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GONSKI SCHOOL FUNDING REVIEW RISKS UNDERMINING SCHOOL CHOICE

The recommendations of the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling released today by the federal government entail great risks for school choice and private investment in education, according to the free market think tank the Institute of Public Affairs.

While the key recommendation of a School Resource Standard funding model is being heralded by education stakeholders as a consistent approach to public funding, especially for students with special needs, of all schools across Australia if implemented, this benefit could be greatly undermined if the funding reform reduces parental incentives to invest after-tax dollars in education.

‘A school resource standard may detrimentally affect school choices made by parents for their children, and is potentially a retrograde step on the road to education reform,’ said IPA Research Fellow Ms Julie Novak.

‘Unlike the current system of funding non-government schools at the federal level, the proposed resource standard will determine a funding baseline for all schools explicitly based on the incomes received by a batch of high-achievement schools.’

‘The fact is that non-government schools which receive incomes, through tuition fees and other private contributions, greater than the assessed resource standard would receive relatively less public funding.’

‘This in turn could lead to pressure on Catholic and independent schools to raise fees in the future,’ Ms Novak said.

‘Such an outcome would harm the viability of non-government schools in a scenario of ever-increasing teacher salaries and other cost pressures, and reinforce the dominance of union-controlled government schooling putting even more pressure on the public purse.’

The other key recommendation is that an additional \$5 billion be provided to Australian schools, with 75 per cent of this to be directed to government schools.

‘Government schools already receive about \$31 billion or 79 per cent of federal and state funds to schooling, with the additional down-payment being justified largely on educational disadvantage grounds,’ Ms Novak said.

‘But the latest data shows that only 13 per cent of Australia’s PISA 2009 reading performance can be attributed to socio-economic background, and this effect has diminished since 2000.’

'In addition, the strongest growth in schooling environments over the past decade has occurred in low-fee independent schools catering for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.'

'That certain stakeholders, such as the Australian Education Union, claim that educational disadvantage is being perpetuated in government schools is more a function of system and school effectiveness and teacher quality issues than an alleged lack of funding.'

The complexity and potential implementation problems of a school resource standard have also been cited by the IPA as matters of public policy concern.

'Despite the Gonski Review's quest for simplicity, the proposed funding system is significantly more complex than at least the existing federal SES model it aims to replace,' Ms Novak said.

'There is a potentially significant problem that reference schools will be selected on the basis of NAPLAN test scores, which various education stakeholders claim is subject to manipulation by the exclusion of underachieving students.'

'Concerns by teachers about the phenomenon of 'teaching to the test' would only grow louder if the key determinant of reference school selection is NAPLAN scores.'

'The uninspiring record of the Gillard government in implementing any program or funding scheme of consequence, including in cooperation with other levels of government through a proposed National Schools Resourcing Body, gives more reason for concern,' Ms Novak said.

'The states have previously indicated that they are not prepared to countenance a dilution of their ability to control state funds, and surely of concern to stakeholders is that the proposed school funding reform will be overseen by the former Minister for Pinkbatts.'

Research by the Institute of Public Affairs on school education policy can be found at www.ipa.org.au.

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