PRESENTATION TO THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

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FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2009

A NEW PROGRESSIVE CONSENSUS FOR AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Why We Need Change

Thank you for that welcome. It's terrific to be here at the Brookings Institution to discuss one of the greatest issues we face – improving the performance of our schools. In the year and a half that Labor has been in office in Australia, we have learned a great deal from the experiences of school systems all over the world, including here in the United States. So I'm delighted to have the opportunity to repaying some of the debt by talking with you about our reform agenda and discussing future directions with you.

You may not be familiar with the precise details of Australia's school system, but I'm sure our general situation is familiar to you. We have a federal constitution in which States and Territories carry primary responsibility for the delivery of schooling. The Commonwealth Government plays a major role in funding and regulation which has grown throughout the last half century. Government schools – run by the states, with funding from the Commonwealth, now account for about two thirds of all students. Christian and other non-government schools are funded on a per-student basis, weighted according to socio-economic status, directly by the federal government.

Australia generally performs well in international studies such as PISA and TIMSS and we are proud of our record. But we do not achieve as highly as we should

or could. Our performance at the higher levels of achievement is static or declining. And our persistent tail of low achievement, associated mostly with socio-economic disadvantage, is too long. Over the last decade federal funding policies have combined with other demographic and social changes to drive a marked uptake in non-government schooling. The Commonwealth Government plays an important role in funding all types of schools.

This is a diversity that the Rudd Labor Government recognizes and celebrates. We support the right of parents to choose what kind of school their child attends and the role of Government in providing funding. But we are also determined that every child, in every school, should receive the highest quality instruction and learning. And this is not currently the case. The pattern of recent change had created an opaque, fragmented funding system and no clear national priorities for improvement, reform or accountability. In a nutshell, our results could be summarized as: performing satisfactorily, but could be doing better, especially in the bottom end of the class.

Like the United States, Australia has a serious educational equity problem. Too many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are clustered in a small number of schools, with low expectations and low rates of achievement. This has caused our participation and attainment rates at Year 12 to plateau for the last decade or more at around 75 per cent. The upshot is that a child from a working class family is only half as likely as a child from a high income family to go on to tertiary study – and has a far lower chance still of getting into an elite institution or faculty. And, of course, that a young person who does not complete secondary education is about four times more likely than one who does complete to be unemployed in later life.

The situation is of course much worse for Indigenous students, who have massive gaps in literacy and numeracy outcomes that begin in the earliest years and suppress their year-12 graduation rates dramatically. This is a significant source of shame to a nation as wealthy as ours – and it is a form of defacto discrimination the Rudd Government has committed itself to overcoming. This level of failure is not acceptable. We know that we live in complex and diverse societies. But I do not accept that, in these societies, disadvantage is destiny.

Further, as the excellent work done by McKinsey, among others, has shown, tolerating underachievement in schooling means accepting a loss of economic growth and productivity that we cannot afford. The most recent analysis they have released shows that, if the U.S. had matched the educational achievement levels of countries like Finland and South Korea, GDP in 2008 would have been $2.3 trillion, or 16 per cent, higher. In other words, the costs of sustained underperformance are far greater even than the costs of the current recession. That bears thinking about carefully.

Australia faces a similar challenge, albeit from a position of generally good quality schooling. But for more than a decade, our previous government ignored it. In fact, through a combination of ideology and neglect it made them worse. The true measure of a nation's schools is how well all their students perform. What is new in Australia is the determination to achieve excellence and equity in every school and every community. Our goal is to create a new, ambitious and progressive consensus for improvements to all schools.

Putting the Education Revolution Together

So we have set out to create an Education Revolution. Working to make the most of our current schooling systems and their distinctive features, we have put in place a reform strategy that combines seven essential elements.

- Investment
- High expectations
- Better curriculum
- A new era of transparency
- Improving teacher quality and school leadership
- Targeting disadvantage
- New ways of governing for collaboration *and* accountability

As in the US, the onset of a global recession has not lessened our determination to pursue this revolution. Instead, a central feature of our economic stimulus strategy involves investment in school buildings and other educational infrastructure. Let me

say something briefly about each element and turn to you for discussion of how these priorities apply in the US and how such a reform agenda can best be pursued.

Increased Investment

The first, of course is investment. Our changes involve huge increases in public spending. Over the next four years, federal spending on spending on schools will almost double. The specifics include an increase in the percentage of funding given to primary schools, including a $14.7 billion program – more than 1 per cent of annual GDP -- over the next two years to upgrade and enhance school buildings, with every primary school receiving a new hall, library or gym and modernization or repairs in literally every school, a commitment of $1.5 billion over seven years – more than 1 per cent of annual GDP – to raise achievement in disadvantaged school communities, and a $2 billion dollar program – the Digital Education Revolution – to achieve a two to one ratio for computers to students in years 9 to 12 of secondary school and ensure fiber connections for every school.

The list could go on. But of course money alone won't provide what's really needed, which is a transformation is quality and equity. So we have to invest the money in new ways.

High Expectations for All

At the center of all the changes we propose is a simple goal: the narrowing of achievement gaps by insisting on quality for all. Too often those who talk about standards mean only higher standards for those at the top. I believe everyone must be judged by the same standards. As someone from a family without a tradition of tertiary education, I know first hand that the cruelest thing you can do to any child is give them a second-rate, "dumbed-down" education. I reject the idea that coming from a poor home disqualifies anyone from achieving in high-level mathematics and science, the humanities and artistic creativity. Every child is capable of great things. Our task is to design schools that bring those talents our in every individual child.

So the core of our approach is to set the same standards and the same accountabilities for all schools, regardless of where they are, who attends them or what sector they are in. This has been an explicit and controversial feature of our funding agreements, which create the same requirements for all schools for the first time ever in relation to curriculum, assessment and reporting of income sources. Through this framework and its emphasis on consistency and transparency, we expect a far more accurate picture to emerge of what great schooling can achieve and where focused effort is required to make sure that great schooling is what children are getting.

Better Curriculum

The next element is world class curriculum. Our election policy promised a single national curriculum to provide clarity across the eight jurisdictions that make up Australia and create a platform for higher achievement. We have created a board of experts and representatives from all those jurisdictions, chaired by Professor Barry McGaw, to develop through rigorous collaboration a national curriculum for Australia. The process, which has been highly consultative, is going very well, with drafting about to commence for math, science, history and English. This curriculum will be based on subject disciplines, seek to learn from the best of what is currently practiced and provide essential content and content standards while maintaining space and flexibility for effective teaching and learning. It will outline the curriculum entitlement for every young Australian.

School subjects must stop being weapons in backward-looking culture wars that interest parents and parents only – and start being designed to interest students. This is being achieved through collaboration, goodwill and hard work between governments and educators. I believe it is 30 years overdue for a modern, talented country such as Australia.

A New Era of Transparency

Curriculum cannot support better teaching without the right assessment. So a core part of our revolution is a new era of transparency, in which the performance of

each school is publicly reported in a consistent, meaningful format along with the contextual information that helps accurate interpretation of that performance. A new system of individual school performance reporting will make the results of new mandatory national testing available to policy makers and parents alike – in a way that will emphasize a school's performance relative to like-schools.

This transparency is crucial. To improve schools that are failing their students, we need information. And we want parents to drive change. We know parents want this information. A survey we conducted last year in cooperation with state school parent bodies found that 96.9 percent of parents in all school systems agreed that important information relating to school activities and performance should be made available to parents. This included information on testing, graduation results, teacher qualifications and experience and approach to curriculum. Parents want to know. I find it offensive to suggest that this information should be withheld or that parents are too stupid to know what to do with it. We believe this sort of reporting will show that schools with similar socio-economic enrolments are capable of wide disparities of performance. Our aim is not to name and shame as some have suggested – but to find out what the higher-achieving schools are doing right and try to replicate that success elsewhere. The schools serving the poorest communities have nothing to lose from this process, but much to gain.

At this point I want to pay tribute to Joel Klein, Chancellor of the New York City Schools. I met Joel this time last year in New York and he gamely took up my invitation to visit Australia last November. His role in our public and professional debate about transparency was important and influential. He achieved this impact because of the strength of his dedication to equity and excellence and the platform of positive change that he has built in one of the most demanding public school systems there could be.

I want to make one further point about testing and transparency. Some educators are now arguing that testing to produce rich data like this is the wrong way to go. That it will lead to a system of rote learning. In a sense, a return to a nineteenth-century version of schooling, suited more to the industrial revolution than today's fast-changing, innovation economy.

In response, let me say that we have no intention of allowing the tail to way the educational dog in this way. Our schools will not become test factories. We have no intention – whatsoever – of suppressing the joy and creativity that a great school can bring out in every child. But first we have to ensure that children have the basic skills they need to follow their dreams. No matter what your imagination, you can't be a great writer or historian or musical lyricist if no one discovers that you can't read or write properly. You can't be a great mathematician or astronaut or economist or if no one discovers that your numeracy skills are deficient. And you won't ever cure a deadly disease if you haven't been able to grasp the basics of science. We want to ensure young people have basic skills – yes. But only so they can use them to follow their instincts and enthusiasms to choose the life they want to live. Our reforms will ensure schooling remains enjoyable and liberating for every student – not just those fortunate to be given that chance already.

Improving Teacher Quality and School Leadership

The next element is improving the quality of teaching. This, for me, is in some ways the beginning and end of effective schooling. Without the highest quality instruction, nothing else can work. Within school, it is the single greatest influence on student engagement and achievement.

Like the U.S., we have many outstanding and dedicated teachers. And we have strong unions and systems of tenure and pay progression negotiated over decades. Through another 'National Partnership', using $550 million dollars of federal funding – about 0.5 per cent of annual GDP - the Commonwealth is working with the States and Territories to change the way teachers are paid and recruited. Another national partnership of the same size is investing to improve literacy and numeracy performance by supporting better instruction and whole-school improvement. Our aim is to attract the right people to the profession and, once they are there, provide new incentives for them to develop their expertise and remain in the classroom.

Different systems are trying different methods – from teacher scholarships to school-based centers of excellence, performance and development frameworks to new leadership networks. It will take time to develop and test the new models. But at their core is the long term commitment to ensure that teaching is a fulfilling, demanding, properly recognized profession for the twenty first century, in which career advancement is shaped by effective performance and professional excellence is a source of occupational pride.

As part of this effort, we have supported the foundation of Teach for Australia, a national program to attract high-achieving graduates into teaching, based on the success of the *Teach First* and *Teach for America*. I know that Teach for Australia has developed a working international relationship through *Teach for All* and I look forward to that bearing fruit. Finally, we are investing $50 million in leadership development for principals, directly inspired by the leadership academy created by Joel in New York.

Targeting Disadvantage

These improvements have to be delivered in every school. Research undertaken by the Australian Treasury has found that the difference made to a child's educational attainment by the quality of the individual school is highly significant – something like the difference between 84 per cent of students in a school reaching the minimum standard for literacy and numeracy and 99 per cent of students doing so. That is a difference worth striving for. It proves that the disadvantages a child brings to school from their home can be rectified by concentrating on improving the quality of the school, including its engagement with parents and the wider community.

To do it, we've developed a new $1.5 billion program to target additional resources to disadvantaged schools. It will fund these schools to:

- attract high performing principals and teachers;
- provide funding for intensive learning activities for students who are falling behind;

- create robust networks of parents, other schools, local communities and businesses to help students into jobs, training or further study; and
- provide incentives for individual schools to extend their reach through longer opening hours, after-school study support, sports and other activities to help keep students engaged in their studies.

The benefit will be approximately $500,000 extra per year to each average sized disadvantaged school. Spent the right way, we believe it will make a dramatic difference.

New Ways of Governing

In eighteen months, I believe we moved schooling in Australia onto a new plane and shown that it possible to overcome long-established expectations about what is and is not possible. But in truth, the work has only just begun. Achieving and sustaining our high expectations will only happen if we can bring together these many actions into a strategy that is carried forward by every member of every school community.

Our aspiration for a new way of governing can be described as 'collaborative federalism'. It involves joint decision making and policy development between the Commonwealth and the States and a stronger emphasis on implementation and innovation than we have previously seen. It means seeking to leverage our new dollar investments to create far greater value from current spending, for example by insisting on more comprehensive data and transparency. It means that our funding systems are reward-based but that we are committed to simplifying and making more flexible our payment systems and our regulations.

It represents the first time ever in Australia's history that we have shared national reform objectives in education. Commonwealth, State and Territory governments are coming together and working with teachers and parents groups to design policy and shape practical innovation in local communities. Through this

collaboration at many levels, I hope that we will forge a strong and enduring national commitment to achieving educational excellence.

But in saying this, I recognize that the greatest part of the work is still to be done. And this is where I believe that collaboration and exchange, between policymakers and between education practitioners, can serve both our countries as well as many others.

We don't reform schools and school systems for the sake of bureaucratic change. We don't introduce testing or transparency because they're the latest management fad. We do it to benefit children. And because, whatever their merits and intentions, existing ways of schooling are not good enough for so many.

As we focus relentlessly on implementation, on practical innovation and local improvement, I am sure there is much to learn from the experience that is gathered together today. Thank you.