

# Address to the ISCA and AHISA Education Forum

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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT**

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**4:30PM**

**Simon Birmingham:**

Thanks so very much for the chance to be here with you all today. It's a thrill to be back here again at this conference having had the pleasure of speaking with you all three years ago indeed; and to join such a distinguished array of educators and indeed also of people who I know give their time to school communities in terms of the volunteering, the effort that is made by those of you who are here as members of school boards, councils and the like as well.

Now I start by indeed acknowledging chairs and executives and teams of ISCA and AHISA, two organisations that provide very strong leadership to education in Australia, particularly in the independent school sector. The two organisations who I know put in the hard yards and advocacy on behalf of your members. But more importantly, work very hard to ensure the best possible outcomes for the students in the schools that you represent. Can I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people and in doing so, as Australia's Education Minister, acknowledge all of Australia's Indigenous peoples and the importance of you as school leaders in the work that we do together to continue to learn more of Indigenous knowledge and culture, to learn more from Indigenous knowledge and culture and to build upon that together as a nation.

You've heard a little bit of politics coming out today. You've heard from- there we go, you've heard of a lot of politics by the sound of that laugh. I'm not going to disappoint.

I was at an event recently, alongside a couple of the people you've heard from today – the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. And the Leader of the Opposition started his remarks by saying and I quote: I believe in a well funded public system, I believe in a well funded Catholic Diocesan education system and I also respect if people want to send their children to non-systemic, non-government schools. I thought that was a pretty grudging acknowledgement I have to say. Let me be clear, I believe in a well-funded and fairly funded public education system. I believe in a well-funded and fairly funded Catholic Diocesan Education system and I believe in a well funded and fairly funded independent school sector because we believe, as a Coalition Government, a government of

the Liberal and National parties, we believe in the right of Australian parents to choice, and the right of Australian families to choose education. We're not grudging in our support for any school sector; we are enthusiastic in our support for all school sectors. We believe that choice is important because it's a core value of coalition governments. As the history is written and it seems to have been written a few times lately, that sense of choice goes back, it goes back to- well the Menzies government decided to make commitments to fund non-government education. And we've seen growth in terms of our funding support. And as the history of Australian school funding has evolved, federal governments have taken on the role as the primary funders in the non-government education space, alongside parents who of course actually provide the majority of support, in terms of ongoing funding to non-government school on average.

In terms of taxpayer support, the Federal Government has historically assumed that primary responsibility while the states and the territories had assumed the primary responsibility of funding of public education in government schools. Now over time, we've taken on a bigger role in both spheres, particularly in recent years we've seen significant growth and support from the Federal Government for public education. That's a good thing because it allows us hopefully to work better as a nation, in terms of cooperating on the types of reforms across our education landscape, to improve student outcomes. It's a good thing because it means that together with the states and territories we have more of a partnership in terms of delivery of school education. And I want to return to some of those reforms shortly.

But, in terms of non-government education, gradually the Federal Government has become a larger and larger contributor in a range of ways, particularly in terms of expanding choice, expanding access to different options in non-government education. We saw during the Howard government, significant growth in terms of newer, low fee non-government schools. It's the fact that nowadays in terms of the median fees of schools in the independent sector, are far, far lower than people would expect. Far closer to \$5000 as a median fee that your schools charge. That's because so many of you have placed such priority and premium on providing access to so many families.

Maximising access to families is why it is important that we have a needs-based approach to funding. If funds were limitless, you could get all the money in the world in the Federal Budget – my job would be very easy. If you were running your schools and had all the money in the world – your jobs would be easy. But we don't and so we have to prioritise funds, you prioritise funds in your schools; we have to prioritise funds as government. And we've undertaken the steps over the years to prioritise those funds to make sure that when it comes to support for non-government education, we give the greatest funds to those school communities which can least afford to contribute to their fees. And we give less, historically, to those school communities who can better afford to contribute to their fees. That's a fair approach, it's a principled approach, it's an approach about empowering choice so that communities who have less capacity to contribute to the operation of their schools, get the maximum tax payer support, so those families can make that choice if they choose to and not be disempowered from doing so.

It's an important principal, it's why SES funding models were developed in the first place to try to provide a rationale for the way in which peoples' dollars are distributed across the non-government schooling sector. However, while much has been achieved in terms of the years up until now, providing for a funding model that allows for that choice. It's also fair to say that the choice was somewhat compromised and the funding models even more

compromised, by the continuance of legacy arrangements and historic deals. That's why the decision that we took as a government last year, to enact a process to get to a common funding formula, applied consistently across the country, in terms of non-government education, was a historic step.

The commitment we made last year, was that over a six to 10 year transition horizon, every Australian non-government school would receive 80 per cent of its schooling resource standard from the Federal Government; consistently, according to the same needs-based formula. That was a dramatic step forward in terms of fair treatment, equitable treatment. We coupled it with an additional investment of some \$24.5 billion dollars, compared with what had previously been there and we did it alongside, saying we're also going to up our share of contribution to public schools, to a 20 per cent share of schooling resource standard. Noting, that you don't have to go back a long way to find Federal Government paying less 10 per cent of the cost in public education. So the important historic step, to move to that 80 per cent share, and we did so because we want to make sure that that large pool of funds that we invest in public education and in non-government education is distributed fairly, based on the types of needs that David Gonski in his report laid out several years ago now. Sadly, different deals, 27 different deals in fact across different jurisdictions, different sectors have compromised those arrangements. We wanted to come back to something that was consistent.

The 80 per cent is important to your sector in particular, because against that needs-based funding approach, so many of your schools were not actually in receipt of anywhere close to that 80 per cent. Let me give you a few examples, the Australian Christian College in Caboolture, Queensland, has an SES score under the old methodology of just 89. Labor's model, left them with just 53 per cent of the schooling resource standard in 2018. They're a low-fee school at \$1600, they're a low SES school well and truly. It was a similar story at Liberty College in Tamworth, with an SES score of 83, fees of \$960 a year; they were only receiving 62 per cent of the schooling resource standard. Or the Hinchinbrook Christian School, in Ingham Queensland, a regional school, SES of 91, charging less than \$1000 a year in fees, but receiving just 59 per cent of the schooling resource standard.

Those schools were operating alongside others, often others with similar fee structures, often others who were trying to appeal for the same types of families or students, but who were in receipt of a much greater share of the schooling resource standard. Those schools are the types of examples where if we just left Labor's old arrangements in place, it would have taken more than 100 years for many schools to transition close to a common share of the schooling resource standard and still we wouldn't have been there.

We made a commitment to do it in a six to 10 year horizon and the result of that is very strong funding growth for those schools and many others. I just want to acknowledge that there are some and some in this room here today, who are also in receipt of an SRS above the 80 per cent mark. I want to thank you because the way in which the independent school sector approached last years reforms was one of principle. Was one of realising that you stood for fair and equitable treatment across the board and a number in this room and across the sector were willing to stand there and say, we may not do so well as an individual school, but we recognise that the vast majority of the sector do and it will provide a fairer, better, landscape for the future.

Now it's a brave thing for politicians to make predictions, particularly in the age of uncertainty in which we all seem to operate nowadays. But I will make a bold prediction and that is that I expect the 80 per cent share will stay. Regardless of what happens in politics over the coming years, I don't see anybody unpicking that now that we've set it in stone, put it in legislation. Because it is now there as a benchmark to identify that all non-government schools, regardless of state, regardless of sector, regardless of faith, regardless of any other differentiating factors, ought to receive the same share of funding under the same system, methodology and formula. But, and there's a but, the risk to it is that it's ideals or other offerings could be made, that they might be the 80 per cent share but then what else comes along for some, but not for others. The same speech where Mr Shorten gave such grudging acknowledgment of the existence of the independent school sector, he also made a commitment that a Labor Government would apparently reintroduce a system weighted average for those operating in non-government space assistance.

Now, that's of course, unclear as to whether that is truly Labor policy- I don't know if the same thing was said today by either Mr Shorten or Ms Plibersek. And Ms Plibersek been at pains not to repeat that statement ever since. But if done in isolation, that could distort funding for those in systems relative to those who stand alone. And it's those distortions that we have to be cautious of; to make sure that we will be able to maintain a true, fair, consistent approach, we do hope across the board.

I could tell you that as we approach discussions at present- with the independent school sector and Catholic Education, I and the Turnbull Government remain committed to our principles in ensuring that funding is applied consistently, fairly, independently, according to need, across the different non-government sectors. You all – those in this room, those in Catholic Ed, do a fantastic job in terms of the choices that you offer. We have much more in common than is sometimes acknowledged in media or the press and we want to make sure that you are all strong into the future. And that you are all supported, in terms of your capacity to offer that choice to families. We won't be doing side deals with one or another, we will be talking as we are, as I am with representatives of independent schools and the representatives of Catholic Ed to make sure that our response and our implementation of the recommendations in the recent report of the National Schools Resourcing Board is handled fairly and independently- according to principles that I outlined before as our actions last year were. And that's the way we'll be tackling it and approaching it.

Now I appreciate that the recommendations to change the way the SES score is calculated, create some uncertainty. We firstly deal with 2019. The recommendations don't relate specifically to 2019 in terms of the shift to any use of income data in terms of the calculation of the new SES score. SES Scores in 2019 will still be calculated on the basis of the historic census data. Schools who have made plans based on projections of the funding they expected to receive, as a result of reforms legislated last year, should proceed with confidence in relation to that funding. They should have confidence that they have certainty for next year. Beyond next year, I will also give you a commitment, and that is as we look at a transition to the new use of SES methodology, that needs to be considered in the context of all the other reforms we've legislated last year; most notably that transition to 80 per cent of schooling resource standard. But if we look at the transition, or the shift to that new SES methodology around income data, we will also be very mindful of transition factors; just as we were in the legislation we passed last year. Where we made sure transitions this year over a six to 10-year horizon, we will be singly mindful in terms of the implementation of a new better, more refined SES methodology. We are working closely with your sector to make sure that

concerns about the way in which that data is collated and collected are addressed so that you can all have confidence that the data is a fair representation. If you did not have a chance to have a look at the National Schools Resourcing Board, which incidentally was another significant reform that we've put in place, in terms of ensuring that we acted on that original Gonski Report recommendation. And acting on that recommendation, provided an independent source of advice for our Government and to future governments around the way in which non-government school and government school funding models work and how the Schooling Resource System evolves. If you do not have a look at that report, I urge you to do so; it makes a strong and clear case as to why a shift from a census area of methodology to the use of median income will be more accurate and fairer. We just need to make sure that the transition to it is one in which you are all supported through, and one in which ultimately, non-government education across the board, is stronger as a result of them having an even more robust, even more credible funding model and funding formula.

Of course, I'd rather not find myself spending lots of time talking about funding. It's a topic that dominates, but far more important than funding, as you all appreciate, is what you do with the funding. I'm sure as you've heard, politicians come through the room today and do as we've done in talking about school funding. Many of you have thought the other speakers that you've heard from, talking about reforms and best practice in education; were indeed better and more and more engaging speakers of the day.

What I hope is that not only can we put to bed funding by sticking with our principles, but also over the coming weeks and months where you can chart a new, common, national direction in terms of education reform in Australia. And that common direction is going to be based on the recommendations of the *Through Growth of Achievement* Report that we received this year. That report; charted an opportunity for state governments and federal governments to work together in the area of potential common interest. How it is that we ensure that our curriculum supports the progression of each child to the maximum of their capabilities this year. How it is that we ensure newer school leaders working with skilled staff in your schools, are able to apply tools and curriculum progressions that clearly empower you to be able to see the progress of those children- to ensure that teachers have the best possible advice on what should come next, and to ensure that we get the best result for each child- that we have more high achievers achieving even greater heights, and that we lift the performance across the entire Australian education system. Now I know that many of you are already applying and doing many of the things in the latest Gonski report – *Through Growth of Achievement*. And I hope that as we work to get state and territory governments to work collaboratively and cooperatively across the country on a shared vision into making that report, to those of you who have experience in terms of learning progress, formative assessment tools, the types of recommendations that are embedded in this report, will, share your experiences with us. Will make sure that we pick up the best of what is working, learn from the mistakes of what hasn't, and ultimately deliver practical reforms that can help each and every one of you. We're not looking to wield these reforms as a big stick, we're certainly not looking to seek reform that will create additional learning expectations or administration for those of you in the non-government school sector nor for the hard working school leaders and teachers in the government school sector. But we are looking to create a framework that better empowers everybody to be able to access the types of tools and curriculum that you – those of you who have been doing it for years – have been applied, for those of you who are leading the way, we make sure that similar high quality resources are available to everyone else.

So I hope that when you next meet, whether it's me or a future minister, the discussion is about the progress that is being made, not on school funding, but on implementing the reforms that are outlined, being discussed between ourselves in the states and territories and that by then, several years down the track, we'll be well into their implementation. Those reforms build on our work and we've already started in terms of initial teacher education to try and ensure that those coming out of our universities, are as ready and skilled as possible. And again, I thank you [indistinct], that as you put greater expectations on universities to ensure the classroom readiness of their graduates, that would flow through to you when you take their students into your schools and are expected to assess the way in which those students are learning and progressing. I want you to be honest with those assessments. We want you to make sure you have those close partnerships to be in communities to get the best possible outcomes for your students. And also finally, thank you to the great diversity and spread of innovation that we see, not just in terms of teaching standards and styles, not just the choice that you offer across faith and values and things that are important and the foundational bedrock of our society. But also for what is often unheralded in the education sector, and that is the work that you do across areas of disadvantage, across those who have become disaffected with the education system. Just the other day I had the pleasure of opening You Think; new school in the centre of Adelaide CBD. A new school targeted towards kids that found the education system didn't work for them and have become disaffected, who dropped out and have lost touch with school. You walk past it on the main street- on Hindley Street in the Adelaide CBD and it looks like a coffee shop. You walk inside and you start talking to the children though, and you see that you have there an independent school who's operating under a generous funding model that we've established. But most importantly, is putting those resources to use in terms of tapping in and providing the opportunity to kids that if they were deprived of that opportunity would likely find themselves facing significant challenges in terms of their employability, their future life and may well, of course, run into troubles with the Correction Services, Social Services or otherwise. In some of those gems, the innovation that are outside of the norm that the independent schooling sector allows, the type of structure we have in Australia that allows that choice and innovation is so important for and I thank you all very much for the work that you do across the education landscape. I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that we deliver with the fair, consistent, needs-based funding that we've promised. But most importantly, the best possible education outcomes for our kids. Thanks so much for the chance.