How good are our schools?

There must be an election in the air!
Ms Julia Gillard, our Prime Minister, recently announced her education reform agenda announcing she would pump $6.5 billion into the nation’s schools over six years from 2014. This was her response to the Gonski Review, written by Sydney businessman David Gonski, which called for increased funding for schools in areas of disadvantage, noting that poor and indigenous students are more likely to suffer poor educational outcomes. It warned that Australian school standards are slipping compared to global standards.

Results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have just been released. PISA is an international study that was launched by the OECD in 1997. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years by assessing 15 year-olds’ competencies in the key subjects: Reading, Mathematics and Science. To date over 70 countries and economies have participated in PISA. Just over 14,000 students from 353 schools randomly selected across states and the three school sectors around Australia took part in PISA 2009.

Six countries: Shanghai - China, Korea, Finland, Hong Kong - China, Singapore and Canada scored significantly higher in reading literacy than Australia. Three of these - Finland, Hong Kong and Canada - had outperformed Australia in reading literacy in PISA 2006 as well. Twelve countries performed significantly higher than Australia in mathematical literacy in 2009 - seven who had beaten us in 2003 and 2006 as well with one of them being Liechtenstein! Australian students recorded a mean score of 527 points on the scientific literacy with six countries higher, Shanghai - China being the highest on 575.

An interesting but not surprising result for Australia was the results based on geographical location. Students in metropolitan schools scored on average much better results than their remote counterparts. Across the three areas of study, the gap between metropolitan and remote schools averaged approximately one and a half years of schooling. Similarly, gender difference in reading and literacy in favour of females was significant. The average difference between males and females in Australia represented one full year of schooling. However, males tended to shine in Mathematics. I have not even mentioned the disparity with indigenous performances.

There are clear signs of serious issues that must be faced by the government. Australia has chosen to participate in PISA in order to monitor national outcomes - the challenge is to act on these findings!

Mr Stewart Ross

“..... Australian school standards are slipping compared to global standards.”