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Gonski2.0: Have Aboriginal children been thrown under the bus of political expedience?

Most participants in the long-standing debate on school funding agree that the present system is unnecessarily arcane and opaque. Platitudes that funding should be needs-based are also getting a good airing. Nonetheless, the discussion has become mired in self-interest and partisan politics.

It is usually the case that the most vulnerable members of society have the softest voices, and in the context of school funding, the meek are not likely to fare well.

The original Gonski report highlighted the link between disadvantage and low levels of educational achievement, and proposed additional funding on the basis of disability, low socioeconomic background, school size, remoteness, the number of Indigenous students, and lack of English proficiency. A number of these categories apply to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

“The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (Congress) negotiated with the government of the day to ensure that in the Gonski report implementation strategy, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students would qualify for additional funding, rather than only those at schools with substantial Indigenous enrolments,” said Rod Little, Congress Co-Chair.

“Congress also supported the insistence by the Commonwealth on accountability so that funding would reach the children for whom it was allocated, rather than being swallowed up by school systems,” he said. The funding formula was based on the needs of individual students. “Congress renews its call for these principles to be upheld in any changes to school funding arrangements.”

“The gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts is widest in the Northern Territory and for students in remote schools. These are precisely the schools that would gain the least under the Gonski 2.0 proposals now under consideration,” said Jackie Huggins, Congress Co-Chair.

“It is not coincidental that under the capable leadership of then Education Minister Adrian Piccoli, NSW as one of the earliest signatories to the first implementation round of the Gonski report has the best achievement in closing the gap in educational outcomes,” she added.

Since its inception, the Closing the Gap strategy has been fundamental to the Commonwealth’s approach to Indigenous Affairs and it has largely enjoyed bipartisan support. The strategy has always included goals to close the educational gap. It appears that once again, the most disadvantaged members of Australian society are about to be shafted in the name of political expedience.

This is not good enough. On behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Congress demands that the nation’s political leaders do better.

The first step to this end should be to work in close collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and leaders. A good place to begin would be to implementing the road map in Congress' education policy, which emphasizes accountability for outcomes.

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