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More money for the classroom - or for bureaucrats?

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We’re understanding more about how the school funding reform will work, but there is one important question that goes unanswered.

Last night’s federal budget had few big spending items, but one standout area was the A$9.8 billion school funding reform.

With most states still yet to sign on to the package, the budget papers reveal where the funding will be coming from, namely through reforms to the family payment system, closing tax loopholes and cuts to the higher education sector.

But it also showed that the bulk of the money would be delayed with only A$473 million in extra money coming from the Commonwealth next financial year.

With all the talk of money amidst the proposed Gonski report implementations the most vital question has not been asked: how will this money be dispersed to classrooms?
In the whirlwind of political spin, television press and the media foray, one would be forgiven for getting sucked into the vortex of big figures. However, it would be dangerous not to consider the most vital part of increased funding, and that is, ensuring that additional funds reach the classrooms, and not bureaucratic pockets.

In their press release on April 14, the Labor government advised that when it comes to funding dispensation, “school education authorities” will distribute money to schools. It is unclear whom or what “education authorities” they are referring to, but it does go on to state that:

Government and non-government education authorities will have flexibility to implement their own needs-based school funding systems, reflecting their own priorities and circumstances.

In other words, “education authorities” will be free to fund schools as based on their own “priorities and circumstances”. This sounds like a slippery slope from the proposed fair and equitable funding model. Indeed, Gillard's proposed “SRS” funding model (Schooling Resource Standard), with the multiple funding sources, seems similarly opaque to Howard’s “SES” funding model (Socio-Economic Status).

The lack of discussion regarding funding dissemination is an important issue to address. Before the Gonski report days, there was another major research report that drove political reform - the “McKinsey report: How the World’s best performing school systems came out on top” (2007).

This report was supposedly so inspiring that it fuelled Kevin Rudd’s “Education Revolution”, and then-education minister Julia Gillard was frequently found to substantiate “evidence-based” reforms
by referring to this report.

The major reforms that the Rudd and then Gillard governments pushed under the guise of this research was the improvement of teacher quality, in spite of the additional systemic approaches that the Report advocated for.

The selective hand-picking of the McKinsey report is being replicated in the proposed Gonski reforms. In all the political banter about money, the matter of how funds will be distributed and whether it will reach the classroom, remains invisible and uncertain. It is important to remember that previous research stresses increased funding “won’t guarantee improved performance”. The most important aspect of funding to remember is this: funding must reach the classroom, in order to make a difference.

The United States of America is an excellent example of high expenditure, but low results. Both McKinsey and Gonski demonstrate that the US spends more per student than most countries in the OECD (developed countries that are included in ranking systems):

For example, Estonia and Poland, which spend around US$40,000 per student, perform at the same level as Norway, Switzerland and the United States, which spend over US$100,000 per student. Similarly, New Zealand, one of the highest performing countries in reading, spends well below the average per student.

In spite of their high expenditure, the United States continually fall behind in literacy, mathematics and science test results (PISA), whereas their lesser spending Kiwi neighbour consistently achieves higher outcomes. It is not the expenditure that is the problem for the United States, but more so, how the expenditure is distributed:

America tends to tie up more of the resources in administration. There are more layers of administration and therefore less money getting into the classrooms in schools in many system... The place you really want to spend the money is as close to the classroom as possible.

In all the talk of cash facts and figures, how the money will reach the classroom is missing in action when it comes to current reform debate. The Gonski report argued for the establishment of a “National Schools Resourcing Body” (Recommendation 35), a centralised institution that will maintain and review funding of Australian schools, whilst also managing all quality assurance procedures.

Although this runs the risk of imposing additional bureaucratic processes to an already overloaded system, it is apparent that “governance and regulation” of Australia’s funding mechanisms “require a more sophisticated approach” and indeed,
The effectiveness of the [new funding] arrangements rests on confidence in the independence and transparency of the process for setting the schooling resource standard.

We run the danger of impersonating the United States, if we do not closely examine the question of distribution. Unless the funding is injected directly into classrooms, and not into bureaucratic machines operating under the label of a one-dimensional “teacher effectiveness” slogan, we will experience minor differences in systemic achievement levels.

In order to considerably “revolutionise” our gaps between low and high achievers, it’s vital to ensure funding gets to where it’s needed and straight to the classroom.