Big cuts to West Australian schools

If schools don't have enough resources, they can't provide a full education for their students.

In WA, we're not getting Gonski, we're seeing budget cuts, especially to High Schools, which are hitting disadvantaged schools hard and letting down our students.

I have been involved with the Morley Senior High School, in the eastern suburbs of Perth, for about eight years, and I am currently the School Board's chair. I got involved because I wanted to see outcomes improved across the school.

Our school is made up of students who speak 68 languages at home. Many of our kids have parents who are migrants and are working hard to establish themselves financially in Australia. Those parents don't have the time or skills to be able to advocate for their school, so it's important that we do it on their behalf as a School Association.

The best way to support our students, and make sure their needs are being met, is to make sure the school is in a proper financial state. We've had some successes in lobbying the Education Department for funds in recent years, which is crucial because we had barely been getting enough for basic building maintenance and the core of the school is about 45 years old. One of our successes has been to convince the Education Department to upgrade 40 year old toilet block – before that you didn't want to go into them.

Hits to school budgets

But in the last year our recurrent budget has also been hit.

WA has signed a Gonski agreement – and has supposedly shifted to a "Student Centred Funding Model" - but schools like ours, which have low-SES students and many from non-English speaking backgrounds are still going backwards.

Like one-third of other schools across WA, we were given a last minute cut to our 2015 budget just before Christmas. Our cut was $69,000 and came on top of the $250,000 cut to our 2015 budget that had already been announced.

On top of that we have also lost our chaplain, who was part of our team of counsellors and support staff which plays a big role in ensuring children have someone to talk to about problems at school or at home, something which helps take pressure off our teaching staff.

It's hard for us to understand how the new funding model works. It is based on six categories of student need, but what we are not told is how these categories are weighted, so it's a kind of fake transparency. If they want to cut budgets, they can simply change how they weight the categories to deliver that result.

> This is not what the Gonski reforms are supposed to be about, and many needy High Schools, not just ours, are getting cuts to funding this year.

Students missing out

This year's cuts will make it even tougher for us to provide a fully-rounded education for our students.

The lack of funding means that we have very little on offer in the way of arts and humanities. There's no music, dance or drama program, and limited extra-curricular sporting events. I don't see these things as luxuries, they are an essential part of an education. They are also important for integrating children of different backgrounds into school life.

I'd also like to see us have more activities after school. From 3.30pm, the school is a ghost town, because we don't have the funding to run sports or chess clubs or things like that but with proper funding we could set these things up and provide more opportunities for students, as in the case in better-resourced schools.

The other change the State Government is pushing is a shift in funding from High Schools to Primary Schools. They are saying that we need more resources to go to Primary Schools for early intervention programs.

> That's not real reform, or needs-based funding, it's just shifting money around. There's also a totally false logic behind it – that somehow there are no children arriving in High Schools with extra needs!

In fact we are seeing increasing numbers of students arrive at our school with intellectual disabilities, autism, or other conditions which require support staff or individual education plans.

Also, from talking to Primary School principals in our areas they are not seeing any extra money flow to their schools, so where is it going?

We have one line school budgets in WA. That means that when you approach the Education Department to ask something, their mantra is "you can take it out of your one line budget" this is not autonomy, it's just a lack of support.

My question to the WA Government is: how many more cuts are we expected to take?

Cutting funds to public schools is short-sighted

Our school, and a lot of others, have done well in rallying the community around and raising our own funds, but it will never be enough to replace what has been cut. There are also schools that don't have that depth of community support, who have to deal with budget cuts without help.

The frustration for us is that when we have the resources we can do great things with them. For example, we are one of four schools in WA which runs an aviation program. Aviation is highly demanding and students learn maths, science and geography at a high level. Over 80 per cent of the graduates go on to seek a career in aviation, so the program is giving students direction and preparing them for work. Sadly, this program is under threat of being stripped of its ATAR status because the Department believes there are too few students studying it in WA.

> Under-investing in our public schools is not only unfair to disadvantaged students, it is incredibly short-sighted. This is an under-investment in the social fabric of our community.

I believe that if these cuts continue disadvantaged schools will head down a road of under-funding, amalgamations and closures which will end up being incredibly costly because it will reduce our capacity to provide quality public education.

Public school capacity will be a big issue in Perth in the coming years as the money from the mining boom dries up and more students go to the public system – I wonder if our Education Department and our government are ready for that?

Jack Garber
Chair of the Morley SHS School Board

Visit: I Give A Gonski

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