

GRATTAN'S CIRCUIT-BREAKER

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The tirelessly constructive Grattan Institute has proposed a bold and ingenious 'circuit-breakers' for the vexed question of schools funding.²

Targeting the December 16 meeting of state and federal education ministers, the proposal comes in three parts:

1. Instead of spending billions on indexed funding increases which are no longer justified by cost or inflation increases, hold the money back and spend it where it will make an educational difference.
2. Specifically, allocate the money to schools in greatest need – ie those with high concentrations of educationally disadvantaged students – and to 'Master Teachers' and 'Instructional Leaders' to 'improve teaching effectiveness in maths, science, English and other fields'.
3. Put the development of funding formulae, and public reporting on 'funding outcomes', in the hands of a new, independent, national body.

The proposal is strongest where it follows Gonski's lead and weakest where it does not.

On the latter: Gonski wanted all extra funding to go through the school gate so that decision-making (and responsibility) would be in the hands of those who actually have to do the job.³ That approach had its problems of its own, but Grattan's proposal to spend a substantial fraction of the freed-up money on two new teaching categories is much more problematic.

Those with long memories will recall the 'Advanced Skills Teacher' category, promoted and accepted in the early 1990s as the key to professionalising teaching and lifting effectiveness. It did neither. There is no such thing as a single measure capable of making a significant difference to teaching effectiveness or schooling outcomes, and Grattan's silver bullet would not be a priority even in a comprehensive strategy. It is, moreover, unlikely to appeal to school authorities, and distracts by introducing industrial issues into a debate about funding.

Fortunately the Master Teacher/Instructional Leader idea is not core to Grattan's plan. Here the problem is political viability rather than educational desirability.

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² Goss P and Sonnemann J, [Circuit Breaker - a new compact on school funding](#), Grattan Institute, 27.11.16.

³ Boston K, [What Gonski really meant, and how that's been forgotten almost everywhere](#), *Inside Story*, 6.1.16.

One obstacle is in the political clout of the two sectors and many schools (about half of the total) that would get smaller funding increases under the regime proposed, and in the small but powerful group of 'over-funded' schools which would actually lose money.

Another problem is within government itself. Grattan's suggestion may well appeal to the federal government as a way to meet the widespread demand for needs-based funding without adding to its commitments. But to the states? The proposal would require some to lift their spending and all to agree to a national scheme, something they have been willing to do only when there is more money on the table (*vide* the Whitlam/Karmel settlement of 1973) and even then, not necessarily (*vide* Gonski).

Neither the states nor the Commonwealth's bureaucrats will be receptive to talk of an independent national body which intrudes on their prerogatives. Gonski's 'national schools resourcing body' was the first of many his proposals to be knocked out. Grattan is correct in seeing such a body as essential, but it could succeed only with strong and sustained federal government backing.

Grattan's proposal - the master teacher and instructional leader component apart - deserves and will need every support, but it is important not to oversell what it represents. Even in the unlikely event of acceptance in full, this proposal would not 'end Australia's toxic school funding debate' as Grattan and others have suggested.

Over a period of 150 years or more that illusion has been entertained by an illustrious company headed by Gough Whitlam himself.⁴ The durability and toxicity of the problem rests on the fee/free distinction and on a regulatory regime which permits some schools to select and exclude whomever they like while forbidding others to select or exclude anyone. Those structural problems rest in turn on governance of the schooling system, divided between two levels of government and three sectors, which operates at an Italian level of dysfunction.

It is possible to imagine arrangements which would both end the debate and reduce the educational and social problem which underlie it⁵, but only in the wake of a shift in the ground and terms of debate going well beyond those attempted here. Grattan has offered a valuable a circuit-breaker, but not a game-changer.

⁴ Ashenden D, [The educational consequences of the peace](#), *Inside Story*, 28.7.16.

⁵ Ashenden D, [Money, schools and politics: some FAQs](#), *Inside Story*, 28.9.16.