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Back to drawing board for Gonski, says Christopher Pyne

LAUREN WILSON THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 25, 2013 12:00AM

EDUCATION Minister Christopher Pyne has declared the new Coalition government will go "back to the drawing board" on the administration of billions of dollars in school funding, claiming Labor's so-called Gonski reforms are a "shambles" and impossible to implement.

As the opposition accused the Coalition of backing away from its "unity ticket" on school funding, Mr Pyne told The Australian the Abbott government planned to review all aspects of Labor's education funding reforms, amid revelations Kevin Rudd never signed off on the \$1.6 billion deal with the Catholic education sector, nor finalised bilateral funding agreements with the Victorian and Tasmanian state governments before the September election.

"Everything needs to be examined fresh, because the model that Labor came up with is a shambles and quite unimplementable," Mr Pyne said.

The senior Liberal frontbencher criticised the former government's overhaul of the school funding system, describing it as complicated, devoid of transparency and "much worse" than the Howard government's socio-economic status-based funding model it replaced.

"We are going back to the drawing board because we don't have any choice," he said.

Mr Pyne's remarks are set to escalate accusations from Labor that Tony Abbott is breaking the pre-election promise he made when he said there was "no difference" between he and Mr Rudd on school funding.

The Coalition committed during the election campaign to provide the same \$2.8bn "funding envelope" to schools over the next four years, but rejected the "strings attached" to the Labor Better Schools model and promised it would reduce the amount of central control the commonwealth would have.

Mr Pyne yesterday reiterated the Abbott government had no plans to reduce the overall level of funding pledged to schoolchildren, nor attempt to renegotiate the funding agreements due to start at the beginning of the next school year.

But he claimed Labor's Better Schools plan was a "sham", and that of the 9600 Australian schools, only 900 schools in the independent sector would be required to implement all aspects of the national school funding model crafted by businessman David Gonski.

"None of the other states and territories are applying the national school funding model," he said.

"They have licence to do whatever they want. The idea of a national school funding model is a sham."

Mr Pyne said there would have to be changes to education reform laws passed by Labor, but denied he was killing off the Gonski reforms because "there is no such thing as the Gonski model; there was never any attempt to implement Gonski".

Bill Shorten earlier accused the government of a policy backflip.

"For the Coalition now to say one thing before the election - and remember they invented the term in regard to education policy, they said there is a 'unity ticket' in education funding - and what happened to this so-called 'unity ticket' after the election?" the Opposition Leader said in response to the Coalition's decision to point out that the agreements with Catholic schools and the Victorian and Tasmanian governments were not set in stone.

Opposition education spokeswoman Kate Ellis accused the government of walking away from school funding reforms just two weeks into the new parliamentary term.

"We need to be very clear that if Tony Abbott rips up these school funding agreements, he is not just ripping up a commitment that he made to the Australian people, but he is ripping up the opportunity for our children to have a better future and a better education," she said.

National Catholic Education Commission executive director Ross Fox confirmed a legal agreement for the school funding reforms still needed to be signed.

Speaking to The Australian he said there were some "very good things" about the Better Schools reforms put in place by Labor, but he said Catholic schools would welcome any move to improve the funding model. "The best feature of the new arrangements are the ability of the most needy and disadvantaged students to be supported with funding irrespective of the school they attend," Mr Fox said. But he said there was nevertheless, "an opportunity to streamline some of the things relating to reporting."

Mr Gonski could not be contacted last night.

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