More cash for private schools, PM vows

Gemma Daley

Julia Gillard will today promise increased funding for every independent school as she begins the campaign to sell the government’s response to David Gonski’s education blueprint.

The Prime Minister will seek to reassure independent schools, after a week of claims that Mr Gonski’s modelling would produce clear winners and losers in the non-government sector.

“Every independent school in Australia will see their funding increase under our plan,” Ms Gillard will tell the Independent Schools Council of Australia in Canberra, according to remarks obtained by The Australian Financial Review. “This plan will lift school standards, not school fees.”

The Labor government’s response to Mr Gonski will deliver “higher quality education” to students, not simply school funding reform, Ms Gillard is expected to say.

The government has promised to pass legislation enabling the $5 billion-plus plan before the end of the year but has a major battle on its hands to convince the states to contribute billions of dollars each year.

“The government needs to get on with Gonski as a matter of urgency,” Greens schools spokeswoman Penny Wright said. “Legislation must be passed this year to allow schools to plan for the start of new fairer funding from 2014.”

The Catholic sector says some of the richest private schools would be better off if the plan is implemented, while others would lose out.

The government has not released its own modelling, but it has provided data to the states and the Catholic and independent school sectors, which have used it to calculate outcomes.

KEY POINTS

- Prime Minister Julia Gillard says Labor’s response to David Gonski’s recommendations will maintain parent choice in schools.
- Opposition Leader Tony Abbott wants the government to release its new funding modelling.

The Greens said yesterday the government needed to act quickly. “The government needs to get on with Gonski as a matter of urgency,” Greens schools spokeswoman Penny Wright said. “Legislation must be passed this year to allow schools to plan for the start of new fairer funding from 2014.”

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Tony Abbott at the United Australian Indians Fair yesterday. He has raised fears of a Labor schools ‘hit list’.

Photo: LOUIE DOUVIS
By BRIDGET COOK

A PUBLIC meeting will be held next week to make local schools’ concerns about budget cuts to TAFE funding loud and clear.

The secondary school Education Coalition, for the outer sub-region of the southern metropolitan region, called the meeting after they met last month to discuss the implications of the recent changes to the funding of TAFE, VET, VCAL and related programs.

As a consequence of the State Government’s cuts, funding has been reduced to 80 per cent of courses across the TAFE sector, with training in hospitality, business, sport, retail and process manufacturing all affected at Chisholm.

Hampton Park Secondary College principal David Finnerty said the group discussed the implications the TAFE funding cuts would have for students’ pathways and sense of well-being.

“While there was general recognition of the quite demanding economic environment currently facing Victoria, there was equally expressed a grave concern as to the potential, long-term impact for our children, of the recently announced drastic reduction to TAFE funding, identified in the Victorian State Budget,” he said.

In the outer south region, 33 per cent of Year 12 completers go on to vocational training.

Mr Finnerty said the reduced number of courses due to budget cuts would markedly limit pathways and opportunities from school to TAFE, university and into positive economic participation.

“Often students from lower socio-economic areas make effective use of these pathways,” he said. “Fewer courses and site closures will increase student disengagement. This will result in poor outcomes for the individual, as well as having long-term negative implications for the state economy.”

Mr Finnerty said they also fear the TAFE funding cuts would affect VET (Vocational Education and Training) provisions in schools.

VET in the VCE or VCAL allows students to include vocational studies within their senior secondary certificate.

“VET provision is compulsory in VCAL to comply with the Industry Specific strand,” Mr Finnerty said. “Our information is that there will now be reduced access to courses and at significantly higher cost.

“There is significant concern that access to a variety of certificates and an increased pressure on available spaces will further marginalise students who would otherwise benefit from the VCAL option.”

A spokesman for the Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall said rather than cutting funding, the government announced in May’s state budget an extra $1 billion over the next four years for the state’s training system.

“Much of this money will go to better support courses that provide higher level training such as apprenticeships, areas of skills shortages or areas that make an important contribution to the Victorian economy and Victorians’ chances of gaining meaningful employment,” he said. “The government is increasing subsidies in these important areas, in which TAFEs traditionally have a very strong market share, while reducing subsidies in areas of oversupply or that don’t necessarily lead to positive employment outcomes, such as fitness training and many lifestyle courses.”

The Education Coalition has called the public meeting 23 August at 7pm at River Gum Performing Arts centre, Hampton Park Secondary College.

Mr Finnerty encouraged interested people to attend the meeting.
Privatised training

The free market ideology of the NSW government that has opened up the state training budget to tender by private vocational education providers for domestic students is a myopic policy that if not adequately regulated will ultimately result in a reduction of quality training.

TAFE colleges throughout NSW have had to make cuts to staffing salaries and courses of study in order to meet significant cuts to operating budgets.

TAFE cannot provide all the skills training our state needs and good private vocational training providers (those paying award wages and ensuring professional development of staff) are required to fill the gaps, but Australia currently has 6000 private training providers, arguably too many already.

TAFE with its large capital infrastructure of buildings and equipment that is expensive to maintain and its commitment to disadvantaged students and those requiring special support staff will find it hard to compete on level terms with smaller private providers.

I find it ironic that the free market ideologues that have been loudly whinging about national skills shortages are the very people that are supporting a reduction in TAFE services.

We may soon hear them complaining of poor quality training received by our training graduates.

Bruno Conte, Berkeley
Students explore wonders of science

THE wonders of science were explored by Esperance Senior High School students during national science week.

Curious students took part in experiments to find out what reactions happened when mixing different chemicals.

On Thursday science teacher Julie Hall carried out some exothermic and endothermic reactions to see which elements became hot and which ones became cold, much to the delight of the students.

Also during the week, science teachers carried out a series of demonstrations including a balloon car race, making soap, board games, vinegar and bicarbonate rockets and liquid nitrogen demonstrations.

National Science Week is an annual celebration of science in Australia that has been running for the past 15 years.

“It also aims to encourage an interest in science pursuits among the general public and to encourage younger people to become fascinated by the world we live in,” a spokesperson for the national event said.

WA Science and Innovation Minister John Day said it reinforced the importance of engaging the wider community in the outstanding science happening in WA.

“A society that is aware of the science around them and employs scientific thinking is better equipped to make informed decisions and develop innovative solutions,” he said.

“Science plays a vital role in the development of the ideas and innovations that continually improve our lives.”

Federal Science and Research Minister Chris Evans said National Science Week put a spotlight on Australian scientific achievements ranging from the anthrax vaccine, penicillin and the cochlear implant through to GPS and WiFi technology.

“Now in its 15th year, this annual celebration of all things science offers the opportunity to step out of your comfort zone and experience what the world of science is all about,” Senator Evans said.

He said National Science Week gave young Australians a taste of the exciting opportunities that existed today and into the future.

TIM SLATER
Isabelle Hill and Brooke Western mix a chemical powder with some water.

Jasmine Lewis, Libby Carter and Rachel Howe see if their experiment becomes hot or cold. Photos: TIM SLATER

Brett Tate with a beaker during some exothermic and endothermic experiments.
STATES STEP UP FUNDING REVOLT

PM: private schools will get more

SID MAHER
MILANDA ROUT

JULIA Gillard will today promise every independent school increased funding under Labor’s education reform blueprint as she moves to head off a revolt from the states amid growing concerns that as many as one in three schools will be worse off under the plan.

Victoria and Queensland last night threatened not to sign up to the funding reforms if any schools — public, independent or Catholic — were left disadvantaged by the government’s response to the Gonski recommendations.

Victorian Education Minister Martin Dixon told The Australian he would not be a part of a funding model “that would disadvantage any school, family or student”.

Queensland Education Minister John-Paul Langbroek said his state would not agree to “expensive federal government reforms that leave almost a third of schools worse off”.

But the Prime Minister is expected to today tell an Independent Schools Council of Australia forum that she is determined to “lift school standards, not school fees”, and that the government’s response to businessman David Gonski’s education review “will deliver funding security for your schools”.

But with the release of the government’s education blueprint put back to next month after having originally been expected this week, government and non-government schools remain nervous about their future funding.

News Limited papers reported that more than 3000 public and private schools could emerge as losers under modelling prepared by the states and non-government schools, but that the government had moved to make changes to “make sure no school will lose a dollar”.

Opposition education spokesman Christopher Pyne said unless annual funding indexation of 6 per cent a year was maintained under the new model, schools would suffer a real cut in funding.

Education Minister Peter Garrett took to Facebook yesterday to say “no school will lose money under our plans — in fact, funding for every school will continue to go up. We’ll be releasing more details soon.”

Sources told The Australian yesterday that public school funding would be increased for every school.

In her speech today, Ms Gillard is expected to say that her goal is not simply to reform school funding.

“My only interest in school funding is using school funding to drive improvement in school performance, to get all of our children a higher quality education,” she says.

Yesterday, appearing on Sky News Australian Agenda, the Prime Minister directly linked performance to funding. “That money, in my view, any more we give to schools needs to be about driving better outcomes for kids, high quality and better standards,” she said.

Today, Ms Gillard is also expected to declare that “government support for a child’s education is one of the entitlements of citizenship”.

“No matter how rich or poor your parents are or where you go to school, our nation should provide a basic degree of support to your education, because you are Australian, because you are part of the whole.

“Now, naturally, one way this idea of an education entitlement derived from citizenship takes concrete form is in school funding. There should be Australian government support to educate every Australian child — in the poorest and most remote school; at the best known and best resourced school.”

Ms Gillard’s speech comes amid delays in the government’s response to the Gonski report, which was expected to be released this week, but will now be released “in a number of weeks”.

The report, by a panel headed by Mr Gonski, says extra funding is required to enable all schools to educate students to a high standard, estimated by the panel at $5 billion a year based on 2009 figures.

The commonwealth is still
Private schools to get more

Continued from Page 1

finalising the actual costs, but it is believed the estimate in 2013-14 dollars is $6.5bn.

Gonski proposes a baseline funding of $8000 for every primary school student and $10,500 for high school students with new loadings for disability, location and disadvantage.

The opposition, the Greens and the Australian Education Union slammed the delay, saying the government needed to take action now given slipping student performance standards.

Tony Abbott accused the government of delaying its response to the Gonski reforms because of reports that almost one third of schools would be worse off under the funding changes.

Ms Gillard said the federal government had shown it would be prepared to “step up” and grant extra funds to the states for important national outcomes. But she signalled the funding for the National Disability Insurance scheme, which could cost up to $7.8bn, would be funded by expenditure savings.

Australian Education Union federal president Angelo Gavrielatos said the government “needed to act and act now” on the Gonski report, which made it clear that there was a “urgent need to invest in education” to improve the way funding is distributed.

Ms Gillard told Sky News Australian Agenda that without drastic reforms to the education system, Australia risked falling behind on a world stage.

Ms Gillard also said that the funding for any Gonski reforms would be driven by better outcomes for children, more transparency and lifting standards in teaching.
Hospitals say no to free visa health
EXCLUSIVE
The states will stand their ground over Medicare

SEAN PARNELL

FOI EDITOR

PUBLIC hospitals are challenging the expectation they will treat foreign students and 457 visa-holders free of charge in a dispute the Gillard government fears will damage Australia’s reputation.

Foreigners cannot access Medicare-funded primary healthcare services and are required to show evidence they have taken out health insurance to be granted a visa.

But some visa-holders are using public hospital services while serving out waiting periods with their insurer or letting their insurance lapse altogether, prompting an angry response from state governments.

The Victorian government now charges upfront fees for patients ineligible for Medicare and has been rallying the states to push for reforms, demanding the federal government enforce visa-holders’ insurance requirements.

Documents obtained by The Australian under Freedom of Information laws show Health Minister Tanya Plibersek was told by her department that some foreign students, especially those who met the insurance requirements, believed the states’ response was “racially based”.

While the states are free to give preferential treatment to Australians who are eligible for Medicare — and still treat some nationalities under reciprocal health arrangements — Ms Plibersek was warned the dispute “could have negative effects on the perception of Australia as a destination” for foreign students and skilled workers.

The Australian revealed last month that the West Australian government had complained about 457 visa-holders with HIV/AIDS — whose drug regime can cost up to $17,000 a patient per year — being a burden on the public system.

In Queensland, the Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital moved to prevent visa-holders accessing anything other than emergency obstetric and gynaecological services, prompting federal Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans to demand answers. Queensland Premier Campbell Newman recently wrote to Senator Evans saying visa-holders with insurance, and who had met the 12-month waiting period, would be treated at the RBWH. But he pointed out that some uninsured students were still seeking access to free public hospital treatment and it was the commonwealth’s responsibility to ensure visa-holders met their insurance requirements because “health facilities which treat these patients face great difficulties in recovering costs”.

In NSW, visa-holders who present at public hospitals without proof of their insurance or ability to pay the bill, are given only “the minimum and necessary medical care to stabilise their condition” and are then pursued over their debts.

The Victorian government has taken the lead on the issue and is preparing a report for all health ministers on possible immigration and insurance reforms.

The dispute has complicated the commonwealth’s bid to respond to a call for immigration restrictions to be eased for those with health conditions.

The conduct of Victorian public hospitals is a matter for Victoria.

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT

The National Health Reform Agreement allows the states to charge patients ineligible for Medicare an amount for public hospital services, and does not require them to provide non-emergency treatment to international students regardless of their insurance status.

The dispute has complicated the commonwealth’s bid to respond to a call for immigration restrictions to be eased for those with health conditions.

PREMIUM CONTENT

“The conduct of Victorian public hospitals is a matter for Victoria”
JIBES ABOUT DOG-WHISTLE POLITICS ON ASYLUM COME BACK TO BITE LABOR
If Julia Gillard wants to assuage mainstream voters she must acknowledge who was right

CHRIS KENNY

BORDER protection, more than any other issue, demonstrates how Labor has alienated itself from the political mainstream. Right until its offshore processing conversion, moral grandstanding by the Rudd and Gillard governments offended voters.

Labor’s contortions over asylum-seeker policy have rivalled London’s rhythmic gymnasts in all but elegance. But beyond the significant humanitarian, immigration and security implications of last week’s backflip, the electoral fallout is consequential.

On the asylum-seeker issue, Labor’s leadership sailed inexorably away from its traditional base. Yet we see it was all for nothing.

We now have a major party consensus of sorts, on this difficult national challenge. After years of passion, spin, trauma and tragedy, commonsense has prevailed and it transpires that the mainstream supporters of tough border protection measures were right all along.

The Liberal Party has weathered some internal pain but refused to be diverted by moderate dissenters; the Greens happily indulged a constituency for emotion, posturing and deal themselves out of the policy solutions; but Labor has suffered. The ALP membership has been split, its policies have failed, and its rhetoric has demonised the very voters it seeks to win over. Since the 2001 defeat (an election it would have lost with or without Tampa) Labor has used the border protection issue to frame the Coalition as xenophobic, brutal and manipulative.

Labor and its allies accused the Coalition of playing “dog-whistle” politics; of appearing to a racist underbelly to muster electoral support. This was not just an extremist view of the Howard government; it became the accepted wisdom of the political class.

Ross Peake displayed the mindset in The Canberra Times in 2007: “Howard’s challenge was to craft a response that would push the right button. Xenophobia popped on to his political radar.” You hear similar sentiment to this day from the Greens and the gallery.

But just think about how insulting this view has been to the Australian public.

The whole basis of the so-called dog-whistle relies on mainstream voters being racist and gullible. Otherwise how could you convince them that the arrival of boats — that you argue aren’t a problem — is actually a serious dilemma? And how could you suggest the public’s concerns over this concocted dilemma were based largely on the colour or nationality of the asylum-seekers unless you believed the public were racist?

Yet this is the insult Labor has directed at voters, almost daily, until its remarkable offshore conversion.

The government’s most immediate practical challenge is to show sufficient resolve to implement tough border protection. Without stringent assessment processes, tough visa conditions, a preparedness to turn back boats, and a willingness to accept responsibility for the problem rather than delegate it to the region, its measures are unlikely to work.

However, on a political level the implications are dire. Already voters resent the government over a series of issues falling under the banners of competence and trust. If boats continue to arrive, anger over incompetence will heighten.

But on trust, Labor can’t make up the ground. Its moral posture on borders is so longstanding, and its disdain for the mainstream view has been so vitriolic, that a belated switch to strong border protection only underscores the struggle to identify where it stands. Writ large for the electorate is an absence of conviction.

The only constituency that Labor seems to have been able to satisfy is its media barrackers. Antipathy to the Coalition on asylum-seekers seems to trump even climate alarmism as a standard for the love media.

Along with the public, the media saw the dimensions of the asylum-seeker problem and how it was resolved. They saw indisputably tough measures work. Boat journeys, tragedies and arrivals halted; detention centres emptied and dismantled; refugees resettled; our humanitarian intake maintained through orderly processes.

When Labor came to power there were virtually no asylum-seekers to free; there was no problem to solve. But for no reason other than to proclaim their humanity, they dismantled the border protection regime, trumpeting the move like evangelists.

The boats began to arrive. Detention centres were filled, new ones built, and filled. Tragedies unfolded at sea. Initially, Immigration Minister Chris Evans said, “we’re just managing what is hope-
fully a temporary peak in arrivals”. Later, Julia Gillard said, “We are obviously dealing with the push factors in our region.” Much of the media agreed with Labor about domestic policies not playing a role and continued to target the Coalition with the usual inferences against ordinary voters.

Take The Age’s Michelle Grattan, who said in May 2010: “Abbott’s return to the Pacific Solution is cynical and depressing, a real ‘whatever it takes’ bid for votes.”

When Labor decided it needed to adopt offshore processing there was no apology, no admission of error, no mention that pull factors did, after all, play a role; just an inexplicable and hamfisted attempt to change policy by establishing offshore processing in East Timor. Eventually, after the horrific Christmas Island disaster in December 2010, they came up with Malaysian people swap.

All the way, the love media reached identical conclusions. Grattan declared: “The situation has reached the point where one evil (compromising people’s human rights) has to be balanced against another (many deaths), and a package needs to be implemented which has the maximum chance of achieving success.”

Ross Peake was no longer so concerned about xenophobia: “The senate has a duty to shift the pall of inaction that hangs over our elected representatives. Australia must do its bit to end the terrible trade in people that so often results in deaths by drowning.” This overnight, en masse conversion by Labor and the media — from a decade of demonising offshore processing to embracing it — would have been hilarious if the consequences in the interim hadn’t been so tragic.

It has become even more absurd, as the same group advocates for Nauru and Manus Island — centres they previously railed against. But the telling point is this: while the media and politicians have provided the succour of self-justification for each other, the public has looked on. And you only have to look at the polls and talk to voters to understand the resentment.

Mainstream voters have long been told their support for strong border measures showed they were scared and racist, insinuating, for good measure, they were gullible. So now the jibes about dog-whistle politics come back to bite. If the Prime Minister wants to assuage mainstream anger, she could start by acknowledging who was right.
Don’t demonise Gillard

I am surprised at the demonising of Julia Gillard over the asylum-seeker backflip brought about by the acceptance of the Houston recommendations.

The whole debacle, costing taxpayers billions of dollars, not to mention boat people’s lives, was caused by her predecessor Kevin Rudd and his hapless sidekick, former immigration minister Chris Evans. They should both be run out of the country.

For years they were in denial of the problem and mindlessly kept telling the public that it was “the push factors, not the pull factors”.

It may have been true that, when shadow immigration minister, Julia Gillard favoured the dismantling of the Howard government’s Pacific solution but she was not a party leader then and was likely to be beholden to the party line.

Once she assumed leadership and was better able to formulate her own policies, she quickly made it known that she was very concerned about the boat-people situation. She gave ground, made compromises and extended olive branches, but the Liberals put politics ahead of the national interest and refused to budge.

Rather than slate Julia Gillard for reverting to the Howard government policies, I think she should be given credit for being big enough to acknowledge a mistake — a rare quality in a politician and something her predecessors were too proud to do.

J. McCarthy, Yokine