Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Teaching and Learning.
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Schools Connect Australia, is the first organisation of its kind in Australia.

It is an independent, non-profit organisation, established in 2010 with support from the Victorian government and leading businesses that have a passion for education philanthropy.

We help raise student achievement in government schools by matching businesses, individual philanthropists, universities and non-profit groups with public schools.
By focusing on priorities identified by schools, we design partnerships and scholarship funds that help students thrive and reach their potential. The community partners also provide mentoring, work experience and other types of voluntary expertise to help their partner school.

Our board includes leaders from business, the legal profession, higher education, and educational research, as well as the secretary of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The goal that every child should have a high quality education is something that most fair-minded people agree with. How we get there is where the disagreements start.

For example the shadow boxing between the states and territories and the Commonwealth over sharing the cost of the $6.5 billion Gonski school funding package is entering its final phase.

The Prime Minister, Ms Gillard, has said she wants agreement on the funding model for the nation's 9,500 schools before the Council of Australian Governments' meeting is due in April.

Understandably, the Gonski education package's $6.5 billion price tag – the extra money it will pump into schools each year to deliver a more transparent, equitable funding system based on student need – has dominated the media headlines.

But it would be a mistake to think the Gonski model is only about money.

It gives us the chance to think more creatively about how to lift student achievement and improve schooling for teachers and students.

At its heart, it is about the kid in the classroom slouched in his chair, uninterested, resentful or both. Australia has too many of these children.

Barely half of all teenagers from low-income households finish Year 12, according to the Gonski review. Among students from middle-income families only two thirds complete Year 12. Even in high income households one in four teenagers fail to finish Year 12. That is a national disgrace for a prosperous nation.

It represents a tragic waste of human potential because the research on this issue is clear. Children who don't finish high school have higher rates of unemployment, ill health, criminal behaviour and poor personal relationships in adulthood, than those who finish Year 12.

Our society is developing extra layers of complexity and our children are caught up in that process. Talk to any teacher and they will tell you that getting children to love and value learning is an increasingly difficult job. Twenty three per cent of Australian children start primary school already behind scratch, with developmental problems in behavior, language, cognitive skills or physical health, according to the federal government's Australian Early Development Index.

In poor neighbourhoods, the rates of developmental problems among children are even higher. Even for many students without these problems, their lack of enthusiasm for learning is something that troubles all schools, regardless of postcode.

Teachers and schools should no longer be expected to bear these responsibilities alone. Thankfully governments across the political spectrum are starting to realise that. The Baillieu government's new policy, 'Developing Victoria as a Learning Community'', encourages government schools to establish partnerships with the philanthropic, not-for-profit and corporate sectors.

The Gillard government has a similar approach, promoting community- school partnerships that draw on the voluntary expertise businesses and non-profit groups can provide, through mentoring, scholarships and work experience.

Ten years ago many supporters of government schools would have recoiled at the idea of such arrangements, fearful they were merely a way for businesses to flog their brand.

But as more partnerships appear, that initial hostility has waned.

The big city law firm mentoring students in a struggling school, the business that funds a student scholarship or the engineer helping a class build a solar powered car, are not part of a commercial transaction.

They bring something more precious than money to government schools, which educate 80 per cent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

They bring cultural capital – the sort of opportunities and aspirational beliefs - children in disadvantaged homes so often miss out on. Many of these children

lead lives constrained by their family circumstances. They rarely move beyond their neighborhood, they struggle to see the relevance of schoolwork or imagine a future much different from that of their parents.

By injecting extra expertise into schools to help teachers, partnerships can make school a more meaningful and exciting place to be, not only for students disengaged from learning but for all students.

A vital recommendation of the Gonski review has been largely overshadowed by the hubbub over the funding model price tag. It urged governments to change unfriendly tax laws that make it almost impossible to donate to government schools and to make it easier for philanthropists to develop partnerships with schools that need help.

There is enormous goodwill in the community to do this. Business enthusiasm for education philanthropy has been growing steadily in Australia.
The London Benchmarking Group's latest report measuring corporate social responsibility investment in Australia by 44 leading companies, reveals the category of education and young people has been the top priority for corporate community spending since 2010.

Philanthropic trusts, funded by individuals and businesses, are eager to provide scholarships, mentoring, professional expertise and donations to help schools, according to a recent survey by the Australian Council for Educational Research. It found many schools wanted such help. Yet both groups often lacked the time or expertise to reach out to one another, with the thicket of complex tax laws being a huge turnoff. Some progress is occurring. For example our organisation was established to overcome these logistical roadblocks and help bring philanthropists and schools together.

The benefits for business from involvement in philanthropy have been well-documented. Companies that embrace volunteering and other types of corporate social responsibility have higher levels of productivity, staff satisfaction and lower staff turnover.

The Gonski review highlighted the importance of closing the wide achievement gap between Australia's best and lowest performing students. Instinctively business knows that the path to national economic and social health runs through Australia's classrooms. It will take a community effort to get us there.