School funding changes fall short of a pass mark

The debate over our school system is as complex as it is controversial. Bring up the topic of school funding at any social event and you’re guaranteed to find a range of vehemently held opinions. But one thing most people can agree on is that the system is not working; it’s not serving our children either fairly or well, and governments ought make this an urgent priority.

Revelations in *The Age* this week that some of Melbourne’s most prestigious private schools will see their funding rise by up to $34 million over the next decade under the Turnbull government’s school funding changes are concrete proof, if more was needed, that the socioeconomic status model of allocating funding is broken.

The mantra of school choice is also fuelling unhealthy competition.

There are blatant loopholes in the SES model, and school funding more broadly. For example, private schools enrolling high-performing students from non-English speaking choice is itself corrupting the system.

As *The Age* revealed recently, more than half of Victorian parents do not send their children to the local public school. A high proportion of parents are opting to go outside their area in search of higher performing schools, both public and private, and are priming their children with coaching for interviews and scholarships or private tuition in instruments and languages that will increase their chance of being accepted to public schools outside their zone.

We have seen disturbing evidence that within the same area one public school becomes the sought-after, high-performing option, while the other is relegated to taking those with no choice. This phenomenon is unfair to the students and deepens inequities within the school system.

The enrolment criteria and selection process for many of these more sought-after public schools is often less than clear and has moved a long way from the stated goal of local schools serving their communities.

The evidence shows us that the mantra of school choice is also fuelling unhealthy competition between schools, rather than co-operation and sensible resource sharing in the public as well as the private sector.

And what of the disturbingly high
backgrounds and public schools cherry-picking the highest-performing local students while excluding others. In both cases schools are flaunting the intent of the funding regime but continue to financially benefit.

Despite federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham's energetic defence of the SES model, arguing that it has been reviewed and reformed and is a credible way to measure families' capacity to contribute, it's clear this model is inadequate.

It's worth recalling that the Gonski review described the SES model as susceptible to a "potentially large degree of inaccuracy" and recommended it be replaced.

While the government defends its funding changes, arguing they support families' right to choose the school they think best for their child, there is a strong argument that this preoccupation with the concept of number of students who fail to complete school. As the accepted wisdom goes, we ought be judged by how we serve the least fortunate.

It is surely unacceptable that 26 per cent of students fail to finish school or a vocational equivalent.

Genuine reform of school funding ought include an overhaul of the SES system to ensure that it is actually achieving its purpose - to level the playing field and give all children an equal opportunity to receive a good education. But the system is also blinded by the preoccupation with achieving high ATAR scores - and encourages families to have the same narrow focus.

Any truly equitable funding model ought be biased in favour of those students needing more help, not those schools that have managed to screw better deals out of the politicians and the broken system over the years.