**CHRIS BONNOR transcript S1 Ep4.mp3**

**Speaker 1 is Jane** [00:00:10] Hi, and welcome to Talking Teachers. I'm Jane Hunter. This is an Australian Education podcast series wherein each episode will be exploring what is working and what isn't in our schools. We'll be talking to some of the most informed people in the field and asking questions about the big issues in education. We also want to investigate if it's at all possible to find new solutions to the current challenges in school based education. I'm co-hosting this series with my colleague Don Carter, and we're both teacher education academics at UTS. Hi, Don. Very excited about this podcast. I wondered who we've got today.

**Speaker 2 is Don** [00:01:00] Jane, I am excited about this. We've got someone who's well known in the education community and beyond, Mr. Chris Bonnor. And I need to do a quick introduction because he has many, many achievements. Chris Bonner is a former New South Wales school principal, an education writer, speaker, advocate for public schools. He served as president of the New South Wales Secondary Principals Council and he's author of The Stupid Country and What Makes a Good School. Both written with Jane Caro and his latest publication is Waiting for Gonski How Australia Failed Its Schools. Written with Tom Greenwell. And it's quite a list, I think you'd agree.

**Speaker 1** [00:01:40] Absolutely. And there's some of my favorite literature in education, but also his opinion pieces that he writes from time to time. I picked up them by the mainstream media. Yes, can't wait to hear what Chris has to share.

**Speaker 2** [00:02:01] Chris, welcome to the program. We've got a few questions for you and we want to let you know that at the end of the interview, we're going to give you the chance to do a 30 second rant on the topic of your choice. And we're not going to interrupt. We're just going to let you go for it. But to start, let's go to a piece in The Sydney Morning Herald that you wrote in September this year, and I'm quoting you here, when I say we've spent decades arguing the toss about schools. Some people have extolled the virtues of competition and choice. Others have lamented the social community and national cost of such a system. There have been endless debates about who pays and how much. Chris The question is why and why is this going on? Endlessly, it seems.

**Speaker 3 is Chris** [00:02:46] Thanks, Jane, and thanks to both of you for the opportunity to say something today. I really appreciate it. Look, it's because we've left so many things undone going back decades. It's not just about funding. It's about the whole relationship between quite different school sectors and the things that get in the way. We have, for example, never solved the problem of what a problems that are going to arise If you have a public system available to all students from all families in all places, under all circumstances, and a private system that has very few of those obligations. How do those two systems co-exist? And particularly when one of the systems is substantially privately funded and one substantially publicly funded, it hasn't worked in other countries. We must ask ourselves, why isn't working here? It's the undone work, the stuff we haven't done, and also we haven't solved the problem of equity. And every time we embark on creating an equity, equitable funding system, we don't do anything about school fees. Because while governments may have an equity intention, private providers use private funding and the boost of that private funding at the top end of schooling undermines the equity intention. In fact, some people call it as a funding system at war with itself, which I love. I love that phrase. It's not my I'll just love it. And the other thing is we need to create, as well as the funding, we need to create a level playing field in the relationship between schools. We've never had that in favor of since public education was established back in the 19th century. And that that's really important. We need to create some structural reform that, in return for public funding, creates a similar raft of obligations on the part of all schools, regardless of sector. And we could come back to that more later. But unless we do that, unless we embark on those deep structural reforms that have made to our system, which is an oddly unique system in the in the in amongst equivalent countries. Until we do that, we won't make a breakthrough with funding.

**Speaker 1** [00:05:05] Chris that's fascinating. And part of the issue around equity and you've written extensively in this area, but what I was really interested in, in your 2020 book with Tom Greenwell titled ‘Waiting for Gonski’, you talk about you've got a fabulous quote in there from our former prime minister. It seems such a long time ago now, John Howard and his education minister at the time that they both perpetrated a hoax on the religious poor. What was that all about, in view of what you've just mentioned about the level playing field?

**Speaker 3** [00:05:44] Yes. Thanks, Don. I think the issue there is that both John Howard and David Kemp, his education minister, introduced substantial funding of non-government schools. And the rationale behind that was that it would make schools accessible, more widely accessible to including the poor. But of course, what happened was because it happened in a context that didn't have regulation, didn't have any government say so over what happened, the fees kept going up. The religious poor were not able to access non-government schools of their religious choice. That was the hoax. And of course, that hoax continues. And there's many hoaxes about school funding. But that was the most glaring error. And I wonder if we'll ever get to the stage where the architects of that system are called to account, given that the evidence since then shows that it was never going to happen.

**Speaker 2** [00:06:45] Thanks, Chris. And that's an interesting point, particularly now that we have a new federal government, and we have a new federal education minister. If you could get the new Minister, Jason Clare, into the room with you, what advice would you give him now?

**Speaker 3** [00:07:00] Minister, have a look at what your predecessors did and the fact that it hasn't worked and avoid trying to do the same thing. You we don't need you as well to play out Eisenstein’s definition of insanity, you know, doing the same things repeatedly and expecting different results. Stop ignoring the enduring reality that Australia's whole framework of schools is designed to create hierarchies of kids, schools, and communities. It's designed to create winners and losers while making little, if any, progress. Really, we have to ask yourself and ask others why equivalent countries don't have the same system we have.

**Speaker 1** [00:07:43] Just wondering, in view of what you've said, Chris, this idea of, you know, not reinventing the wheel or going over the same ground, do you see that there are signs of hope here?

**Speaker 3** [00:07:57] No and the main reason, Jane, I think, is that it's in the too hard basket. For example, in the book, we propose fully government funding all non-government schools on certain conditions that they that they do not charge fees open their schools to. In fact, the religious poor and all poor, for that matter. And the main reason is that the structural changes that are needed are substantially, in a sense, intrusive because we are really challenging the way the non-government school system in fact operates by accepting substantial government funding. In fact, some cases as much funding as goes to government schools, enrolling students from similar backgrounds, but also topping up that funding with fees. And it is the fees that are the discriminator. Essentially, fees enable schools to not enroll certain students. Not that the schools would intend to do that. That's the way the system works. What we propose is that because they're almost fully government funded, that the non-government schools drop fees entirely in return for full government funding and certainly a raft of obligations and regulations about how they should operate and in which ways they should be accountable. In that way, choice becomes real. We're not anti-choice. In fact, such a system would expand choice because the religious poor, the victims of that hoax we are talking about earlier would have access to a school that might reflect their beliefs. If we could do that, it would be a substantial breakthrough. But of course, the the vested interests that lie behind the pick groups that lie behind the non-government schools, not so much the schools themselves certainly wouldn't entertain that. I mean, I would like to see the discussion evolve and I guess I would like to be able to ask. Archbishop, do you mean to say you don't want this system because you must enroll the poor? In other words, what's happening unfortunately, in Australia is that religious schools are becoming associated with excluding rather than including and the people who run those schools I know would not want that to happen. Ideally, they would want to open their schools. But I suspect the peak groups wouldn't entertain it for one minute.

**Speaker 2** [00:10:19] Chris, you've mentioned vested interests and it made me think of that claim. For example, there are vested interests who are very keen on maintaining that plan in its current form. There's an HSC industry in New South Wales, for example, and stacking between somewhere. All of these vested interests are teachers. Is there too much pressure on teachers these days?

**Speaker 3** [00:10:43] Yes, there is, and it is driven by a belief in what education should be about and the place of measurable outcomes as almost the sole indicator of teacher quality and school quality. Whereas it's not. I mean, in the last decade I've been strongly associated with a group of innovative schools, the big picture schools, where the whole framework of learning and teaching changes with very, very high student engagement, very focused young people who know what they want to do after school, when they leave school, and make sure their schooling experiences help them reach that goal. You know, if you're going to measure those schools against the outcomes that we value, the results, the HSC results, we would simply dismiss them as viable education institutions. Whereas the reverse is the case, that strong level, we should start to measure things like engagement. We should start to measure belief in learning that could be held by young people because that is what is going to carry them through their later life, not their net blown scores it while they're at school. That won't carry them very far. But that belief that if their life falls apart, they can go. Go back and start again. I can go back and learn again in different ways for different pathways, for a different future.

**Speaker 1** [00:12:07] It seems, Chris, you know, you mentioned big picture a moment ago, and it almost seems that we're at a point now where parents and communities are looking for alternatives. And there's a group of very progressive principals in New South Wales who are also keen to move in different directions, to not value the ATAR, not value the HSC as we've known it. If you look what is coupled with that, you see lots of parents who are home schooling their young people and their children because the mainstream schools simply doesn't fit their child's needs. What do you say to that as a way of addressing how we move education around and satisfy some of the equity issues that you have campaigned for so long about?

**Speaker 3** [00:13:02] Yes, I think in many ways, and I started thinking this sort of 20 or 30 years ago in schools, it's the assessment and ranking accreditation tail that wags the school dog. In other words, if we can change that tale, if we can change that endpoint, we can change schools. But any school that wants to change within the structure that we have imposed on them at the moment seem to be outriders. And that's really hard. Therefore under our current system, really, schools are driven by those external measures and the whole behavior of schools, the culture of schools is one of competition, not to become innovators, not to become better in that way, in the learning, the fundamentals of learning in the classroom. But they become they compete with each other to bring inside the gate those students that would most enhance their reputation. Now, I've seen that as a school principal over 15 years, and I've seen it as a peak group head and I've seen it as a consultant. And it's very distressing to see that the innate quality of a school takes second place to making it to the school or the system, wanting to make sure it has a place in the sun and is noticed that's not serving young people and it's not really in the long term delivering the outcomes we want to see.

**Speaker 2** [00:14:25] Chris, you mentioned schools that are doing great things and beyond test results and it could be a school who have improved their retention rates for their students or attendance rates rather. It's really difficult to measure the worth of a school when you were just measuring a narrow set of five indicators, basically. That's leading me to ask the next question. What do you think about performance pay for teachers?

**Speaker 3** [00:14:56] It's one of those global education reform movement type initiatives that people like me that have been in the system for a long time simply respond by saying, well, we actually tried that in 1995. It didn't end well. We just doubled down on stuff that doesn't work. And I think one of the reasons we do that is that governments and school systems in looking for solutions, go for the low hanging fruit, go for the stuff that resonates, particularly with the critics on the conservative side. But it doesn't work. And after two decades, we're entitled to ask, shouldn’t we start thinking outside the square? Shouldn't we go back to fundamentals in the way our whole framework of schools is organized and what we believe school education to be? What is the purpose of schooling? Why should we sit back and see it hijacked constantly by one side or the other, or by governments with different purposes? And so it goes on. Let's give the trust and the power back to schools. Yes, of course, with the accountability and everything that goes with that. But no wonder young people going through schools and coming out of schools don't want to become part of that.

**Speaker 1** [00:16:18] It almost seems we you're suggesting a bipartisan approach because we're held to the vagaries of three and four year election cycles in this country. You know, and I would suggest, you know, we're so over governed. Do you think a bipartisan approach would make a difference?

**Speaker 3** [00:16:37] You could argue that we've got a chance now, Jane, with the with the Gonski Review, one of the achievements of the Gonski review. And there's a lot that it didn't do. It didn't address the whole issue of school fees and the equity implications. But what it did do, it put equity into the conversations about schools and you'd be a very brave partisan person to say that we don't believe in equity. It's become a bit like parenthood, you know. The problem is, of course, in the structural undermining of equity in our schools to make that breakthrough, we must create different alliances, different pressure groups. And that's why Tom and I propose abolishing school fees. There is an alliance. I mean, we did face for many, many decades the alliance between the high-flying independent system and the Catholic Well, who arguably hid behind the Catholic system in appeals for more funding. But we needed to create different alliances like the alliance of those that don't have the power and don't have the money to exercise choice of schools as it is now. If we can do that, we can overcome some of the blocks created by vested interests because those blocks are still there. But we must create a different conversation if we're going to get over them.

**Speaker 2** [00:17:53] I must ask at this point, Chris, the teacher shortage in Australia is formidable, it's a crisis overseas as well. What's your view on how this has happened?

**Speaker 3** [00:18:04] It's arguably a cumulative effect of a lot of the things we've been talking about and the belief amongst young people that this is not a professional career for them. But in another article recently, I argued there's no such thing. We don't have a teacher shortage at all. If you look at this, this is the value of Julia Gillard's MySchool website proved to be a treasure in so many ways, but not in comparing schools. It's a dud there, but in the data behind schools. If you look at teacher student ratios in different schools, in different sectors, we find that for example, in the independent sector there are 7000 teachers in surplus and I use the word surplus because schools, which are all students from the similar backgrounds, get similar results. That huge number of extra teachers is not delivering measurable results. When you compare with schools that do it for less. And of course, you can't shift 7000 teachers to two to meet the 4000 shortage by 2025. But we need to understand that in all these issues, teacher supply shortage funding, there is an equity story or inequity story behind it and we really need to think about why are governments funding in in sometimes in very small ways, this surplus of teachers in schools when fair comparisons are made, arguably don't use them well and don't you don't need it.

**Speaker 2** [00:19:40] Chris, you've raised many questions and we mentioned earlier that we're going to give you a think second rant. I mean, the things that you've been talking about, I'd like to go on a 30 second rant myself, however.

**Speaker 3** [00:19:53] Well.

**Speaker 2** [00:19:53] You can pick up on any of the topics you've mentioned, introduce a new topic, but we're just going to sit and listen to you for 30 seconds while you talk.

**Speaker 3** [00:20:04] That was 30 minutes, was it? Don't look, I think I've alluded to a lot of the issues. Interestingly, I looked at the things that get in the way before Gonski and the things that get in the way after Gonski, and not a lot of them have changed. But really the big problem is this it's an inside is I'm not blaming parents about the school choices they made. John Howard created in Australia a large private education constituency. That was his biggest achievement in one sense. It means that we have one third of parents and kids and families and so on with a vested interest in not seeing any change to the system that we have that really dooms what we have to continue in perpetuity unless we can create those new conversations, a conversation that will not disadvantage those people but will really widen choice available to all families and create a far more equitable and achieving education system. If so, we need to address that big problem. We need to bring those people on board in those different conversations.

**Speaker 2** [00:21:19] And finally, Chris, is there one single way out of this for education in Australia?

**Speaker 3** [00:21:27] I think we need to understand that it's not just about funding, it's about the difference. The difference is, is schools who they bring in through the front gates and how that's having such a big impact on student achievement. If we crowd the struggles together in schools with other strugglers, we are condemning them to underachieve. And yet when we crowd the advantaged new advantaged schools, they're not doing much better. It's this impact of peers on our strugglers and the impact of peers on learning outcomes generally. That is the big, unspoken, and unseen issue in our efforts to achieve greater outcomes from kids.

**Speaker 2** [00:22:10] One final question. What advice would you give to young people as to why they should become teachers?

**Speaker 3** [00:22:19] Look, when I look back over my teaching career, yes, of course there were struggles. It was difficult, but it was just so rewarding. If we can give that trust and reward back to teachers, not necessarily the salaries, but that's part of it too. They will enjoy. They will start to enjoy the rewards and the rewards that you get as a teacher because that's what keeps you going. And that what's that's what gets you got a bit of it because you can make a difference to kids. If we can restore that. We're on a winner.

**Speaker 1** [00:22:52] Chris That's another sign of hope and really enjoyed what you've shared with us today. Thank you so much for what you've done for education and for the work that you continue to do for our teachers, for students in our communities.

**Speaker 2** [00:23:11] Thanks, Chris. That was enlightening. Very enjoyable. We'd love to have you back.

**Speaker 3** [00:23:17] Thanks, both. Thanks, Jane, and thanks. I've really enjoyed this conversation and I hope that it can spark different thinking in so many ways.

**Speaker 1** [00:23:32] Don, that was amazing. Chris always has such fresh insight for somebody who's been in education a long time. Hearing new ideas bubble up from his wisdom was really quite something.

**Speaker 2** [00:23:48] Yes, I agree. Jane. And one of the things that really impressed me was his forensic knowledge of schools and data, but also the history he knows about the history of education, about policy decisions and the ramifications. But most importantly, he understands teachers and kids in schools.

**Speaker 1** [00:24:07] I agree. And it's that sort of wisdom from his role as a principal that he brings and the fact that he has lived through so many education ministers and so many reforms. I mean, that his work on Gonski, his work with Tom Greenwell. There are so many ideas that he's continued to pursue. And really, if there was just 10% of what he's written about was taken on board by the governments of the day, perhaps we would be in a different place.

**Speaker 2** [00:24:41] Jason Clare if you're listening, get in touch with Chris. He can help.

**Speaker 1** [00:24:53] Thank you for listening to this episode of ‘Talking Teachers’. If you'd like to know more about Don and me, you can look at the UTS website, simply Google UTS Teacher Education, where you'll also find show notes for this podcast. The podcast was produced by William Verity for Impact Studios at UTS, which specializes in turning research into quality audio. We wish to acknowledge that the series is being recorded on Gadigal Land of the Aurora Nation. We thank and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.