A recently released report by Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd on school funding (Private school, public cost – How school funding is closing the wrong gaps), attempts to predict the impact of projected school funding increases, yet is based on a number of misleading assumptions and fails to adequately contextualise many of the author’s calculations.

The report purports to project historical school funding data forward, showing that half of all Independent school students will get as much or more than government school students by the end of the decade. However, the report does not take into account the introduction at the beginning of 2014 of the new Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding model by the Australian Government.

The funding assumptions in the paper are based on data from 2009 to 2013 which were the last five years of the old SES funding model. The new SRS funding model is projected to deliver significant additional Australian Government funding for all government schools, according to the 2015-16 Commonwealth Budget papers. Once fully implemented, the Australian Government’s contribution to the SRS funding model will deliver the same funding growth to all education sectors.

A key feature of the new SRS funding model was to be the joint contribution by all governments, with signatory states committing to 3% indexation of school funding as well as the delivery of additional needs-based funding to all schools based on disadvantage. This was designed to address concerns about declines in state funding for schooling.

Any failure to grow total government school funding would be an issue primarily for the respective state and territory governments, not as a result of Australian Government funding policies under the current SRS funding model. Independent schools have no advantageous funding arrangements over government schools.

The Bonnor/Shepherd report, by focussing on specific bands of schools according to ICSEA, doesn’t address the full range of difference in individual schools’ and students’ funding across sectors. The report also does not acknowledge that the independent sector has had increasing numbers of students who would be classified as more disadvantaged, resulting in higher overall per capita funding.

Whilst the report dismisses averages, it acknowledges that according to their interpretation of My School data, Independent school students still only receive on average 66% of the government per student figure and they acknowledge savings of $4 billion to governments.
from students attending non-government schools. ISCA analysis of other available data shows that this proportion of total Government funding is actually lower than shown in the My School data used in the report.

While pointing out the deficiencies in other data sources, the authors also neglect to mention the widely acknowledged inconsistencies and deficiencies in the reporting of financial data for the My School website between the government and non-government sectors. The My School website provides the following advice about making financial comparisons between schools.

“The financial resources available to schools are directly influenced by the characteristics of the school (such as its location and student profile), its programs and operations. Caution should be taken in using this information to make direct funding comparisons between schools.”

There are also significant caveats around the use of ICSEA scores for the independent sector where the data is not whole school data and which incorporates a significant amount of imputation to calculate ICSEA scores. The use of ICSEA is not generally supported by the Independent school sector and should not be used to compare funding levels across school sectors because it is often not a true representation of the entire student population.

The funding of Independent schools will always be a partnership between governments and parents. Independent schools have always had a needs based funding model which supports greater public funding for students with higher needs. The growth in public funding for Independent schools is only a reflection of the rise in direct costs that schools face in delivering a quality education to students.

Whilst the current SRS funding model may not be perfect for all educational sectors, it in no way reflects a level of advantage for Independent schools that the reports suggests will exist in future years.

ENDS

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