25 August 2008

Letter to the Editor
The Sydney Morning Herald

Your columnist Gerard Noonan persists in propagating the myth that non-government schools are somehow ‘rorting’ government funding (‘C’mon Rudd, chalk one up for record’, 25th August), when he knows full well that they receive what the federal government’s SES funding system says they should. Implying dishonesty on the part of these schools is an unfair slur on the dedicated professionals who run them.

Funding for independent and Catholic schools is not “middle class welfare”, it is recognition that these schools provide a valuable public service for more than 1.1 million students and save governments billions of dollars in funding every year. Noonan’s dislike of the excellent work done by non-government schools, including the ‘heavy lifting’, is clearly not matched by more than one-third of all Australian families who choose them as the provider of education for their children.

Dr Geoff Newcombe
Executive Director
C'mon Rudd, chalk one up for record

From the sidelines

New governments only get a brief time to act before the weight of office hangs too heavily around their necks. Good ones move swiftly, sustained by the incoming tide of electoral goodwill to do useful and creative things. That's why, in the vital area of school education, the new-ish government of the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and his deputy, Julia Gillard, has been such a disappointment so far.

Yes, last year's promise of handing out computers to all students had a certain modernist and egalitarian ring to it. But it looked too easy, every bit the billion-dollar stunt that it has turned out to be.

Like the Napoleonic "chicken in every pot" or the Hawke government's no-child-shall-live-in-poverty offerings, it has quickly become a quagmire, with the federal and state governments bickering over who will pay to maintain, network, filter, fix and upgrade the hardware.

Perhaps the problem is the way Rudd has structured his government. The idea that an education revolution can be handled by a part-time minister - who also doubles as the Workplace Relations Minister and backs up to deputise for Rudd when he is on one of his frequent overseas jaunts - is silly. It does not matter how talented or well-meaning Gillard is.

Leave aside the Gulliver-like tasks facing her in the higher education area, where there are at least two decades of shabby neglect to renovate and restore. There are huge challenges ahead in schooling. Not the least of these is finding a practical way to wean private schools off the rorted federal school funding system.

Billions of dollars are now flowing in middle- and upper-class welfare payments via the SES funding model that Gillard says may be tinkered with sometime after 2012 - that is, almost two election cycles away.

Her stated solution after seven months in the job? Let us see if the system might be trimmed for use by public schools. Even her staunchest supporters know that is a cruel joke.

And what of the biggest crisis facing education? The almost systemic non-engagement of Aboriginal kids, who make up close to 4 per cent of the school-age population.

With a few notable exceptions, the public school system is not coping. Some tokenistic measures are touted by private schools, but those schools do not do any of the really heavy lifting.

Not too late, Kevin and Julia. But it is certainly time to extract digits.