

Submission on the draft report of the Harper Review – Non-confidential

We are Our Children, Our School (OCOS)¹, an alliance of 18 exclusively parent run, grassroots public education campaign groups from metropolitan, regional and rural areas of Victoria. Namely,

1. Beaumaris School Community Group (BSCG)
2. A new school for Bannockburn District
3. High School for Coburg (HSC)
4. Doreen and Mernda Secondary School Alliance
5. Friends of Elwood College
6. Friends of Kyneton Education (FoKE)
7. Nunawading Primary School Site Preservation Group Inc
8. Oakleigh Ward Local Secondary School (OWLSS)
9. High School for Preston
10. Point Cook Action Group
11. Public Education Group (PGR)
12. Reopen Our Schools (Banyule City)
13. Richmond High School Choices (RHSC)
14. Secondary Education for Seddon, Kingsville and Yarraville (SKY High)
15. Restore Strathmore Heights' School Zones
16. TwoSchoolsNow (Port Phillip and Southbank)
17. Northern Mallee School Council Presidents Group
18. Docklands Community Forum

We congratulate the Review Panel for taking an interest in system-wide reform of the education sector. Australian governments have long neglected to make system-wide investments and changes to improve educational outcomes.

No one would deny that Australia is lacking in quality and equity of educational outcomes. Our Children, Our Schools supports the full implementation of Gonski and we support choice. Part of the solution, however, lies well beyond the funding proposals by the Gonski Review.

As parents, we have been forced to mobilise to advocate for better educational outcomes for not only our children, but for all of the nation's children who attend public schools. It had become abundantly clear to us that many parents cannot opt into a public school of their choice. This is primarily because states/territories have highly politicised their actual planning and provision of public primary and particularly public secondary schools—promising to provide adequate funding for only those schools in marginal seats and only at election time.

¹ Please read about us, our aims and more on www.ourchildrenourschools.com.au

OCOS' support of public schools is not only motivated by individual choices for our children but by a conviction that they are 'national building entities' which do the 'heavy lifting' to achieve equity (Davy 2008²) and are one of the primary sources of social cohesion in this country. In particular we are advocates for local public schools.

We would therefore support the emphasis on an intergovernmental agreement to establish choice if it meant an enforceable community standard of and planning for public schools. The fact that public schools have to take all comers means that choice and diversity policies have to date disadvantaged these schools even further. OECD studies have shown over and over again that choice and competition undermine educational outcomes (see Cobbold 2014³). We therefore urge the Harper Review panel to consider the complexities of this matter and involve all education stakeholders and education experts when it deliberates on fundamental changes. Most high performing countries excel because they have a strong and intergovernmental commitment to their public schooling system and fund and staff it accordingly.

Dean Ashenden recently gave *some* pointers as to what would be required to establish an equal playing field across the school systems:

“Consider the constellation of things that would need to be changed in the specific circumstances of Australian schooling for competition to really deliver the educational goods. There would need to be a level playing field, including a Gonski-like needs-based funding floor and a per student expenditure ceiling; a universal no-fee or means-tested fee regime; a focus on competition for performance rather than FOR STUDENTS, including regulation or some other way of managing exclusions, cherry-picking, body snatching and dumping; and agreed educational objectives combined with a common set of benchmarks and indicators.”⁴

Such an equal playing field has not yet been aspired to at any time in Australian history. OCOS hopes that the Review panel understands and fully appreciates the strong preference for public schools amongst Australian parents, despite policy settings encouraging parents to leave the public sector. A prominent example is David Gillespie's 'Free Schools' (2014)⁵, a book which argues that public schools are not only better but also simply better value for money. We also note that whilst NAPLAN has interpreted accountability to make performance comparable, it lacks disclosure of financial information to know how much value adding any school actually does.

² Davy, Vanlyn, 2008, 'Australian schools: social purposes, social justice and social cohesion' (University of Newcastle, Faculty of Education and the Arts, School of Education, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)), available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/34335> [accessed 17 November 2014].

³ Cobbold, Trevor, 2014, OECD says competition in education has failed, The Canberra Times, September 3, 2014, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/oecd-says-competition-in-education-has-failed-20140902-10ba3c.html#ixzz3Jl1M1gMX><http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/oecd-says-competition-in-education-has-failed-20140902-10ba3c.html> [accessed 17 November 2014]

⁴ Ashenden, Dean, 2014, Australian schools: the view from Mars, 24 September 2014, <http://insidestory.org.au/australian-schools-the-view-from-mars> [accessed 16 November 2014]

⁵ Gillespie, David, 2014, Free Schools: how to get a great education for your kids without paying a fortune, Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia

Important points missing from the Draft report are oversight and governance issues. We agree with David Gonski's observation that a state education department which has responsibility for two systems, the government and the non-government schools has an inherent conflict of interest.

For some economists, competition and choice in education are linked with vouchers and the abolition of school zones. We vehemently oppose this view. We support a fully tax funded universal fee-free public school system with an enforceable access to all fundamental participatory and education services, curricula and goods like uniforms, textbooks, laptops, in- and excursions etc. Any system-wide reform has to keep in mind that many children who live in low income households, and especially those reliant on government income, find public schools unaffordable as it is. Many children go to school hungry, so reform has to address poverty and ensure literal universal access as well.

We remind the Review panel that there is little accountability in education. For example, there have been more than 20 reports by the Victorian Auditor General's Office into the lack of performance by the DEECD, yet, no change is apparent. Meanwhile, policies assume parents are consumers of educational services but they still have very little information about the school they choose and also have no access to statutory or industry-based Ombudsmen exclusively concerned with the delivery, equity and performance of educational provision. Yet, an Ombudsman is part of the policy mix in any other industry. OCOS would like to see oversight, performance reviews, transparency and the right to complain as enforceable rights of Australian parents. This would also mean that parents from low SES backgrounds who regularly miss out based on cost barriers to educational participation would have a right to appeal.

Last but not least, we caution against independent and autonomous public school models. OCOS supports the critique by Save Our Schools of the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission 2013 report entitled *Making the Grade: Autonomy and Accountability in Victorian Schools*:

The Minister ignores both the research evidence and Victoria's own school results over the past decade. Victoria has had the most devolved school system in Australia for nigh on 20 years, yet its results are no better than the most centralised system in Australia – NSW – and on some measures they are worse.⁶

⁶ Cobbold, Trevor, 2014, Victorian Report on School Autonomy is Intellectually Bankrupt, Tuesday September 23, 2014, <http://www.saveourschools.com.au/choice-and-competition/victorian-report-on-school-autonomy-is-intellectually-bankrupt> [accessed 17 November 2014]

Overall, OCOS finds that little educational evidence has been cited or discussed in the Victorian and the Harper Reviews so far (see Rowe, 2014 in the Conversation⁷). Access, equity, high quality innovative public schools need to be at the heart of the Review Panel's considerations.

OCOS thanks the Panel for its time and consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

Darren Saffin,

Secretary, Our Children, Our Schools (OCOS)

⁷ Rowe, Emma, 2014, Competition in education, The Conversation, 22 September 2014, <http://theconversation.com/harper-competition-review-seeks-widespread-change-experts-react-31963> [accessed 17 November 2014]