Ready, Set, Gonski

They’re off! The covers have been pulled back from the Gonski Review on school funding and 41 ways to reshape the nation’s funding have been revealed. There are no dramatic surprises. Choreographed leaks, multiple discussion papers and loose Canberra lips have ensured a minimal need for resuscitation units.

There is much that is good about the Gonski recommendations. An attempt to end the double reporting and duplication between State and Federal Governments has been made with the setting up of a National Schools Resourcing Body (NSRB). This body will have significant powers, particularly in establishing the extra funding a school will get in addition to their base-level entitlements.

However, it remains unclear whether this body will be strong enough to end the interminable buck-passing between State and Federal Governments over school funding. It could degenerate into just another layer of bureaucracy.

Garrumphs about unnecessary political meddling in school funding have been ameliorated by the suggestion that a 12 year funding cycle be introduced. This will get a big tick from school principals because it will divorce funding from Federal elections and give greater certainty to long-term financial planning.

The recommendation that an extra five billion dollars be poured into Australian schools will be universally welcomed by all educators even though most of it will go to State schools. However, this increase represents only half of one percent of GDP, and still means Australia is behind the funding levels of many other countries. One person who may not be quite so happy will be the Federal Treasurer whose economic credibility depends on generating a budget surplus in 2013. Therefore, be ready for some judicious stonewalling. You know the sort of thing: ‘Need for an extensive period of consultation…Vital we do not rush things…Important we engage with constituents…’

It is proposed that the base level of funding should be $8,000 for a primary aged student and $10,500 for a student at secondary school. Presumably, these figures have been arrived at using the reference schools signalled as the means to determine how much money is needed to educate a student properly. It’s difficult not to think these figures are too low and may result in a significant decline in the funding of many non-government schools. A rethink is needed.

The Review Panel suggests a minimum school entitlement of 20 – 25% of the average cost of educating a student properly. But what is meant by ‘properly’? The definition chosen by David Gonski was the amount of money needed to get 80% of students to an acceptable level of academic performance. It is suggested that NAPLAN results might be used. If this happens, it would be appalling. Firstly, NAPLAN results are too limited as a definition of educational performance. Secondly, the level of funding needs to be nearer the cost of getting a 100% of students to an acceptable level. Duh!

In fairness, this base level of funding will be topped up with extra loadings determined by the NSRB. The factors influencing these loadings will include things such as the number of disadvantaged students, the geographical location of the school and so on. Rather more worryingly is the influence of a school’s capacity to contribute to its resource requirements. Here, read fees and funds.

The Government is in a bit of a fix about fee levels and fund raising because it cannot afford to promote disincentives to private effort. If it does, self-help initiatives will evaporate and the nation will lapse into a welfare mentality it can ill afford. The Review Panel’s handling of this issue has been rather clumsy. Its second recommendation implies it wishes to give less money to schools that can raise money; but tucked away in recommendation 21 is a claim they want to preserve incentives for private funding. Clear as mud!

Not many will object to increased transparency in funding. Not many will complain about greater accountability. Not many will oppose increased funding to needier schools. However, quite a few will take their grumbles to the ballot box if the school funding they currently receive does not retain its value in real terms.
The issue of what the Review Panel wants to do with the schools that are currently overfunded because of John Howard’s ‘no losers policy’ remains unclear. They may resort to the existential trick of saying that, ‘If you can’t see it, it’s Gonski’. In other words, these schools may simply stop being called ‘funding maintained’. There. Problem sorted. The Review Panel wants the SES model of funding to be maintained, albeit in an improved state. By that they mean consistently applied and with no exceptions. Now won’t that be a change!

So - what will happen to schools that are considered overfunded? This is where Craig Thomson’s credit card is a bit of a problem. Julia Gillard can’t do much! What the Government has decided to do is play the ‘no school will lose a dollar’ card. The other card played is the ‘we will form what-in-hell-shall-we-do groups’. The former buys the favour of those who do not realise a school could lose five per cent of its funding per year due to educational inflation. The latter buys time which is an old political trick to dissolve initial opposition to change.

There are demands on the educational dollar that the ‘why-don’t-school-fee-increases-match-CPI-increases’ brigade don’t understand. Increases in insurance costs, duty of care costs, technology costs and red-tape costs mean that the financial impost of educating a child accelerates far quicker than many appreciate. For this reason, the Review Panel’s suggestion that CPI not be the sole means of determining annual increases in funding is welcome.

The suggested improvement in the funding of disadvantaged students is good news. Particularly pleasing is the suggestion to remove the difference in funding disadvantaged students at state and private schools. This proposal may worry the teacher unions for whom the whiff of a voucher system is ideologically abhorrent.

Peter Garrett has said that children ought to be able to achieve their full potential. These are carefully chosen words. ‘Ought to be able’ hints at a painful truth. Despite the Gonski Review, there will remain student underperformance in schools. At times, this will be the fault of inadequate funding – and this is what David Gonski wants to fix. At other times, it will be the fault of inadequate teaching, inadequate parenting or an inadequate commitment to learning by the child. These are the next big challenges for the Government – whoever it may be.

**Dr Tim Hawkes**