

## OPENING REMARKS TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO TEACHING AND LEARNING

**Annemarie Rolls, chief executive officer, Schools Connect Australia**

Good morning Senators. Thank you for allowing me to speak to you about how education philanthropy can improve teaching and learning.

You have a copy of my written submission to the inquiry, which also explains the role of Schools Connect Australia, an independent nonprofit organisation, and its establishment in 2010.

I will now make a short presentation, expanding on some of the key themes in my submission.

Before I do so, in the interests of clarity and brevity, I will define two terms I will be using throughout my presentation. The first is "philanthropists." The second is "support for schools".

By philanthropists I mean any individual or business, a philanthropic trust or fund, a community group or a higher education organisation, such as a university, that wants to support a school.

When I use the phrase "support a school" I am referring to financial or "in-kind" help – for example scholarships, mentoring programs, work experience programs, the volunteering of expertise etc that philanthropists provide to schools. I must stress that this philanthropic support is in the form of EXTRA help for schools. It is NOT a substitute for government funding. It is ON TOP OF government funding.

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In the grand foyer of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, these words are engraved on the wall in large letters for the assembled crowds to see:

*"Courage, hard work, self-mastery and intelligent effort are all essential to a successful life.*

*"Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike."*

Those words were written by Theodore Roosevelt, Nobel Prize winner, a staunch supporter of the museum and rated by scholars as one of America's greatest presidents.

More than a century on from when they were written, those words could describe what teachers strive to do every school day with our nation's children.

But teachers cannot do it alone. As the committee is undoubtedly aware from its reading of the landmark Gonski review into school funding and its own investigations into teaching and learning in schools, there are some facts that have emerged from education research that most scholars in the field now agree on.

They are:

- the biggest influence overall on a child's achievement is their home or socio-economic background
- the biggest influence *within* the school environment, is the quality of tuition from the child's teacher
- 80 per cent of Australia's disadvantaged students are educated in government schools.
- low student aspirations and underachievement are a real problem in schools, especially those with large concentrations of disadvantaged students.

My written submission describes Australia's shockingly mediocre Year 12 completion rates, especially among students from poor backgrounds.

How do we turn this around, and, in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, help instill hard-work, self-mastery and intelligent effort into the lives of our children?

Our own research reveals that schools identify this task as their top priority. And in a national survey of schools and philanthropists released last month, both groups also nominated improving student engagement with learning as their top priority. They also stressed the importance of overcoming barriers to low student engagement, by helping students with material assistance and creating richer learning environments.

That study was co-authored by Dr Michelle Anderson, from the Australian Council for Educational Research. Dr Anderson is arguably Australia's most eminent researcher in the field of education philanthropy and we are lucky to have her as a board member of Schools Connect Australia.

In essence, education philanthropy is a form of early intervention. It can be a vital circuit breaker in helping overcome the negative influence of a child's impoverished or dysfunctional family background.

When a philanthropist provides support for a school they can make a meaningful difference in the lives of teachers and students. They bring wider opportunities and expertise to schools, they help enrich the school curriculum by supporting specialist programs, they help build the skills of both staff and students.

For example in Australia our organisation has created the *Inspired By Industry* program. Some of Australia's leading companies \_ IBM, Heinz, Energy Australia, the Bionics Institute – have joined the program, partnering with government high schools to help reverse declining student enrolments in maths and science subjects.

Each industry partner works with the school's teachers and students to help bring these subjects alive, showing how advances in maths and science technology are used in their workplaces.

IBM Australia is collaborating with teachers from Keysborough Secondary College, in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs, to help students explore how apps are created.

The company is also sharing its expertise with Alkira Secondary College, in the city's northern suburbs, working with teachers and students on how cities use data analysis to create better traffic flows and road safety.

Too many of our students are disengaged from learning because they can't see why it is useful or how it fits into a larger context. Or they may be reflecting the attitudes of their parents towards learning. This program is a grassroots way of inspiring children to have big dreams, to see that work can be creative and stimulating, to learn from other adult role models apart from their teachers and parents.

This type of partnering with external supporters also has a real impact for teachers, enabling them to also be inspired to make their teaching more exciting and linked to the real world. We have to remember the importance of supporting both teaching and learning and empowering our teachers to be the best they can be also.

In Britain, there is a nonprofit organisation run by the Prince of Wales Trust, Business in the Community or BITC, doing similar work to what we are doing here, matching schools with philanthropists.

Known as *Business Class*, it builds long term partnerships between a cluster of highly disadvantaged secondary schools and local businesses to tackle student problems of low aspirations, poverty and lack of mobility. It began in 2008 and is now being rolled out nationally across the United Kingdom.

An independent evaluation of *Business Class* by Cass Business School in 2010 measured the program's impact on improving the performance in partner schools.

The evaluation found:

- 39 per cent improvement in students' academic improvement
- 40 per cent improvement in students' employability
- 25 per cent improvement in leadership and governance of Business Class schools
- 54 per cent increase in optimism in schools about the partnership's sustainability

We are currently negotiating with BITC to bring the Business Class model to Australia.

Senators, in my final remarks, I want to draw your attention to a contradiction in public policy towards education philanthropy that politicians have the power to remedy.

State, territory and federal governments are giving schools more autonomy to make decisions at the local level. They are encouraging schools to build stronger links with their communities and philanthropists. This approach has bipartisan political support. But current tax laws actively discourage philanthropists from donating to public (government) schools. This is brought into sharp focus by the findings of the Gonski report on school funding.

The report found growing recognition at community level that schools can't overcome their challenges alone and collective action, through school and community partnerships, can strengthen government efforts to tackle educational disadvantage.

It outlined numerous reasons why philanthropy was underdeveloped in government schools and in all schools serving poorer communities.

"These schools are less likely [than those in affluent areas] to have networks, the confidence to approach potential donors, or the time and resources to devote to grant applications," the Gonski report said.

Government policy and tax laws about philanthropic giving to government schools are also complex, unclear and can differ between states and territories. "Non-government schools do not face the same barriers to receiving donations," the report found.

Dr Anderson's survey, the Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP) 2012 Survey report, revealed there was enormous goodwill and enthusiasm among Australian philanthropists to help schools, their staff and students, thrive and reach their potential.

But, like the Gonski report, it also found barriers that deter donors from helping disadvantaged schools. The LLEAP survey found that the tax rules that allow philanthropists to give tax-deductible donations to schools, are so restrictive and complex, that they discourage many donors from trying to support schools. And the complexity of these tax laws has meant many schools, mainly government schools, are either unable to fully benefit from them or are poorly equipped to do so.

Meanwhile many private schools, because they have tax status as a charitable institution, find it much easier to receive tax-deductible donations. So we have a tax system that makes it easier for philanthropists to donate to private schools and get a tax deduction, rather than to needy government schools.

If Senators would like more information about the shortcomings of this policy, they may find it helpful to read an article on the topic by Dr Anderson, which was

published in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* opinion page on Monday February 18<sup>th</sup>, this year.

I can also provide the committee with a copy of the LLEAP report's executive summary if Senators would like to examine the report's findings.

The restrictive tax laws governing education philanthropy are also having an impact on our organisation, Schools Connect Australia.

Philanthropists who want to support our work by giving us a tax-deductible donation, are unable to do so because our organisation does not have Direct Gift Recipient status (or DGR status) under the tax code.

So far, despite applying more than a year ago to the Australian Tax Office for DGR status, we have been unsuccessful in obtaining it.

Overall, we find ourselves in a situation where governments are encouraging us to fulfil a vital need – to act as a broker to bring schools and philanthropists together to help them design sustainable partnerships. But current tax laws are having an unfortunate, unintended impact in slowing progress in this area.

My comments about tax law should not be viewed as wanting to lay blame. I am not an expert in tax law. There are many highly qualified tax specialists within the Tax Office and elsewhere who could come together to design an improved system for education philanthropy.

We need to help each other to build better opportunities for children in schools. We are well on the way.

We also need to be sure to support the capabilities of school leaders and teachers as autonomy becomes a more prominent focus of change in school structure. Partnering with philanthropy will particularly enable this.

I appreciate this opportunity to be part of your proceedings. I'm happy to answer any questions you may want to ask.