gonski Sub-Committee**

Finally, I was asked to provide an example of grass-roots action by a school P&C. I spoke about the formation of the Broulee Public School's Gonski Sub-Committee and its action so far, and some ideas for other P&Cs or parents who would like to take action and have an influence in the funding debate. For a full presentation of my input to this symposium, please see [here](#).

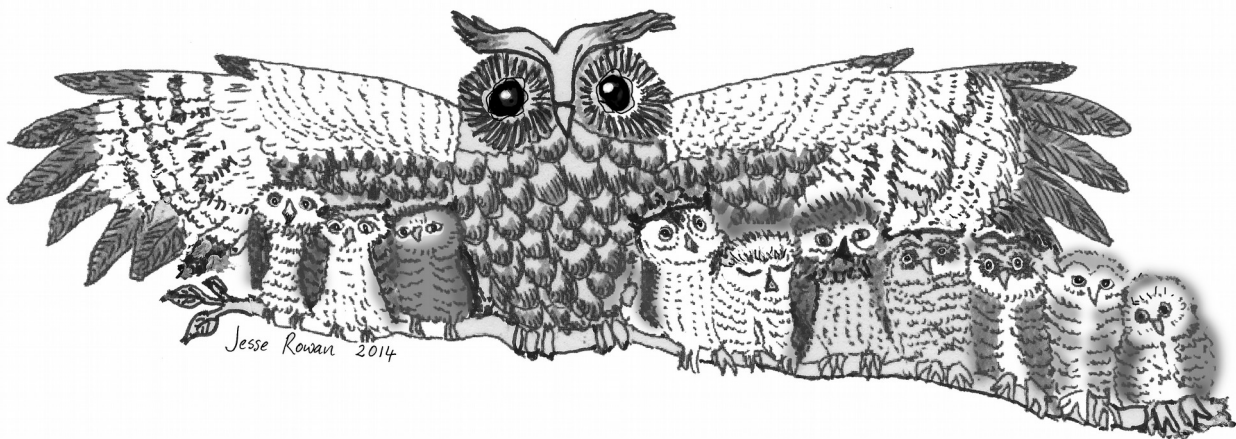
## My Conclusions

With (allegedly) limited funds, the government should be trying to maximise its impact by wise and

fair spending. Schools which are already well resourced with excellent facilities should ideally not be receiving further government funds. The schools that have the hardest task – those with most children coming from disadvantaged home situations – should receive the most government support to increase their resource standards to the minimum needed to achieve a quality education for all children. We need the full Gonski funding and an ongoing commitment to equity in education from all political parties.

Every child who 'slips through the cracks' and does not end up with an adequate secondary education will end up being a financial drain on our economy. If we don't invest properly in needs-based funding for education, Australia will spend more money in the long run on 'regrettables' – the criminal justice system, health problems, mental health problems, domestic violence, child welfare problems and unemployment costs.

Parent and P&C Association voices are important in this funding debate, too. P&C members (which can include teachers) spread our wings wider than just our own children to support all the children in our schools, especially those who come from disadvantaged families. We know that by helping everyone succeed, we are making schools a better place for our own children too. The benefits in using education to lift disadvantage extend to the whole society.



## **Australia is in a caring crisis. Let's make our politicians care about education funding.**

The Gonski Review's recommendations have been carefully researched by a respected, talented and experienced group of professionals from various political positions, drawing on the wisdom of over 7000 submissions and visits to many different schools from all sectors. It is widely supported in our community and praised from overseas experts as the best way forward for real improvement in Australian education, as it focusses funding where it will make the most difference.

We must not let our apathy, lack of awareness or our busy lives stop us from letting our politicians know that we want them to fund education according to need.

Jesse Rowan  
Chairperson  
Broulee Public School P&C  
Gonski Sub-Committee  
30 October 2014

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