

# Transcript

## Deborah Cameron ABC 70.2 interview with Stephen O'Doherty

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DEBORAH CAMERON: Now the launch of the new My School website this morning will invite many comparisons a lot of them totally unfair. The top of the table compared with the bottom of the table. Rich schools might even try and sell themselves as not that lucky at all. You already hear them say it occasionally, 'oh these facilities—more of an accident of history really, than anything we do today.' You can hear them saying it. You might hear also: 'poor schools—now they'll be allocated a space at the bottom of inevitable leagues tables,' that I dare say will be compiled today in news rooms around Australia and published, the first of them, tomorrow. But these ideas also play into wider considerations—the Government's commission the Chancellor of University of NSW, David Gonski, he's also a prominent business executive and philanthropist, to head an enquiry into education funding. It's due to report later this year. One of the organisations to make a submission to that enquiry is Christian Schools Australia, Stephen O'Doherty is the CEO of CSA. He's also a former Shadow Minister for Education in NSW. He joins me now.

Stephen, good morning.

*STEPHEN O'DOHERTY: Good morning, Deb.*

Now we will be tempted to compare extremes today, but I suppose it's the average that you should seek to try and understand in amidst all the confusion about the funding of schools in Australia. What should we be looking for as a fair and average mean of funding?

*Well it's very interesting if you take the averages that have already been published for government schools, the catholic school sector and the independent schools – there's actually not a lot of variation on the average numbers between what's spent in governments and what's spent in independent schools. The people who talk about schools with massive amounts of money to spend on kids – the figures just don't show that. Even taking into account the very substantial proportion of parental income that's spent in independent schools—more than the half of the income that independent schools spend on schools comes from parents, that's what these figures show—even taking that into account, the difference between the amount available to spend on kids in non-government schools compared to government schools is still only in the order of \$2-\$3000. Now I'm not saying that's not a large amount of money, but these figures don't show the massive inequity that the critics of school choice have spoken about over many years.*

Well let's look at what we should aim to achieve with education in the first place. The idea of delivering a well-equipped high school graduate into the job market, into university or just into their future, ready for anything. Now what should we be aiming to do here with most students in Australia?

*Yeah, and by the way, being able to contribute to their culture and to the society around them, as citizens. Those are also very important non- job outcomes.*

*What we're saying to Gonski is – in fact his terms of reference say – try to establish a benchmark, an international benchmark, for what it costs to educate a student in the best way possible. Compare Australia to the best we see in the OECD. Come up with a number that we can all use as the basis of funding because funding in Australia, historically has been what can the government afford and then let's index that - let's add to it over the years and argue about how the cake is divided up. We've never really sat back and said 'what does it cost to educate a child to an international standard'. We'll like Gonski to do that analysis first.*

*We'd then like to take that number and say 'well of the money that goes to government schools and goes to non-government schools, how is it being used to that purpose? Are we getting an efficient expenditure of the money that goes into the systems?' Because, as you've said, these are billions of dollars worth of tax payer's funds being spent in a variety of ways to educate Australian kids in a number of settings. We ought to be getting value for money.*

Now the Australian Bureau of Statistics acknowledges a lack of information even at the OECD comparison level around education so it's very hard to judge where Australia's spending resides and putting it in fair company. But the OECD does say that Australia ranks about 7<sup>th</sup> in terms of population with tertiary education qualification. We're not at the top of table in other words. What else do you need to examine when you look at value for money in education?

*You do need to be looking at entry level scores for kids and the things around a child within their environment. Look; to cut to the chase, when MySchool is published and people start comparing the socio-economic advantage index, ICSEA, with the results achieved by the kids in the NAPLAN tests, just leaving aside the income for a moment, when they compare those things they'll find that in Australia we still have a fairly predictable pattern: that if your parents were well-educated you're more likely to do better at school. Now, people will say that's not a profound finding, but in a sense it kind of is. Now let's come back to the income question—these figures that are out there today will show that, by and large, more money goes to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, so the system is actually, by and large, working. The things the governments wanted to achieve with the distribution of funds, by and large, are being achieved, in terms of the way the money is spent so kids in lower communities are, by and large, getting more government spending, wherever they go to school. But do they get better outcomes— the answer generally speaking is that they don't. So what's Australia doing wrong, or what's it not doing right? To be able to use education as an emancipatory tool to make sure that those kids who come from impoverished backgrounds have similar sorts of outcomes compared to their innate intelligence levels because I think we're kind of saying that they ought to have every opportunity to do well, but still year after year, Australia just discovers that they don't. That the best predictor of how the child will do at school still relates to the education level of their parents.*

Now, tax payers will also be drawn to look at the amount of funds going to schools which already have magnificent resources and who have lines of generous benefactors, private benefactors and other sources of income. What do you think will happen if those schools lose a percentage of tax payer support?

*Well let's just look for a moment of what these figures do show us. The average spending from all government sources in non-government schools, or in independent schools, is \$6300. Those schools then raise an additional on average \$8200 from their parents in order to educate their kids. So government funding in independent schools on average is \$6300 per pupil. Government funding on average in government schools is \$10,600 per student. So when I said earlier the formula was working ...it is! Accepting that all students ought to have something spent on their education by the State or by the public purse, if you like, by and large, government funding is going to government schools—*

And I accept what you say, and I also accept exactly what you said about the amount of money that goes those with greatest disadvantage and that the government is weighting its funding to those schools but the question concerns those with the most magnificent resources – if they suffer a percentage loss what will it mean to them? Nothing? Or something?

*They'll have to raise more money from their parents to educate the kids. They'll have to put their fees up. That's the bottom line. And they will. And all that will happen is the gap between those – fewer people will be able to go to those kinds of schools. Now my friends in the public education system will say 'well so what?' – but look there's got to be some fairness here. You can't look at a big building that was built with sandstone 100 years ago and say that's going to produce educational outcomes; buildings don't produce outcomes.*

*By the way, the schools that I represent, the Christian schools they've got a massive task in just building basic facilities because they've been going from nothing in 1970-something, through to very moderately resourced but very effective educational institutions today. They're teaching in transportable building and temporary buildings and just starting to put up permanent buildings – so there's a bit of capital works going on in the low fee independent schools sector. But you got to be very careful before you say 'look a school with two swimming pools doesn't need any government funding to spend on teachers' – well, buildings don't make good educational outcomes.*

Thank you very much for your thoughts this morning, Stephen.