

# AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS



EDUCATION



POLICY FRAMING  
STATEMENT

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## EDUCATION POLICY

Education is a long-term investment. It is an investment in our economies through its ability to connect students with employment; it is an investment in our communities through encouraging critical thinking and social cohesion; it is an investment in health systems, by educating about risks and benefits of different life choices, and strategies to navigate through different life stages and challenges.

For a proper investment to have a real long-term impact, it requires funding. It also requires those funds to be spent and managed wisely and effectively.

Current discussions around education investment in Australia are centred around the Gonski report and recommendations. The key messages and aspirations contained in this report are relevant and commendable, and the Australian Democrats support them, particularly the need for equitable funding for schools including in rural, regional and remote areas.

### Education Reform

Education reform is needed to meet the complexities of student needs and a rapidly changing society and workforce; however, the framing of the public discourse can be discouraging and create a sense of disillusionment to those in education.

It is important to respect teachers, principles and other education staff as professional people, and avoid simplistic assessments such as 'teachers are not engaging enough' or proposing complete overhauls that in effect, throw the baby out with the bathwater, and fail to recognise the ways schools constantly and actively reflect, adapt and grow.

It is also counter-productive and discouraging is to continually impose additional administrative burdens on teachers, under the guise of monitoring and assuring quality of teaching.

Unfortunately these have been the earmarks of public discourse on education, leading to a feeling there is a lack of support from our political leaders and media. Education *must* evolve and adapt, but this is best guided by the educators and school support staff who live this vocation.

### Inclusive Education

Those in education continue to highlight the need for financial investment - not just for infrastructure including buildings and facilities, but for human resources. It is therefore imperative that financial investment is managed wisely and equitably, without fear or favour, across both the private and public sector. This is especially important if there is to be truly inclusive education that is accessible to every student.

The goal of inclusive education is to ensure every student feels safe, engaged and connected to their learning; a wonderful bi-product is the opportunity for children to learn with others from diverse backgrounds to their own, which helps develop informed citizens, cross-cultural understanding, and social cohesion. Inclusive school communities are also an opportunity for families from diverse backgrounds to have a central community focal point, through the school. However, inclusive education requires adequate resourcing to be effective (if under-resourced and delivered poorly, it can actually cause harm).

To include students with disabilities and other different needs requires teachers to be trained, to be given time to properly differentiate curriculum, and to have SSO-type support both in the classroom and in the preparing of lessons.

To include not just students, but families from culturally-diverse backgrounds including Aboriginal backgrounds, requires resourcing of staff such as Community Liaison Officers who are able to communicate with parents in an appropriate cultural context and help them participate fully in the school community, as well as supporting teachers to understand different cultural ways of learning.

To include students who have experienced trauma requires training for teachers in classroom management strategies, and resourcing in the form of counsellors, psychologists, and case workers.

To include students who have diverse gender or sexual orientation requires teachers to be trained to understand this diversity and a whole-school approach to inclusion, with visible policies regarding bullying and harassment. (This particular area, unfortunately, has been treated as a political football with unscrupulous political / media personalities claiming that teachers are pushing a Marxist agenda, or worse. This beat-up of school workers and insinuation of 'agendas' has been as harmful as it has been effective in getting media attention, and the Australian Democrats unequivocally condemn this tactic to gain political points. Not only does it create mistrust between parents and teachers on an issue where parents and teachers must work together, but it does great harm to the emotional wellbeing of the students in question.)

If the goal is that *every* child, from *every* family, feels welcome and safe at school, and therefore able to focus on their learning, then this needs to be adequately resourced.

## Curriculum

Another aspect of inclusive education is recognising that students have different abilities and skills. It has been positive to see recent recognition that education effectiveness must be measured through student growth. A teacher's and school's performance should not be considered in terms of simply meeting arbitrary standards at the end of the school year; it should be measured in terms of how students have improved, and are able to do so year after year. As a society we must work closely with teachers who are passionate about developing standards and metrics which allow for a useful and practical evaluation of student growth.

Current centralised curriculum pressures can be demotivating for teachers and students alike with excessive junior school work loads and performance standards. It is essential that there is flexibility for educators to meet the specific needs of their communities within the framework of national education standards. Education must be responsive to the needs of the students and considerate of their natural aptitude, cultural and social surrounds. While it is essential to provide the basic foundations in reading, writing and mathematics, it is also essential to make the curriculum relevant. Again, teachers, principals and other education workers are best placed to drive this.

## Assessment and Reporting

Measuring and celebrating student growth is incredibly important, but it is important to be realistic about the skills and expectations that are required in certain fields / jobs. Political culture around education should never put pressure on schools or educational institutions to pretend otherwise. There must be honest assessment of a student's attainment of specific skills, and this includes in tertiary settings. It is dishonest to manipulate data so that schools/tertiary institutions appear to have less failing grades; it does students and the future workforces they are employed in, no favours.

This practice of manipulating assessment data or creating ways to achieve passing grades where standards are not *really* met, would not occur if there wasn't such a cut-throat culture that treats

educational institutions as a competitive marketplace. Education is *not* a business and our institutions should not be treated in this way. Some types of knowledge have value that cannot be measured in dollars.

Some students may never achieve certain skills and standards, but may still as individuals, significantly grow. Schools and tertiary institutions should not be punished or scrutinised for celebrating the individual growth of students, which is a success, while still acknowledging that certain levels of achievement are not attained by everyone - and this is OK.

### Tertiary Education

It is essential to connect students to accessible pathways to employment; which brings us to tertiary and vocational education. Tertiary and vocational education requires similar prioritisation to school education, in recognising it as an investment in our nation. However, education reform has been cannibalised, focusing primarily on primary/secondary schools, leaving vocational and tertiary institutions left to fight for recognition on their own. The Australian Democrats believe vocational and tertiary education is part of the same education system as early childhood and primary/secondary schooling, and must be considered as integral to it. It is not an either/or proposal.

Withdrawing funding from public providers such as TAFE, and then punishing the resulting poor performance with more funding cuts, adds insult to injury. While the private sector has its place, the government must properly invest in the public system to allow it to thrive.

The Australian Democrats are committed to the retention and enhancement of regional universities and adequate support for regional based students.

The Australian Democrats is opposed to the deregulation of fees for government-supported universities. Inadvertently, this only preselects candidates for critical careers based on their parents' wealth rather than their aptitude and talent. It is essential for the nation's competitive capacity that we maintain an education system that does not exclude people's opportunity for education based on socioeconomic demographics.

### Regional Considerations

Our view is that equal opportunity to education is a key component of regional liveability. There are significant and quite unique issues facing rural and remote people in regards to education.

The distance to primary and secondary education facilities presents a particular challenge to many families. Increasing numbers of rural and regional people are being forced to leave their vocation or split their family unit to be able to afford and/or access education for their children. For many, the standard of education facilities in their community is not adequate for their children to realise their academic potential. The social cost to the family and community is untenable.

Across Australia, rural communities/electorates have shifted from some of the highest socioeconomic demographics to most of the lowest. This has coincided with government cuts to rural and regional education facilities based solely on numbers. The strategic importance of retaining people and excellent teachers in rural and regional centres based on the economic significance of the output of those regions, must be taken into account in the funding rationale.

The cost of school attendance in rural regional areas is disproportionately high. The isolated children's allowance is a useful concept for boarding school attendance, but has not kept up with the

increase in costs associated with school attendance, and is not relevant at all to non-boarding school attendance costs.

Similarly, tertiary education for rural and regional based students who must live away from home to study is disproportionately expensive to other urban based students. While some students choose to live away from home, most rural and regional students have no choice. This is a significant barrier to entry and completion of qualifications.

If the government is truly committed to regional development, they will recognise that people who train in regional centres are more likely to work in regional centres, and actively invest in enabling this to happen.

## Conclusion

The principles put forth in this discussion paper centre are underpinned by the need for adequate funding with the understanding that this is a long-term investment, aiming for benefits that will not be seen within an election cycle. The Gonski recommendations provide a clear framework for this funding, but disagreements between public/private sectors have hobbled their implementation. Again, the Australian Democrats re-state our stance that funding must be equitable across all sectors, without fear or favour.