

July 2020

The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP  
Shadow Minister for Education

PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

**Fabian Letter to Labor**  
***Implications of COVID-19 on the future of Education***

The Australian Fabians has one of the longest histories of contributing observations, thinking and policy options to the Australian Labor Party. While this has, until now, taken the form of conferences, forums, publications and debates, the most recent events, arising partly from the impact of the current pandemic, have opened other ways and means of us working together.

On Wednesday June 24, over 40 of our members and friends took part in a Zoom Webinar to consider the impact of COVID-19 on the future of education, particularly from the point of view of progressive politics and the formation of policy within the ALP. The lead thinkers who ably opened the discussion included Professor Pasi Sahlberg from the Gonski Institute of Education, Julie Sonnemann from the Grattan Institute and Amanda Bickerstaff, CEO of Pivot Professional Learning. Their evidence-based and quantitative research informed their contribution; this report, however, only reflects a qualitative contribution from those present and not necessarily the institutions that the lead thinkers may represent.

The discussion addressed three main themes:

- Government responses to COVID-19's impact on disadvantaged students in the coming six months.
- Longer-term reforms, where COVID-19 might serve as catalyst for long term change to schooling and education.
- The lessons to be learnt, both positive and negative, by the forced reliance on technology in supporting education during the lockdown period for families and educators.

The contributions are attached in full, but some of the main themes that emerged can be summarised as follows:

### **Short-term government responses**

When it comes to short-term responses, the experience has provided an opportunity, first, to see the advantages in engaging families and communities more and, second, to rethink whether we wish to continue as before or instead take stock, considering what should now be abandoned and what may have proved a disadvantage in the recent circumstances.

As far as the socially disadvantaged and socially disabled are concerned, concerns were expressed relating to a lack of richness in their out-of-school experiences and the potential role these experiences may play alongside structured learning. However, a core issue relates to the inadequacy of the current funding arrangements between State and Federal governments as well as the funding differentiation between public and private institutions. The existing disparity needs to be addressed in favour of public schooling. There also needs to be positive discrimination in the setting of policy to allow for catch-up initiatives clearly targeted at socially disadvantaged students focusing in particular on supporting more positive experiences of well-being in the home.

Home-based learning sheds light on a different range of learning styles and approaches, with more responsibility shifting to how students learn together and with their parents or siblings and to how they collaborate in sharing and managing their knowledge and skills acquisition. There were several suggestions related to bringing learning alive by presenting material within a real-life context, for instance in partnership with the arts. By moving the locus of learning to the home, this large-scale social experiment has produced a living laboratory, revealing advantages to build upon and lessons to learn.

Two strong messages came through: Pasi Sahlberg's challenge to address issues of social and emotional well-being as much as pedagogy, and the Grattan Institute's focus on the real need to address significant catch-up issues for disadvantaged students who were not able to thrive in those circumstances, including looking at any positive intervention and back-up resources that this might require.

### **Longer-term reforms**

In the longer term, this experience has introduced the case for a major rethink about the nature of learning and the engagement of the whole person in that process. One of the implications was the need to revisit the role of standardised testing and focus more on why young people disengage and opt out of the learning process. As part of this rethink, teachers need to be afforded recognition for their efforts, recruited for their intelligence and commitment and allowed latitude in deciding what their students need and when.

Furthermore, this experience has identified the parents, their families and the community as having a potential role in a collaborative endeavour with teachers to set the scene for learning. Teaching as a profession needs greater recognition and status, which should also be reflected in both how they are chosen for the role and how they are remunerated.

## **Lessons to be learnt**

A key operating principle of the Fabians is a commitment to fairness and equity. The school system is one area in which the potential impact of differences in socioeconomic status is most obvious. In the recent lockdown, many young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds did not have the wherewithal to engage in online learning for the whole time they were away from school. Total reliance on technology-supported learning represents a potential basic inequality unless adequately addressed.

However, the role of technology-supported learning and blended or hybrid learning styles is emerging, and consideration was given to the possible pros and cons of this reality.

On the positive side, in this age – characterised by artificial intelligence, the pre-eminence of mathematical languages and the acceleration and access to human knowledge management – digital literacy is likely to be as important a skill as literacy and numeracy have been to date. In an educational era when one size might no longer fit all, technology has the potential to offer customised approaches to individual learning within an electronic classroom, beyond the capacity of one teacher with 35 students to tend to.

Artificial intelligence, the ascendancy of algorithms in daily living and the move towards virtual reality and remote or distance activity across a range of sectors combine to make technology-based learning a necessity. It not only extends the individual student's sensory capacity but also provides ready, instant access to digitised information and data as well as to knowledge banks around the world, from the CIA to the Vatican or the Louvre. For normally introverted students, it provides an equal voice.

Electronic means of communication will support the collaborative workplaces of the future, placing a world of entrepreneurship and innovation within the reach of high school students. The structure of the internet makes it possible for a student to present therefore, in many different contexts, and present to global corporations or to international author and publishers.

## **Specific recommendations for consideration by Labor in government or opposition:**

- Address the inadequacy of the current funding arrangements between state and federal governments and redress the disparities between public and private education funding to achieve a better position for public schooling.

- Consider the lessons to be learnt from moving the locus of learning to the home and give the same priority to issues of social and emotional well-being as to pedagogy.
- Assess the advantages of engaging families and communities more and take the opportunity to rethink whether we can realistically return to acting as we did before this crisis.
- Fund specific programs that enable significant catch-up for those disadvantaged students who were unable to thrive during the lockdown at home.
- Revisit the role of standardised testing, focusing on (a) why young people disengage and opt out of the process and (b) a more continuous assessment regime.
- For any initiative that places total reliance on technology-supported learning, be aware of intrinsic potential basic inequality. Ref: [https://www.pivotpl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Pivot\\_Socioeconomic-disparities-in-Australian-schooling-during-COVID-19\\_1July2020.pdf](https://www.pivotpl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Pivot_Socioeconomic-disparities-in-Australian-schooling-during-COVID-19_1July2020.pdf).
- As the role of technology-supported learning and blended or hybrid learning styles is emerging, consider the possible pros and cons of these developments to ensure any possible adverse effects are considered and that there is equality of access amongst students.
- Expand professional learning in distance and online teaching methods within initial teacher education, and upskill existing teachers in the use of instructional technology, digital pedagogy and their ability to communicate and engage online.

Underlying all these comments, whether relating to the short or longer term, was the pivotal role of fair and equitable degrees of funding which needs to be reflected in the policies and priorities of any existing or future Labor government.

The other major role for progressive governments and opposition parties alike is to formulate and provide leadership towards the type of society to which we aspire or which we anticipate, and for which our education systems should be designed to prepare us.

We are grateful for the major inputs from the speakers and the participants and hope that you and your advisers might find some value in their contributions.

**NB:** *The views expressed here represent the thinking of a group of 50 Fabian members and friends but do not purport to be the policy or directions of the Australian Fabian Society as a whole.*

Yours sincerely,

Dr Julia Thornton  
Chairperson, Australian Fabians, (Vic Branch)

## **Fabian Society (Vic Branch)**

### **Implications of COVID-19: The Future of Education**

**Speakers: Julie Sonnemann of the Grattan Institute,  
Amanda Bickerstaff, CEO Pivot Professional Learning  
Professor Pasi Sahlberg, Gonski Institute of Education  
Convened by Max Dumais, Hon Life Member**

**June 25, 2020**

#### **Introductory remarks:**

##### **Professor Pasi Sahlberg, Gonski Institute of Education**

I would stress the critically important issue of not just identifying health and well-being as things we need to think about, but putting them as priorities in schools as the pandemic continues to hit communities, homes and schools, causing disruption, anxiety and fear. I would like to see well-being and health not just as something that needs to be done to people but as something that should be an outcome of education. Furthermore, well-being and health should be comprehensive in school communities, encompassing children and adults in the school.

There is most likely a directional association between children's use of media and digital technologies and their well-being, health and, eventually, their learning. As hybrid and blended learning models become potential post-pandemic consequences for schooling, this needs to be accompanied by a better understanding of how those mediums are possibly affecting students' minds and souls.

##### **Amanda Bickerstaff, CEO Pivot Professional Learning**

Most of the 21 respondents to a survey believed that disadvantaged students were the group most impacted by school closures, and 75% believed that equitable access to technology and the internet are critical for students. Furthermore, 90% believed that the government should direct funding to support equitable access to distance learning.

The top supports for schools/students that the respondents would like to see are:

- Extra teacher training in supporting student social-emotional health
- Investment in learning devices for disadvantaged students
- More opportunity to introduce play-based learning in classrooms
- Less focus on end-of-year exams

##### **Julie Sonnemann, Grattan Institute**

Our recent report highlights that the losses from COVID compound an existing equity problem. Disadvantaged students are already at risk of leaving school without the basic skills for work and life, and COVID makes these issues worse.

We recommend big investments in small-group tuition to help disadvantaged students catch up. Over a 12-week period, small-group tuition can add an additional three to five months of learning progress. We are calling for a \$1.2 billion national catch-up strategy that invests in tuition programs, using some of the government money going out the door to stimulate the economy.

Where young people are hired as tutors, they are likely to spend the income quickly, providing stimulus to the economy at the same time. Small-group tuition is an initiative that may not be trialled in regular times, given its expense. Now is a good chance to test and evaluate whether this promising initiative can work and to help inform how we tackle the larger inequality problem in the longer-term.

### **Webinar Participant Responses**

#### **1. How governments should respond to COVID-19's impact on disadvantaged students in the next 6 months:**

##### **1.1 *Engaging with the community more***

- Recruit and resource retired teachers as 'Angels' to provide learning and emotional support for children with learning difficulties
- Empower communities to assist disadvantaged students by engaging teacher's aides from the community

##### **1.2 *Taking the opportunity for an educational rethink***

- We should not "carry on" as we did before, so we need to rethink our priorities. As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, many parents now see how tedious and boring learning can be for children. They are also noting that their children are often capable of far more than the educational method that they are being asked to engage with.
- Governments need to recognise what to abandon in the post COVID-19 environment – aspects that will no longer meet learning needs – and to address the several shortfalls in the current education regime by using the energy generated to effect significant change
- There needs to be less emphasis on test results in the coming year. Teachers must be given more latitude to assess what the children in their care need,

especially in terms of catching up on social life and understanding the ‘new’ world around them.

- Identify a more sophisticated set of criteria or list of reasons that have resulted in learning disadvantage and develop strategies to address them. This should involve an analysis of things that proved a disadvantage during this period across both public and private schools.
- Deliver learning and education within real world contexts, such as learning by doing; and review educational processes and content to position learning within a meaningful contextual experience, for example learning mathematics in the context of a shopping experience.

### **1.3 *Addressing fairness and equity issues***

- Ensure there is a balance between inclusiveness and the challenges that may raise for the talented.
- Acknowledge that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds need access to rich experiences, especially out-of-school experiences that build literacy skills, scientific understanding, social and cultural capital through lived experience – similar to the Norwegian “Cultural Backpack” where each child is allocated funding to engage in activities beyond the school that are chosen to build children and young people's engagement with the world.
- Address differences in education funding ratios between state and federal governments and the inadequate federal arrangement – the two distinct systems are promoting inequity in Australia which stems from different individuals’ experience of education.
- The existing disparity between public and private schools requires a re-focus with renewed emphasis on funding the public-school system.
- State schools are expected to do unfair, heavy lifting with regards to the number of disadvantaged students they are required to accept.

### **1.4 *Reviewing learning styles and content delivery***

- Encourage self-paced learning initiatives and support schools in adopting cross-age and peer-to-peer tutoring programmes based on the educational theory that people learn more powerfully when they share that learning with

others. Fund the development of coaching kits with associated content, as well as process primers, that can equip students to teach other students what they have just learned themselves.

- Promote an emphasis on collaborative skills development in the delivery of the curriculum.
- Design curriculum that matches reciprocal human needs as a basis for learning and to promote engagement and motivation in education with added positive health outcome E.g. Borstal boys (who need to learn how to give) tutoring autistic students (who need to learn how to receive.)
- Acknowledge that student well-being needs to be considered alongside academic learning. Any government-funded actions need to have this at their heart.
- Employ arts-based approaches as well as artist/teacher partnerships to support young people's well-being, engagement and learning. The findings of the large scale Y Connect Project conducted in a Brisbane secondary school with a high refugee population and low ICSEA ([www.yconnectproject.com](http://www.yconnectproject.com)) revealed that artist/teacher partnerships in the Mathematics and English classrooms improved engagement and sense of self, resulting in an upswing in belonging, motivation, and academic outcomes. Post COVID-19, projects like this will also support artists in this time of need. One interesting outcome was the suggestion to create an artist library where schools can "borrow" trained artists, historians, scientists, technology experts etc. to partner with teachers to implement the curriculum...; in other words to have multiple artists working across the year to support engagement and motivation.
- Undertake an assessment of why some students have been doing better outside of the classroom with a view to incorporating those lessons into the ongoing design of learning environments.
- The Grattan Institute proposal for small-group catch-up tutoring initiatives may be a too narrowly focused approach that disregards the skills and abilities children have and seems to be guided by the notion that it is possible and/or useful to cram knowledge into the children.
- There are concerns, like those of Pasi Sahlberg, that this simply reinforces the view that learning only happens when teachers work with children and is only about the basics. We are concerned that this is a deficit model.



## **1.5 *Considering resource shortfalls***

- There is a need to focus on addressing current shortfalls in learning by providing backup resources such as second teachers to address any catch-up learning required.
- Designate more funding for the introduction of technology (e.g., WLAN, computers, iPads, electronic whiteboards, collaboration software).
- Fully implement Gonski's recommendations on needs-based funding of schools, Ref: Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B., & Tannock, P. (2011). *The review of funding for schooling final report*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
- Make free university education available for all.

## **2. The 'bigger picture' and reforms that should be seized upon for long-term change to schooling:**

### **2.1 *Undertaking a major educational rethink***

- Revisit the role of governance in schools (based more on a closer understanding of contemporary education)
- Reframe 'schooling' with less emphasis on formal structures: don't allow the curriculum to drive learning. A lot depends on how we define learning.
- Learning is not just what you learn at school in lessons but is a much wider concept and as such we need to rethink this aspect of education, especially for young people who experience financial disadvantage but may have considerable abilities not recognised within formal schooling.
- Post-COVID-19 is a chance to rethink pedagogies which deny that children have the capacity to learn with their whole bodies, including by experimenting and exploring. This is what happens in the early years but becomes lost in secondary schools; imagination, embodiment and emotion are cut out of learning.
- Avoid micro-managing teachers and ensure all teaching staff are both intelligent and committed. Allow them greater latitude in deciding what their students need and when: one size does not fit all.

- Review standardised testing. Revisit the normal assessment processes in order and accommodate the impact of the pandemic crisis by focusing on continuous assessment instead.
- Design more structured 'free time' with an emphasis on learning how to relate to others and on building resilience in students' interactions as opposed to mainly focusing on structured assessments.
- The separation of disadvantaged students is a problem. All schools could be best schools, but not under existing ideologies and policies.
- We need to act on the research that examines why young people disengage, and to acknowledge the extent of this issue.
- Re-think the age at which we introduce formal learning. Follow the example of the Scandinavian focus on the role of play during early years.

## **2.2 *Emphasising engagement with the community***

- Encourage the general community to work collaboratively with teachers to help provide the children in the community with a learning environment in which they can thrive.
- Educate the general community to recognise how essential quality education for all children is in maintaining a cohesive society.
- Promote greater respect for the teaching profession by raising the status of teachers by paying them more and by encouraging the general community to recognise their importance.
- Family backgrounds make a difference, but we should also acknowledge the strengths that children also bring to schooling – by making greater use of a capabilities perspective.

## **2.3 *Addressing fairness and equity concerns***

- Equity is about fairness and social justice in society and social systems. Governments need to recognise the importance and strength of inequalities in Australia and seriously address those inequalities both within the education system and in relation to the socioeconomic status of families. Acknowledging those existing inequalities is a key first step.

- The current attack on humanities will make humanities an area available only to the elite. This will further entrench the divide between groups within society.
- There is a need to use COVID-19 to acknowledge the funding gaps that exist in our systems and to use the COVID-19 situation as a stimulus to providing considerable additional funding for low ICSEA schools.
- Many young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds never engaged with learning the whole time they were away from school. This means that if we lock down again, we need other options that are not technology dependent.
- Greater financial investment in education generally, particularly early childhood and pre school.

### **3. *Pros and cons of technology-supported learning:***

#### **3.1 PROS – some of the potential advantages:**

- Offers opportunity to guide children while they are young in the responsible, judicious use of online resources, including online collaboration.
- Address computer literacy such as online research and data analysis and presentation skills from late primary school upward.
- Introduces critical analysis of the content of online media, including online advertising, from mid-primary school upward.
- At its best, it can offer opportunities for individualised and custom learning programs, the quality of which will presumably improve, with the potential to become a valuable part of the school learning environment.
- Digital literacy is a realistic preparation for the world and the environment in which they will be functioning while building on children's typical interest in, and predisposition to, all things electronic.
- Has the capacity to automate and to extend sensory perception into a virtual realm e.g., through animation skills, musical composition and drafting skills and by developing skills in the electronic capture and representation of reality.
- Extends and enhances the student's application and capacity for mathematical calculation and computation.
- Offers access to any digitised information embedded in any of the repositories and knowledge banks around the world.

- Offers the capacity to simulate real-life events safely and accurately.
- Enables any student to become a possible global publisher.
- Supports business start-up resources through strategic planning frameworks, as well as accounting, graphic design and desktop publishing capabilities.
- Provides introverted students with the means to be heard in a learning environment.
- Supports collaborative learning
- Enables children to use technology to express their creativity.
- Technology is for the exclusive use of the teacher but can be embedded in the design of self-driven learning projects.
- It makes it easy to present material remotely and hold meetings with breakout groups in which whole teams can attend discussions with their teachers.
- Paradoxically, the benefits can be inversely proportional to the age of the kids.
- Students do not need to dress up to attend interviews or meetings and it is easy to access or enable distance interviews.
- Less loss of time or downtime and more efficient use of, and access to, resources.

### 3.2 **CONS – keeping a watching brief on possible concerns:**

- Infrastructure challenges or breakdowns - unstable wireless connections can be a problem.
- Dealing with the economic digital divide and other equity issues, particularly unequal access to electronic resources.
- Breaking down a screen-obsessed culture that can cut across personal interaction.
- Possible long-term effects on healthy vision.
- Possible gender discrimination arising from male-dominated or male-oriented focus.
- Feeds addictive personalities' interest in repetitive activity such as games.
- Time-consuming and steals time from exercise and involvement in activities. For young children, up to Year 2, time spent on online activities means less time spent on developing more critical physical skills and developmental benchmarks (such as speaking, building, writing, cutting, running, climbing, etc.) and social skills (including teamwork, leadership and communication skills).

- Response:(from my 14-year-old daughter) - You cannot ask technology questions about how to do work. Students can get lost and confused without instructions.
- Applying the same approaches that we use in face-to-face learning to technology-based learning could both have the impact of disengagement by students and therefore result in similar outcomes.
- The use of technology during the lockdown has been a nightmare. There have been difficulties for parents and grandparents. Many parents and grandparents gave up on the worksheets and tedium of having to make children engage, and instead focused on baking, building, exploring, building obstacle courses etc. and revisited real-world approaches to learning. How do we know that these approaches did not produce positive outcomes?
- ArtPlay in Melbourne is running online learning programs that are trying to shift the way children engage in online learning. The children were sent packages of materials and had the opportunity to work with the real objects sent to them and then share their ideas and understandings online. This kind of hybrid approach was highly effective and enabled creativity, discovery and imagination, but also sharing and communication.
- Colleagues in education have reported concern that since returning to school, the older students are even more dependent upon their phones than before and are communicating less.
- Reduces the opportunity for social interaction between students and teachers.
- Some students with disabilities and learning difficulties had problems using technology.
- Endorsing widespread computer use at school may contribute to children embracing more sedentary lifestyles, to poorer sleep patterns and shorter attention spans and to online addiction among adolescents.
- Many children will learn computer and other IT skills outside of school, provided that schools in lower socioeconomic areas can offer students access to school IT equipment with appropriate guidance.