Pyne finds extra Gonski money, but how should it be spent?

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During the Cold War, both the Soviets and the Americans were trying to develop a way to write in space. American entrepreneurs spent an unknown sum developing a “space pen”, while the Soviets initially just used a pencil.

Clearly, the American pen was technologically the most advanced tool while the Soviet pencil was basic. Yet, each was capable of writing in a zero gravity environment.

As we see the government once again do a black flip on Gonski funding and giving an extra $1.2 billion to states that have now signed up, the question is: how should the money be spent?

Do we really need to spend money on a high-tech educational solution, like the Americans did? Or should we focus, like the Soviets, on achieving a similar outcome with substantially less?

Far too often governments in Australia, at both a state and federal level, believe that the best way to solve a problem in education is to throw money at it. Unfortunately, while they may
have all the right intentions, the problem is their actions have not always culminated in improved student outcomes.

For example, in 2007-08, the federal government spent roughly A$12,000 per student in government schools. Yet in spite of this expenditure, over the years there has been a relative decline in student outcomes and as a result, student performance in Australia has either stagnated or fallen behind.

The question at hand is not why students have fallen behind but rather how have schools used their funds to try to improve outcomes?

As Australian education experts Allan Luke and Felicity McArdle outline in a recent journal article, the professional development and educational consultant industry has expanded greatly in recent years. It is now a multi-million dollar educational enterprise.

This situation has been further compounded through the introduction of standardised testing. School administrators, who are trying to improve their school’s scores on standardised tests, are looking to this army of well-paid educational consultants because, too often, they themselves are unable or incapable of analysing their own school data.

As Dean of Education at the University of Western Australia Professor Helen Wildy notes, many principals don’t use data for decision making because they lack confidence in interpreting it. Instead they are more likely to use it for marketing or promoting their schools, not for school improvement.

No matter how the Gonski funding model unfolds, there is a danger that, like the Americans, schools will opt to focus on high-end cost programs, controlled and implemented by a sea of educational consultants, to address their challenges. When instead what they should be doing is to find ways in which they could take on direct ownership of the challenges confronting their schools.

After all, these educational consultants are not in the “business of education” but rather the “education business”. Schools need to seek out home grown solutions; solutions from within the organisation – ones that would like be just as effective but less expensive.

Stanford’s Linda Darling-Hammond suggests that schools need to become action research areas. What Darling-Hammond proposes is that highly skilled administrators, in conjunction with equally skilled teachers, explore together the challenges facing their schools.

This approach reflects a great deal more ownership, and as such, will facilitate school-based solutions to school-based challenges. It will in effect see people who are really in the “business of education” – the people who use pencils, if you will – given the opportunity to make real changes for the better.

Consequently, if current and future administrators lack the skills to undertake the necessary research within their schools, simply giving money to schools may in a number of instances not have the desired impact.

We may well find their schools throwing money at educational consultants to deliver a quick-fix to their long standing problems. No matter what happens with school funding, making sure the funds go towards ‘pencil’ solutions is vital.