

PM sets scene for battle with states
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Prime Minister Julia Gillard has laid down the gauntlet to the states in a speech on school funding that was heavy on rhetoric — we are supposed to join a "national crusade" to eradicate the "moral wrong" of a denied education — and low on substance.

She vowed she would not be "held to ransom" by states who were not genuinely committed to reform. The states must contribute their "fair share", Gillard insisted, there was to be "no sleight of hand, no fiddling of the books".

There will be several federal elections before 2025 and the Coalition has already vowed to repeal any legislation if elected next year.

It was, as one wag said on Twitter, as if she was negotiating with terrorists not the jurisdictions that actually run government schools.

The speech is likely to raise the hackles of Coalition states, particularly given Gillard was — yet again — unprepared to name the sum the federal government was prepared to contribute.

Victoria, the state most hostile to the funding reforms to date, has repeatedly pointed out that the federal government does not run a single school.

However Gillard is insisting on reforms to improve teacher quality and student performance in exchange for extra funding — areas that have traditionally been the responsibility of the states and territories.

Some of these reforms seem specious. Gillard says under the government's plan, students will need to be at the top of their class to get into teaching at university. However university entrance rankings are based in part on demand for courses and while teaching remains a relatively low-paid, low-status profession this seems unlikely.

Victoria is frustrated it has been left in the dark despite the fact the states and territories are supposed to be equal partners in school funding negotiations.

Indeed Federal School Education Minister Peter Garrett rang the Victorian state education minister Martin Dixon at 10.45 this morning — less than two hours before the Prime Minister delivered her speech.

No new information was provided beyond what the federal government has steadily leaked to the media over the past two weeks.

There were few surprises in the speech. Gillard repeated her "legislated national goal" for Australia to be ranked in the top five countries in the world in maths, reading and science by 2025. Four of the top five schooling systems in the world — Shanghai, Singapore, Korea and Hong Kong — are in our region and yet "we aren't in that coveted top five".

Gillard wants "our kids to catch Shanghai's kids" in PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results, which are effectively a world league table.

This is a never-never goal — it ignores the fact there will be several federal elections before 2025 and the Coalition has already vowed to repeal any legislation if elected next year.

It also overlooks some of the reasons why Asian students excel, such as the Confucian emphasis on education, intense use of coaching schools, the focus on testing and long days including hours of homework.

However by couching school funding reform in terms of excellence, rather than equity, even if the "legislated national goal" seems far-fetched, the federal government probably believes it is less likely to be accused of left-wing ideology.

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