

Why Not the Best Schools? What we have learned from outstanding schools around the world

by **Brian Caldwell and Jessica Harris**

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Before the 1990s, comparing school systems and levels of student achievement in different countries was practically impossible. Two major international studies, the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), changed that situation and have had a profound impact on education policy analysis. There is much interest in the release of new findings every four years, and movements in a country's ranking are used as markers of success or failure of education reform efforts.

In *Why Not the Best Schools?* Brian Caldwell and Jessica Harris build upon the information provided by PISA and TIMSS, but focus on the characteristics of successful schools rather than successful systems. The book describes the findings of an international study called the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools, involving thirty schools in six countries—Australia, China, England, Finland, USA, and Wales. In each country, five schools were selected for study after being identified as successful schools operating with relatively high levels of autonomy.

The authors were guided by the question of what happens at the individual school level to produce outstanding outcomes, and whether the 'best' schools have any features in common. They concluded

that there are five key factors in creating a successful school. Four are categorised as types of resources or 'capital'—intellectual, social, spiritual, and financial. The fifth factor is good governance, which builds and aligns these resources. At the end of the book, these general criteria are synthesised into a ten-point, ten-year plan that the authors contend would transform all schools into great schools.

The first two chapters of the book provide the background and context of the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools and a review of recent major research that has been influential on schools policy, particularly PISA results and the 2007 McKinsey report 'How the world's best performing school systems come out on top.' The strongest findings from these sources are for the importance of autonomy, accountability and choice. The benefits of private schools as levers for system-level improvement are also canvassed.

Chapters three to seven comprise the bulk of the book and deal with the five factors identified as necessary for success. Caldwell and Harris state that intellectual capital—to which teacher quality makes the largest contribution—is 'pre-eminent' among the forms of capital required by schools (p. 56). They find that successful schools have a relatively high capacity to select their staff and that they engage in regular, school-generated professional development programs. Again, school autonomy, or 'self-management' in the old parlance, is emphasised.

The chapter on financial capital is called 'more money is not enough.' It argues that financial capital is

important, but increased funding at the system level does not always lead to better outcomes. Instead, Caldwell and Harris found that successful schools tend to have greater flexibility in budgeting, conditional on accountability.

In the last two chapters of the book, the authors draw on their findings to put forward the case for a transformation of education. One of the more interesting offerings is a 'fourth way' for schools, which would involve 'fully-funded, non-fee schools along the lines of the popular charter and voucher schools in New York and Sweden' (p. 154). Throughout the book, strong evidence is presented for the advantages conferred on schools and school systems by policies that provide a prudent combination of autonomy and accountability for schools. Research is cited showing that 'the choice and competition created by private schools improves student performance at the system level,' and that system-wide performance is enhanced when there is a 'level-playing field' for funding (p. 26).

The sentiment of this proposal is worthy and welcome. Brian Caldwell has frequently supported the idea of creating a funding model that doesn't discriminate between schools on the basis of government or non-government status. This book does not take up the issue in much detail, for example the issue of fees is not resolved sufficiently, but this policy idea does make it onto the list of strategies to 'revolutionise' education, albeit towards the bottom.

At the top of the list of strategies is the introduction of a national curriculum, and this is one of the few areas in which the book and I part company. Caldwell and Harris believe that the importance of a national curriculum is clear. The rationale they offer is that four of the



six countries in their study have a national curriculum, the exceptions being Australia and the United States. I am not sure the need for a national curriculum in Australia is at all clear, but the writing is already on the wall.

For each of the top four strategies recommended by Caldwell and Harris—national curriculum, improving teacher quality, diversity and specialisation in schooling, and scrapping national testing—they invoke the example of Finland to support their arguments. Given that Finland is at the top of PISA rankings, it is easy to understand why. Countries around the world can learn from Finland's success, but there are good reasons to also look elsewhere for policy ideas.

One of the most controversial schools policies introduced (but yet to be implemented) by the Rudd government is school performance reporting based on national tests. Caldwell and Harris note that Finland has no national tests and no school-by-school performance reporting. They argue that if teacher quality is sufficiently high, there should be no need for such a program, and suggest it should be phased out. This is another area in which I am in disagreement. Australia is very different from Finland and requires a different policy response in the short- to medium-term. Undeniably, improving teacher quality to a more uniformly high level is essential to wide-scale improvement in educational outcomes, but this will require a long-term effort—at least the ten years proposed by Caldwell and Harris.

Caldwell has been a force for good in Australian schools for decades. Along with Jim Spinks and Don Haywood, he was seminal in the decentralisation of Victoria's schools, which gave them autonomy in staffing and budgeting well before

it was fashionable. More recently, Caldwell wrote a paper on school choice with John Roskam for the Menzies Research Centre, again putting himself in the firing line from many colleagues in education academia by expressing a position that was somewhat unpopular at that time.

Why Not the Best Schools is a good contribution to the information available about how to improve schools. It can at times be a little frustrating, as it is written in a very measured way and carefully avoids criticism of current policies or of the people and organisations that have stymied efforts to reform schools in the past. It is not what I would call a lively read, but for anyone with a genuine personal or professional interest in schools policy, it is useful.

Reviewed by Jennifer Buckingham

The Gridlock Economy: How Too Much Ownership Wrecks Markets, Stops Innovation, and Costs Lives
by Michael Heller
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Modern medicine is constantly advancing through innovations in drugs and techniques, and we depend on its ability to resolve our medical issues. While there remain diseases without cure, we assume that research is not unnecessarily inhibited and developments that could save lives are made available without undue delay.

It is both surprising and troubling, then, to find that the medical industry are sitting on or have completely abandoned an unknowable number of promising, potentially lifesaving

drugs and medical techniques for commercial and legal reasons. It is with this disconcerting revelation that Michael Heller opens his book *The Gridlock Economy*, before setting out to explain the cause of this and other examples of economic 'gridlock,' which have a crippling effect on a variety of industries and markets.

Heller is a prominent property law professor at Columbia University with a large body of respected academic work. This, his first mainstream title, is an engaging and thought-provoking read, written with the sparkle and clarity necessary for an effective, popular economics book. Avoidance of technical terms and concepts, along with clear explanations of econometric modelling results, make the book accessible for a non-economist. The text is enhanced by enlightening figures that assist with comprehension rather than merely breaking up the text.

Heller's concept of economic 'gridlock' refers to a breakdown in a market caused by the existence of an excessive number of stakeholders. In circumstances where the agreement or alignment of all those who have an interest is necessary to achieve a result, large numbers complicate the process and often lead to complete standstill. This explains the problems in medical research and development, particularly with regard to pharmaceuticals. All fields of biotechnology are crowded with a multiplicity of patents relating to small development spaces—developers, to commercialise a new drug, face the necessity of licensing many patents (for example, covering earlier drug patents on which the new development is based). If even one party holds out for a licence fee that would make production unprofitable, or flat-out refuses to licence, the drug may not be brought