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Senate Select Committee on School Funding Investment
Parliament of Australia
PO Box 6100
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CANBERRA ACT 2600

SUBMITTED ONLINE

Inquiry into the effect of reduced Commonwealth funding for State and Territory schools

Role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 (WA) (the Act)* my statutory functions include advocating for children and young people, and monitoring and reviewing written laws, draft laws, policies, practices and services affecting the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia. I must give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The Act also states that 'In performing a function under this Act the Commissioner or any other person must regard the best interests of children and young people as the paramount consideration.' The role of the Commissioner is independent and reports directly to the WA Parliament.

In the context of the above I offer the following comments specific to the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

Impact of the cuts announced in the 2014-2015 budget

Although delayed in its effect, the budget cuts announced in 2014-2015 will have a significant effect on the lives of children and young people. The changes to the indexation calculations for school funding will essentially dilute the funding available to implement the much needed Gonski reforms. Funding in the order of \$30b has been estimated to be lost over 10 years as a result of these budget cuts.¹

Gonski funding is designed so that every Australian child regardless of their background can get a high quality education. The main finding of the Gonski Report

¹ Commonwealth of Australia 2015, Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts. First Interim Report, pp 31-32, February 2015.



was that too many children were missing out on education they needed due to lack of resources. Another key finding was that Australia was under investing in education and not delivering funding to where it was needed the most. In recent years, the results of international tests of academic achievement have highlighted the relatively poor performance of Australian students.²

Education is a key influence on a child's life. The budget cuts will mean that the issues highlighted in the Gonski Report will remain unaddressed and more young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, will not have the lifelong benefit that a good education provides putting these young people at risk of a range of adverse outcomes.³ This is discussed in more detail below.

Impact on schools and students in regional, rural and remote areas and the impact on students acquiring job skills of the future

Many of the children that will be affected by these budget cuts live in disadvantaged areas including regional, rural and remote areas. Schooling has a strong influence on a child's future pathway into employment and further education.⁴ Research shows poor engagement with school and low school attainment result in poor educational outcomes, diminished employment prospects and, for some, adverse life outcomes, including social exclusion, poverty and involvement with the justice system.⁵ A failure to obtain an education represents both an individual and societal problem.⁶ People who complete year 12 are more likely to be employed, pursue higher education, and earn higher incomes which can benefit whole communities, with ABS figures showing that it's a reliable predictor of future career success for all Australians.⁷

Poor attendance and engagement at school remains problematic among Indigenous students, students from a low socioeconomic status background, and students living in remote areas.⁸ The Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children has also found higher levels of non-attendance among Indigenous children, children from lone-mother

² Australian Scholarship Group & Monash University 2015, *ASG Parents Report Card 2015*, Australian Scholarship Group, p. 5.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, *Australia's welfare 2015*, Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, section 3.4.

⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 162.

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, *Australia's welfare 2015*, Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, section 3.4.

⁶ Gyönös E 2011, 'Early School Leaving: Reasons and Consequences', *Theoretical and Applied Economics, Volume XVIII*, No. 11(564), p. 44.

⁷ Booth A & Thomas J, 'Is the education gap closing? More indigenous students finish year 12 than ever before', *SBS*, Wednesday 4 November 2015, available at <http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2015/11/04/education-gap-closing-more-indigenous-students-finish-year-12-ever>.

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, *Australia's welfare 2015*, Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, section 3.4.



families, children experiencing bullying at school, and children with non-working mothers, than other children.⁹

These budget cuts undermine the intent of the Gonski reforms putting many disadvantaged children and young people (including rural and remote children and young people) on a trajectory of poor school attainment, lack of high school graduation and poor job prospects.

Any related matter

My role as Commissioner includes consulting with children and young people on a range of topics. A recurring finding from the many consultations undertaken by my office is the central importance that schools and education play in the lives of Australian children and young people.

In 2009, my office consulted with 959 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from across WA to obtain their views on what is important to their wellbeing.¹⁰ This consultation found that children and young people value a good education and want struggling students to get the help and support they need.

In 2013 my office collaborated with AWESOME to give more than 260 children and young people from four to 16 years of age living in remote and rural Western Australia the opportunity to express their views about their lives and communities.¹¹ A key finding of this consultation was the importance of teachers and schools to children and young people who live in rural and remote areas. Children and young people generally enjoyed their time at school and described positive relationships with friends and teachers. Some expressed the desire for more or better facilities at school.

Also in 2013, my office consulted with 233 children and young people with disability aged between six and 18 years to obtain their views on the people and places that are important to them, their challenges, and their hopes for the future.¹² Many of these children and young people saw school as important, as having a positive and profound influence on their development, and a place for learning, opportunity, and social interaction. Accessibility issues and lack of supports at school were raised, with some children and young people unable to attend school or found it difficult to keep up with school work.

In 2014, my office consulted 1,271 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people under 18 years old across WA to hear their views about what is important to them, their concerns and aspirations for the future.¹³ Many Aboriginal

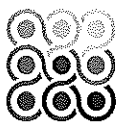
⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, *Australia's welfare 2015*, Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, section 3.4.

¹⁰ See <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/content/Wellbeing-research.aspx>.

¹¹ See <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/content/Creative-Challenge-Partnership.aspx>.

¹² See <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/content.aspx?cId=809>.

¹³ See <http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/content/Consultation-with-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-children.aspx>.



and Torres Strait Islander children and young people expressed a clear understanding of the connection between a good education and a good quality of life, enjoyed being at school and viewed their school as one of the positive things about their community. They also identified a range of barriers that impeded their ability to access school and get a good education.

Finally, last year, my office consulted 296 children and young people from CALD backgrounds to obtain their views on the challenges they confront, their experience of services and the positive aspects of their lives.¹⁴ This consultation stressed the importance, and often difficulty, of learning English. School was often identified as one of the best things about living in Australia. For some, school is very difficult with some identifying they would have liked more support, or believed teachers have lower expectations of them because of their background.

What the findings from all these consultations reflect is the primary role that schools and teachers play in the lives of children and young people. Budget cuts that hinder the realisation of the Gonski reforms have the potential to adversely affect the future lives of children and young people, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As a former educator who has worked extensively in rural and remote schools, I have seen firsthand the profound influence schools have on future outcomes for children and young people and indeed the effect of poorly resourced schools on these outcomes. I recognize the potential that the Gonski reforms have on the education of disadvantaged children and young people and strongly oppose changes to indexation for funding of schools.

I urge the Committee to recommend to the Government to fully and faithfully implement the Gonski reforms including previously agreed funding for schools across Australia particularly those in disadvantaged areas.

Yours sincerely

Colin Pettit
Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA)

16 February 2016

¹⁴ See <http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/content/Consultation-with-CALD-young-people.aspx>.