Engagement of parents critical to schooling reform

By IAN DALTON

The Review of Funding for Schooling led by David Gonski found the engagement of parents to be one of six elements critical to achieving highly effective schooling reform.

However, there appears to be a lack of understanding as to the scope, diversity and significance of parental engagement if one looks at the processes under way to implement the new funding model for schooling arising from the Gonski review together with the education policy of the new Abbott government.

The Better Schools Plan, being rolled out nationally from 2014 to support the new funding model, is based on five key reform areas — quality teaching; quality learning; empowered school leadership; meeting students need and greater transparency and accountability.

The Australian Education Act 2013 requires all schooling authorities to support the Better Schools Plan by developing and implementing improvement plans that set out the activities, programs and initiatives they will undertake to contribute to those five reform directions.

It is clear that the first three of those reform directions are focused strongly on schools, school leaders and teachers.

The fourth area, ‘meeting student need’ could be described as the ‘equity’ element of the plan, the pursuit of equity having been a key focus of the Gonski review.

This element encompasses such things as meeting the particular needs of disadvantaged student cohorts (Indigenous students, students with disability), the implementation of a needs-based funding model and the provision of inclusive education.

In order to demonstrate they are ‘meeting student needs’, schooling authorities will be required to demonstrate how they are strengthening parent engagement by providing ‘better support for, and engagement with, parents and families, including advice on how best to contribute to their child’s learning at home’.

The Coalition’s education policy released in August referred to the ‘strong body of evidence suggesting that parental and community engagement is one of the most important factors in a student’s educational success’.

These approaches to parent engagement appear to demonstrate the broad perceptions among many policymakers and educators that parental engagement is the missing piece of the Australian schooling reform jigsaw, there is currently no overarching policy framework for parental engagement, no agreed definition, no agreed measures and less investment than the evidence warrants.

There is, therefore, a real problem looming for governments, policy makers and schooling authorities if they persist in seeing only half of the picture relating to schooling outcomes and do not genuinely endeavour to understand, resource and implement real parent engagement in school improvement strategies.

It is likely that ‘parent engagement’ strategies will continue to be poorly informed, involve a lot of reinventing of square wheels and consequently fall far wide of the mark.

Parents do not hang off the edge of their children’s education; they sit at its very core.

A nationally agreed definition of parent engagement which captures its scope and educational outcomes related to both school and home needs to be identified.

We will then be in a much stronger position to invest adequately and wisely in parent engagement and make a real difference to how our children engage with and emerge from their schooling.

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