THE HON PETER GARRETT MP  
Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth

ADDRESS TO THE BLOOMBERG BUSINESS BREAKFAST  
SYDNEY  
19 NOVEMBER 2012  
*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

Introduction

Let me start with some thanks.

First to David Gonski for his continuing advocacy for the big school reform project he has given to the nation in his landmark report.

As David will no doubt tell you, setting out to transform huge public organisations like school systems, with their long institutional histories and sectoral interests, is hard.

It’s tempting for anyone who spends so much time thinking through what needs to be done, to put his or her name to a report, hand it over to the government, and then just let the debate take its course.

The easiest thing to do would be to say, well, the public wasn’t ready, or the parliament couldn’t agree, or the organised opposition was just too strong, but history will vindicate my plan.

Well, David hasn’t done that.

He knows that school reform isn’t just an intellectual exercise. He knows that it’s necessary to reflect our nation’s values and ensure our country has the sort of prosperous, sustainable and harmonious future its people want.

And he knows also that achieving that reform takes the full commitment of heart and soul.

As those of you who have read the report of his panel and seen his persistent advocacy will know, he has followed through with the sort of guts and energy and public spirit that deserves the nation’s thanks. So please give him a big round of applause.

The second lot of people I want to thank are each of you for coming here this morning to express your support for change.

I’m guessing you’re here for a reason – because you know that the country’s future depends on the ability of our schools to impart knowledge, skills and creativity to the next generation.

Also, because many of you are parents as well as businesspeople, you care not only about your own children, but also about the less fortunate children of this country who deserve a chance to shine and succeed and enjoy the great things about being an Australian.
I don’t think we are being true to our nation’s values if we leave unfortunate kids behind in our wake as we grow and prosper.

I want to say to all of you: you’ve made the right decision to throw your support behind the campaign for school reform.

And over the coming weeks you are going to see a government backing your beliefs and hopes with the first important legislative steps that will see the Australian Government commit to a new wave of school reform, including a new funding system to get us there.

Within the bounds of the possible, the government hopes to implement some significant achievements that will repay your hopes and your expectations.

Rising to the challenge

For a long time now, our debates about schools policy have been based on old and out-dated divisions that I believe have reached their use-by date.

Whilst a few still cling to arid us vs them positions, as I’ve travelled around our schools talking to parents, what I’ve heard is that they want to get over those old divisions and address the real educational issues that confront their families, their schools and the country.

If we think the electorate is divided on the big issues here, it’s nothing compared to the divisions in America.

Watching the U.S. presidential election play out a couple of weeks ago anyone would have been struck by the fundamental philosophical divisions it exposed.

Responding to this in his great unifying speech on the night of the election result President Obama said “we are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions” and that nations work best when their people “accept certain obligations to one another and future generations.”

When it comes to school education in Australia we are already well on the way to a new national consensus on our national education aspirations.

This has been brought on, in part, by sustained increased investment accompanied by significant nationwide reforms, including the My School website, the National Curriculum, National professional standards for teachers, applied focus on literacy and numeracy and for the first time provisioning schools for the digital future.

For the last five years we’ve managed to get representatives of all school systems, all faiths, all states and all territories, to sit down and work through some strong disagreements and jurisdictional jealousies that have been preventing our schools from being all that they can be.

And now we are working on a plan that takes this effort forward along a new path previously considered too difficult, too contentious.

We’ve understood that improving our schools is about fulfilling obligations to ourselves and to each other. It’s about lifting everyone up so we can face the challenges of the future as individuals, local communities and a country.

Those blessed by extreme talent and fortunate birth must be supported so they can continue to excel.
And those kids who face hurdles to reach their best must be lifted to a higher level of achievement.

**Education – our biggest chance of success**

For Australia this is all about making sure every single student can succeed to best of his or her ability. It’s about creating health, happiness and a high standard of living. And it’s about nurturing a highly skilled citizenry capable of unlocking our productive capacity.

This is how we will succeed in the Asian century.

Can our country rise to the level required?

Of course we can. And I’m confident we will.

When you look at the future that’s unfolding, it’s obvious that education is our biggest chance of success.

And I’m not just talking about increasing our proficiency in Asian languages – crucial though that obviously is.

It’s about remaining the masters of our own national destiny by raising the general levels of our knowledge and skills and creativity.

In the future it is those who are best educated who will be in the best position to create prosperity that is sustainable. They will create the science others will use, the applications others will consume, the culture others will enjoy, and the skills the world will pay for.

As I said, I’m confident Australia will be among the top of these smartest nations. But it is not a given.

Whilst we underinvested in the Howard years, others made education a national priority.

In the 2000 round of PISA testing, only one country outperformed Australia in reading and mathematical literacy, and only two countries outperformed us in scientific literacy.

But in the latest round we were outperformed by six countries in reading and scientific literacy, and by 12 countries in mathematical literacy. Most of the countries outperforming us were in Asia.

Our own mean scores in these subjects have fallen, while the mean scores of the highest performers have gone up.

The educational rise of Asia, once debated only in education circles and covered in the educational supplements, is now obvious to everyone every day of the week.

And it is manifesting itself in surprising ways. Not just in the thirst for overseas student places in our universities. And not just in amazing technological advances coming from our part of the world. In Bollywood films and South Korean pop stars we see cultural and commercial penetration on a wider scale than ever before.

So right across the board – in maths, science, literacy and creativity – we need to be better equipped, we have to do better.

The question is how?
The Australian genius – excellence and equity together

We all know the answer to that – it’s about each and every student. We have to raise up every student, whether they’re already doing well, or could do better.

I know there are some who see this mission as some sort of code for levelling down.

That’s just the sort of negative thinking that’s got to go from our public debates about Australian schools.

If we are going to succeed in this we need to keep two positive thoughts in our heads at the same time. We must strive for excellence for our high achievers, and we must strive for success for those who are failing. These are not contradictory aims – they are complimentary aims. We are at our absolute best as a nation when we think this way.

It’s my firm belief that those two ideas of excellence and equity placed together comprise the essence of the Australian genius in the 21st century.

Our genius has been to create a national community of equal citizens. Equal – not just in theory as in some other nations – but in reality.

And today being equal in reality means going to a great school, whether it is independent, Catholic or public, where the support and the practices are in place to lift each and every student.

If we don’t pursue this approach with every ounce of our effort, by improving every school, then we are potentially making one of the biggest mistakes in our nation’s history.

Now this isn’t just about character; it’s also about hard-headed economics.

Improving schools and improving productivity

Lifting up every child by improving every school is the best way to create a more productive and wealthier country. The PwC report on your table this morning outlines just what is at stake.

The conclusions it reached are dramatic.

Increasing the year 12 completion rates to the national target of 90 per cent would increase our workforce productivity rate by 0.6 per cent per year between now and 2040, and lift our GDP by 0.65 per cent.

If we improve our schools to be competitive with those of world leader Finland, over the life of a child born in 2012, our plan would generate an extra $3.6 trillion for the national economy.

Conversely, doing nothing, and accepting our trend decline in the rankings of educational performance would drag our GDP levels down by $1.5 trillion over the life of a child born today.

This striking analysis points to the fact that our economic future is tied directly to our education capacity. Our young people are our most important resource.

Well educated, confident, and creative they can and will make business success, and with that our national success as well.
So the Gonski Report made the challenge very clear – we must act on what we now know with no uncertainty.

Too many students are being left behind at school and we are not keeping pace with our international competitors.

Responding to this challenge is a social and economic challenge – we have to keep Australia’s educational performance in the top rank of the world or pay the price in falling living standards.

The Government is determined that we will.

A National School Improvement Plan

The first stage of the legislative changes to put in place these reforms will be introduced to the Parliament in the last week of this month.

It will provide the foundation for a National Plan for School Improvement that will have as its goal making Australian one of the top five countries in the world in reading, science and mathematics by 2025.

It will set up the framework for a new school funding model.

A model that puts the needs of students in the centre: that adopted nationally will ensure every school – regardless of sector – has the funding it needs to deliver an excellent education for all students.

This model is based on the core recommendations of the Gonski Review – a benchmark funding amount for every student with additional funding to address educational disadvantage.

It’s a model with widespread support – because it’s consistent, transparent and fair.

This model will require additional investment – from all governments. And to achieve the national goals will require that money to be invested in the areas we know work to lift results.

It will require the best teachers – which is why our aim will be to recruit teachers from the top 30% of the country in literacy and numeracy. And why graduate teachers will receive more on-the-job experience, more preparation time, more training in practical knowledge, and why their progress as teachers will be aided, assessed and rewarded.

It will require great school leadership – which is why school principals will be given more say over hiring and budget decisions and why they too will be supported to achieve better results.

And it’s why each school will need a School Improvement Plan which lays out clearly the steps it is taking to improve student learning, ensure student wellbeing and provide teachers with the opportunity for continual improvement in the classroom.

As the Government has insisted from the start, the release of more diverse and richer forms of information about school performance to parents will maintain pressure from the community level for local schools to get better and better.

Taken in totality, this represents a fulsome response to David Gonski’s report.

More than that, it comprises a next wave of reform that will work because it liberates the energy of schools through increased autonomy, flexibility and leadership.
It has the potential to take us far beyond the significant milestones we have already reached through recent reforms like our National Partnerships program on low-socio-economic-status schools, our computers in schools program, our new national curriculum, and the capital improvements of the Building the Education Revolution investments.

A new generation of parents want action

This is the sort of school improvement the community is demanding. The conclusions of the Gonski Report reflect not just the assessment of educational experts and policy makers, but also the intuitive yearning of everyday Australians.

Many schools were examined and 7000 submissions were received.

The story was the same across Australia. Parents ‘got it’ automatically. They understood clearly that we can’t go on as a nation allowing so many schools and so many children to fail.

They know that most people don’t have the option of paying for a place in a high-performing non-government school, or moving to the catchment zone of a high-performing government school.

And if they can afford to pay for these things, in some cases it is putting them under enormous financial stress. As we know, fees for some schools are now more than the annual minimum wage.

But above all, it is clear that parents understand – regardless of state, sector or school – that the price of letting young people fail will eventually have to be paid in higher expenditure on remedial health, welfare and law enforcement programs placing greater pressure on our taxation system.

The same message was heard loud and clear from Australian business.

Now it’s obvious there are many differing views in the business community about things like tax rates and workplace relations. But one thing I have never heard an Australian businessperson say is that education doesn’t matter.

In fact the voice of business through the BCA, ACCI, AiG and a range of other national organizations has been clear, these reforms are seen as necessary and in the national interest.

Just as parents ‘get’ that every child needs to succeed to build a strong community, businesspeople ‘get’ that every child needs to succeed to build a stronger and more productive economy.

This isn’t ideology – it’s plain, observable, unarguable fact.

But reform of this magnitude cannot be delivered by Governments in isolation.

Once-in-a-generation reforms such as this, are challenging, and so, need the voice and support of business and the wider community.

Because, ultimately we all have a stake in getting this agenda for school improvement right.

We will all be the beneficiaries of a more highly skilled, innovative, engaged and creative workforce.
Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, the parents of the children who started secondary school in 2012 were born around 1970.

They started high school in around 1982.

They were the first generation to benefit from the mass higher education programs begun by the Hawke Government in 1983.

And they have been joined by new migrants who put their children’s success at school before all else.

Together, these people form the first generation in Australian history to whom success at school is the norm not the exception.

Whether working class, middle class or upper class; country or city; Indigenous or other; they are the first generation who know that leaving school early leaves few pathways for their children to get a good life.

They’re not old money, or new elites; Howard’s battlers or aspirationals. They’re just Australians who send their kids to school and want the best for them.

That new generation of parents now expects action to create better schools. They need us to work together to give it to them. To listen to each other. To cooperate. To reform.

My question for us here this morning, and for our political system is: Are we going to listen to them?

Are we going to rise above the old fights about public versus private?

Are we going to see business come together, with community and with government and make these reforms happen now we can see the future in our hands.

Are we going to end the old way of thinking about our schools which says that it’s OK for some to fail because plenty of others will succeed?

Are we going to accept our obligations to one another and to future generations by building better schools for all our children?

Ladies and gentlemen, those are the questions that confront us today.

We need to answer them with a resounding ‘yes’.

Thank you.

Minister’s Media Contact: Lisa Miller 0419 124 717