Elite Melbourne Private Schools to Get Big Funding Windfalls from Turnbull Government



Several wealthy Melbourne private schools are set to get large windfall gains from the Turnbull Government's Gonski 2.0 funding model after revisions to their assessed student need. Many of the schools will get increases of $1-$3.2 million between 2018 and 2027 because their student need has been revised upwards. Yet, about 75% or more of the students in these schools are from the most advantaged families in Victoria.

Lauriston Girls' School is the biggest winner with an increase of $3.2 million. Bialik College will get an increase of $2.7 million, Shelford Girls' Grammar $2.6 million, Scotch College $2.4 million, St. Michael's Grammar $1.9 million, Strathcona Girls' Grammar $1.4 million and St. Catherine's School $1 million [see Chart 1]. Other increases include $0.9 million for Korowa Girls' School and $0.5 million for the small primary school Christ Church Grammar in South Yarra.

These funding increases are much larger than those planned under the previous assessments of need. The 9 schools will receive just over $9 million more than they would have under the previous needs assessment. The increase for Lauriston is over 10 times more than it would have received. The increase for Christ Church Grammar is over 4 times that originally estimated, the increase for St. Catherine's is over 3 times its original estimate, the increase for Bialik College is over double its original figure and that for Strathcona is nearly double.

The funding increases are the result of revised Schooling Resource Standards (SRS) for these schools. As a result, the current Commonwealth Government funding shares of the SRS are much lower than in the previous assessment and it means larger funding increases to get the schools up to the Commonwealth target of funding private schools at 80% of their SRS, with the remaining 20% left to state/territory governments.

The different assessments of student need are revealed in data on the Commonwealth Government share of SRS estimated for 2017 previously provided to the Senate Estimates in an Answer to a Question on Notice (AQON shares) and new data on the 2018 shares provided in response to a FOI application by the Australian Education Union (FOI shares). For example, the Commonwealth funding share of SRS for Lauriston has been revised downwards from 102.3% to only 49.6% [Chart 2]. Other large revisions include Christ Church Grammar from 98.8% down to 66.9%, Bialik College from 86.5% to 55.5%, St. Catherine's from 92% to 67.7% and Shelford Grammar from 72.4% to 52.6%.

The revisions will result in very large amounts of Commonwealth Government funding for many of these schools by 2027.

Scotch College will be receiving just over $8 million in Commonwealth funding in 2027, St. Michael's Grammar $6.3 million, Lauriston $5.9 million, Bialik College $5.6 million and Shelford Grammar just over $5 million, and Strathcona $4 million.

These are some of the most elite schools in Melbourne. They are high fee, wealthy schools serving some of the most privileged families in Victoria. The level of student need is very low. The My School website shows that each school had about 75% or more of its students from the top quarter of socio-educationally advantaged (SEA) families in 2016 [Chart 3]. They have no students or very few from the bottom SEA quarter. For example, 87% of students at Christ Church Grammar are from the top SEA quarter and none from the bottom quarter; Korowa has 85% of its students from the top SEA quarter and none from the bottom and Lauriston has 83% from the top quarter and none from the bottom. None of the 9 schools have any Indigenous students.

According to the Commonwealth Education Department, the dramatic increase in funding has largely been driven by these schools reporting significantly higher numbers of students with a disability. This seems unbelievable. According to data provided to Senate Estimates in July, the number of students with disabilities in these schools was very low in 2017 [Senate Education and Employment Committee, Question on Notice No. SQ17-000796, Budget Estimates 2017-2018]. For example, Korowa and St. Catherine's has less than 6 disability students, Christ Church has 11, Lauriston has 12 and Shelford has 14. They represent only 1-3% of total enrolments in these schools. It would require a massive change in the number of disability students in only one year to drive such a huge change in the Commonwealth funding share of the SRS of these schools.

The dramatic increase in disability enrolments is due to changes in how disability is assessed and funded in schools following the introduction of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). The assessment of disability has changed from a medical assessment and certification to a school assessment. TheGuidelines for the NCCD state that under the new approach teachers and school staff of a school will use their professional judgement to determine the level of adjustment students with disability receive as well as the broad category of disability of the student.

The new arrangements for funding disability students are open to rorting because of the large funding loadings and because schools themselves determine their number of disability students and submit the figures to the Commonwealth Department of Education. There are now three categories of funding – supplementary, substantial and extensive. In 2018, the additional loading for a disability student in the supplementary category is $4,600, $15,991 for a student in the substantial category and $34,173 for a student in the extensive disability category. The loadings for disability students in secondary schools are slightly less. Clearly, schools could gain substantial increases in funding by inflating their enrolments of disability students.

Under this new system, Independent schools in Victoria have reported huge increases in the number of disability students. A confidential report to a Joint Working Group of the national education ministers' council shows that Independent schools in Victoria reported that 26% of their students had a disability under the new definitions in 2016, with 29% in primary schools having a disability and 24% in secondary schools. These are by far the highest proportions of disability students of any school sector in any state in the country. By comparison, public schools in Victoria reported 17% (17% in primary schools and 16% in secondary schools) and Catholic schools 13% (14% in primary schools and 13% in secondary schools).

Not all these students are eligible for disability funding loadings because there is a category of students determined not to need educational support beyond that reasonably expected as part of quality teaching or school practice to address disability related needs. However, the percentage eligible for additional funding under the new arrangements in Independent schools in Victoria is significantly higher than in other sectors and much higher than under the previous disability funding arrangements. The report to the Joint Working Group revealed that 12.7% of Victorian independent school students were eligible for disability funding in 2016 compared with 10.6% of public school students and 8.9% in Catholic schools. This contrasts with the previous funding arrangements whereby only 2.5% of Independent school students were funded disability students in 2016, compared to 5.6% in public schools and 4.7% in Catholic schools (based on data provided to Senate Estimates). Under the new arrangements, disability students eligible for Commonwealth funding in Independent schools in Victoria is five times more than under the previous arrangements compared with an increase of less than two times for public and Catholic schools.

This is an incredible increase in the percentage of students with a disability in Independent schools in Victoria. The executive director of Catholic Education Melbourne, Stephen Elder, has described the new disability data as "dodgy". He told The Age that "Education Minister Simon Birmingham is letting wealthy independent schools – the biggest backers of his funding policies – game the system". He said public funding for students with a disability would now be steered towards schools with "the most creative data collection practices" and away from students who need it.

> No one believes the new disability data is credible. It inherently favours wealthy schools… [they] can afford to make more adjustments for their students – and they also have the staff to complete all the paperwork.

Independent schools refuse to divulge their enrolments of disability students. For example, Lauriston principal Susan Just told The Age that the data the school collected on students with a disability was confidential. The arrogance is breathtaking. Clearly, these elite private schools believe they should not be accountable for their taxpayer funding. It is indefensible for

wealthy private schools to claim confidentiality when they are due to receive million dollar increases in taxpayer funding resulting from their reporting huge increases in disability students. Independent schools in Victoria must be required to justify why they have the highest percentage of disability students in the country.

The Commonwealth Department of Education has previously provided the number of disability students enrolled in various private schools. It should publish the revised figures under the new funding arrangements for disability students. The Senate Estimates hearings later this month should request the new disability enrolments for each private school and aggregate enrolments by sector and state from the Department of Education.

An independent audit of enrolments of disability students by Independent private schools should be undertaken. The new system is open to rorting, the huge increases in disability students in Independent schools are not believable and there is a very real possibility that future funding increases will not be directed at those most in need.

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Save Our Schools

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