SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

A collection of articles on education

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JENNIFER BUCKINGHAM

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FOREWORD

A frustrated education reformer decides to hold a séance to call up the ghost of the American philosopher of education John Dewey.

'How do I bring about effective education change?' the reformer asks.

'Do you want the realistic way or the miraculous way?' Dewey replies.

'The realistic way, of course,' says the reformer.

'OK,' says Dewey, 'I will send a million angels down from heaven to visit every classroom in Australia. They will sprinkle angel dust, and, lo and behold, the schools would be reformed.'

'If that is the realistic way, then what, pray tell, is the miraculous way?' says the reformer

'Oh,' says Dewey, 'the educators will reform themselves.'

An old joke, perhaps, but not far from the truth; there are few issues as controversial as education reform.

How teachers should be hired and paid, how outcomes should be measured (and how often), how girls' and boys' learning requirements differ, if, indeed they do, the value and funding of private schools, the relation between class size and learning outcomes, and so on and so on. Jennifer Buckingham, one of Australia's leading experts on education, covers all of these issues, and many more, in this book.

Although each educational issue has its own background, facts and nuances—admirably covered in these pithy essays—they are connected by more general political views about what makes a good society.

There are two broad points of view. On the one side are those who value individual autonomy; they demand that schools be accountable and transparent. This requires the publication of the results of external assessments of learning and the parental right to switch their children to better schools with government subsidies following the students.

The other view, widely held by professional educators, emphasises the collective good. Parents are only interested in the best for their children. Teachers and principals are professionals who should be trusted to do the best not only for each child but also for society as a whole.

As you read the essays in this book, you will quickly see that Buckingham lines up on the side of autonomy and parental choice. This does not mean that she is unaware of the social value of an educated population and the need to ensure a good outcome for all children. In fact, one of the great strengths of these essays is their demonstration that transparency and parental choice are not simply ways to give even more power to middle class parents but are the only way to ensure that children from deprived backgrounds also have the chance to reach their full potential.

Most of us have an opinion about school education, and some of us consider ourselves to be experts. Buckingham is the real thing. The essays in this book constitute a mini course in education policy—and a compulsory reading for parents, teachers, and anyone else interested in the future of our children.

Steven Schwartz
Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University
Sydney

PREFACE

One of the first times I had an opinion piece published in a newspaper, the person sitting in front of me on the bus on the way to work that morning was reading it, unaware that the person sitting behind him had written it.

This is the power of the opinion piece. It is a vehicle to reach people who don't read discussion papers or government press releases but whose lives are affected by the decisions that politicians and government bureaucrats make on their behalf every day.

At the Centre for Independent Studies, opinion writing is an essential part of our work.

CIS is not a lobby group. We don't have any special relationships with policy makers and political advisers. Being fiercely independent, we rely on the media to a large extent to give our work a wide audience. In this way, our influence on policy and our contribution to the public debate is transparent and open to scrutiny. In turn, we enjoy a high publication rate in major newspapers because we are reliable and credible.

In the decade that I have been at CIS, I have witnessed much change in the school education policy sphere. The educational disadvantages experienced by boys because of changes in curriculum and pedagogy, including the teaching of reading, have been recognised. The conventional wisdom that family circumstances determine educational outcomes has been successfully challenged, and the strong influence of teacher quality on student achievement is now accepted. Many states have made reforms to school governance to increase the role of schools in managing their budgets and selecting staff.

Both sides of politics are now speaking the language of school choice, acknowledging that public and non-government schools both play important parts in delivering quality education to Australian children. External testing and benchmarking is now routine and, later this year, parents in all states and territories will finally be able to access information about the performance of individual schools. After numerous failed attempts over the last four decades, national curricula and standards are now under development. Governments are exploring new ways to recruit and train teachers to complement the traditional pathways as the teaching profession becomes more important and is under more pressure than ever before.

The opinion pieces in this collection are a sample of my contribution to the public debates that both preceded and followed these changes—as a policy researcher at CIS and as schools editor at *The Australian* newspaper (from April 2004 to May 2005). Their publication in this volume does not mark the end of my interest or my work in this area, but rather serves to reiterate that the key themes and ideas advanced over the last decade are still relevant. While significant progress has been made, the most important principles, especially school choice, still need to be constantly defended.

Jennifer Buckingham
Research Fellow, Social Foundations program
The Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney

school choice

Schools must be truly 'public'
7 June 2000, *The Canberra Times*

DISCUSSIONS about the future of education in Australia tend to be constricted by a narrow view of the options. They revolve around the assumption that a public-private dichotomy in schooling is inescapable.

Complaints ad nauseam about the lack of funding of public schools are followed by fruitless arguments about whether private schools should be funded publicly and by how much. It's getting rather tired and there's no end in sight. Let's think outside the square for a moment.

Imagine there are no schools. What should we do? One thing is certain: no one of sound mind would set up the top-heavy, inefficient, and self-serving system we have now. Allow yourself to consider the possibilities.

One thing is certain: no one of sound mind would set up the top-heavy, inefficient, and self-serving system we have now.

(We will leave aside, at this time, the possibility that it might be decided that education is a private good and should be user-pays, because there are limits to one's imagination.) Let's say that Australians have decided that basic education is a human right and should be available to everyone, regardless of means. Therefore, it will be funded publicly.

To pay for this, a special tagged tax is introduced to cover the costs of compulsory schooling. We estimate that it costs, for example, $5,000 a year to educate a child. Each child is therefore allocated an annual education bursary of this amount.

Groups of like-minded parents and community members get together and set up schools. Other people decide to set up schools as businesses. A small number of people decide to use their children's bursaries to educate them at home.

There are no limits to the way education can be provided. There are schools that concentrate on academic results and preparation for tertiary entrance exams. There are schools that are more concerned with technical training and skills.

There are performing-arts schools, religious schools, and schools that cater for children with special needs. Parents can spend their child's education bursary wherever they choose. A few schools might decide to charge additional fees, and some parents might supplement the bursary if they can.

A small government department is established to administer funding and to provide some professional support to the education providers. This department might also be responsible for developing and administering standard tests, but it does not manage the schools nor does it have any authority over them. What do we have? Publicly funded schools that operate autonomously according to the wishes of the parents and communities that support them.

That is to say, they are truly public schools and they are driven by the needs and wants of the people who pay for them. Does this sound familiar? Probably not, because it's a scenario we are presented with very rarely. We talk about the changes that would help in the short term: community schools, limited school voucher programs such as those run in the United States, and low-fee independent schools.

The only choice available to Australian families is, in many cases, to make large financial sacrifices in order to send their children to private schools.

These certainly have their merits. Research has shown that providing parents with the means to send children to the school of their choice has significant academic benefits for children. The only choice available to Australian families is, in many cases, to make large financial sacrifices in order to send their children to private schools.

Private schools outperform public schools consistently in academic achievement. This might be because of better quality of schooling in private schools or to the characteristics of the families of private-school students. The most likely explanation involves a combination of both.

Whatever the reasons, there has been a steady drift out of the public sector. The toll for public schools is twofold: the loss of funding and the loss of many of the middle-class families who are most interested in education. However, the near future may reveal that the true rival of public schooling is not the private sector as we know it but distance education from schools in other countries, or the media corporation that offers impressive academic results in teaching the basics.

It may be that so many people vacate the public system that it collapses entirely. The only way to bring about sustained improvement in schooling and to provide real equity in education is to put it back into the hands of the people who pay for it and make education public in the true sense of the word. As usual, the devil is in the details, and there are important questions to be resolved about the nature of education and the regulation of standards.

The very idea of a whole new way of schooling may seem radical and unrealistic to many, but it is possible. The schooling debate has been bogged down by the constraints of the existing system for too long. If we can imagine a better way to educate our children, we're at least part of the way there.

Research data vouches for the choice concept

31 May 2004, *The Australian*

AUSTRALIA has a quasi-voucher system for funding non-government schools. Families who choose non-government schools receive funding as a proportion of the cost of a public school education. It is paid on a per-student basis, but goes directly to the school rather than via the parents.

A quasi-voucher system provides quasi-choice. Many parents can decide which school their child attends, because of government support, and because we live in a wealthy country. A large number of families, however, especially the most disadvantaged, have no choice.

In a full voucher system, all children would be entitled to the same level of public funding for their education, irrespective of whether they attend a public or non-government school. Possible modifications include means-testing, and supplemental funding for special needs or remote location.

The word voucher has become loaded with negative connotations.

The word voucher has become loaded with negative connotations. It could just as easily be called an 'educational entitlement.' But the purpose is the same—to provide choice in schooling to as many families as possible. Because schools would no longer have a captive market, they would have to ensure that they meet the needs and expectations of their students. And because parents would actively choose a school, they would be more likely to become involved in the education of their children. The ultimate result is improved educational quality for all students.

These are the objectives, but what is the evidence this occurs? On this page last week, Rob Durbridge, federal secretary of the Australian Education Union, wrote that there is 'no evidence that ... vouchers, where they have been tried in the US, have improved student outcomes.' In fact, there is good research showing that vouchers, as a mechanism for facilitating choice, have substantial beneficial effects.

Most research has focused on the students using vouchers. It has shown that in the United States, academic achievement levels rise faster among students using vouchers to attend the school of their choice than among comparable students. There has been some disagreement among researchers on the extent of academic improvement, but it can be concluded with confidence that the test score gains made by voucher students are positive and, particularly for African-American students, significant.

More recently, large-scale studies have looked at the broader impact of vouchers. They show a generalised effect on educational outcomes where students can exercise choice between schools.

One of the best-known voucher schemes in the United States is the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, established in 1990. More than 10,000 low-income families each year use a voucher (with value equivalent to half per-pupil spending in public schools) to enrol children in a private school of their choice. Even though this is a targeted, rather than full-voucher scheme, there is good evidence it has improved outcomes for students.

School choice is not a device for encouraging the abandonment of public schools.

Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby found that achievement increased not just among Milwaukee voucher students who went to private schools, but Milwaukee public schools in general also became more productive, as measured by test score increases in maths, science and language. She also found that this was not because the voucher students were low achievers (creating a redistribution of students), but attributes the gains to the effect of competition on schools. (Hoxby's article in the Swedish Economic Policy Review has detailed and sophisticated analyses of these and other school-choice outcomes.)

Florida has two voucher programs. One is for children with disabilities. The other, called the A+ Accountability Program, applies to all public school students whose schools are underperforming. Students in Florida public schools that fail to achieve the state assessment benchmarks twice in a four-year period can change to another public school, or use a full-tuition voucher to enrol in a private school.

A study by Jay Greene and Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research showed the extent of test-score improvement in Florida public schools varied with the likelihood that students would, and could, choose to go to a different school. Florida public schools that had failed at least twice in a four-year period, making them most vulnerable to a loss of students through vouchers, had test-score gains five times higher than schools that faced no threat from vouchers.

In Sweden, privately run independent schools are funded at the same per capita rate as municipal (government) schools. Research published last year revealed that academic achievement in government schools is higher in municipalities with larger shares of students in independent schools, that is, in areas where students are more likely to exercise choice.

These are a sample of the best studies on vouchers and school choice. They are large-scale, methodologically rigorous, and peer-reviewed. They provide evidence that school choice works. School choice is not a device for encouraging the abandonment of public schools. Its potency does not rely on the argument that state education is failing in any way.

School choice is an important principle in its own right, and rests on the premise that parents should have primary responsibility for the education of their children, including choice of schooling. It means that whatever school students attend—public, Catholic or independent—they are there because they choose to be.

Hand up, Mr Chips

3 July 2004, *The Australian*

WHEN reminiscing about school life, our sharpest memories are of teachers who inspired us, bored us, or made our lives miserable. Few people have encountered the likes of 'Mr Chips,' but many of us fondly recall teachers whose love of their subject and enthusiasm for teaching made a deep impression.

But education research has been at odds with this view of schooling. The prevailing belief has been that children's experiences at home have a greater effect on their education than their experiences at school. Poverty was seen as an almost insurmountable obstacle to a good education.

In recent years, however, there has been something of a revolution in our understanding of what influences student achievement. There is a growing consensus among researchers that poor children can do well at school—if they have strong teachers. 'Invest in building the capacity of teachers and you get improved outcomes regardless of family characteristics like low income,' says Ken Rowe, research director at the Australian Council for Educational Research.

There is a growing consensus among researchers that poor children can do well at school—if they have strong teachers.

This is a reversal of conventional wisdom. In the 1960s, several large studies by sociologists made controversial findings. The Coleman report in the United States and the Plowden report in the United Kingdom found children's home life largely determined student performance and that schools had little effect.

The findings met with scepticism. Researcher James S Coleman later re-analysed his data, and said that some school factors had not been considered and he had put too much emphasis on home environment. Nevertheless, these reports are still influential and among the most frequently quoted school studies.

Many people continue to argue the influence of family circumstances on school performance is too great to ignore. Richard Teese, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Melbourne, has shown low socio-economic areas tend to have the lowest levels of school completion and achievement, and that this relationship has become entrenched over more than half a century. This suggests a direct relationship between family background and student achievement. It also suggests a direct link between financial resources and school performance.

But several education researchers now argue that family background is less important than other factors, particularly student ability and the quality of teaching. Relationships between school resources, family income, and student achievement have been revealed to be more complex, an insight achieved largely because of the development and use of more sophisticated statistical techniques.

Rowe and Gary Marks, of the Melbourne Institute for Applied Economic and Social Research, are among researchers suggesting old methods of analysing student achievement—looking at the characteristics of entire areas or even whole schools—are inaccurate and do not give meaningful information about individuals. There is, therefore, a need to reassess priorities for schools. If it is now understood that schools are not hostage to the socio-economic profile of their students, we need to know what influences student achievement, and what this means for education policy and practice.

Comparisons of OECD countries in the report 'Education at a Glance 2003' show low-spending countries do not necessarily have poor results and vice versa.

According to Eric Hanushek, a US expert on the economics of education and school quality, there is no direct relationship between school funding and school performance. Comparisons of OECD countries in the report 'Education at a Glance 2003' show low-spending countries do not necessarily have poor results and vice versa. After conducting and reviewing hundreds of studies, Hanushek concludes that putting more money into an inefficient system will not produce the desired results. 'It would be easy,' Hanushek wrote this year in the journal *Education Next*, 'if we could improve quality by simply spending more or by reducing class size. But, unfortunately, evidence from both the US and other countries shows that more school resources and smaller classes do not have much of an effect on how much a student learns in school, as measured by tests of achievement.'

This does not mean that money has no effect; rather, some spending policies are better than others. Public funding inevitably is limited, so the most cost-effective education strategies must be sought. International research is pointing to teachers as the key to improving educational outcomes. Rowe is putting this message across in Australia.

Using data from the Victorian Certificate of Education Data Project, which analysed results from 270,000 Year 12 students in 53 subjects, Rowe and colleagues found teacher effects accounted for 59 percent of variation in student achievement, after controlling for student ability, sex, and school sector. Differences between schools accounted for only 5.5 percent.

'Many of us now know, based on meta-analyses, that there are effective schools, but only to the extent they have effective teachers,' Rowe says. 'Above all, such findings serve to emphasise that it is at the level of the classroom that learning takes place and that there can be very substantial differences in the progress made by students in different classes within the same school. 'Indeed, teachers make a difference—regardless of student gender intake or other background characteristics.'

In that case, the best investment is in teachers—but it may not be merely a case of increasing salaries, as unions have tended to argue. Rowe argues for increased spending on professional development, while others, including Hanushek, claim teachers also need personal incentives such as performance bonuses.

Teacher quality also has implications for inequalities between schools. Rowe's data suggests lower socio-economic areas have lower-performing schools because they tend to have less effective teachers. The 2002 Vinson report on public education in NSW and a recent report on primary schools for the federal Department of Education, Science and Training revealed a concentration of inexperienced teachers in disadvantaged areas.

This is possibly due to the lack of salary differentials to compensate teachers for working in more challenging schools, according to Hanushek's research. His study of Texas schools found teachers were more likely to leave certain schools, or the public system, due to student characteristics than because of the prospect of better salaries in other schools. Again in *Education Next*, Hanushek writes, 'The results suggest that policy-makers ought to consider selective pay increases, preferably keyed to quality, for work in [low socio-economic] schools, together with efforts to improve the working conditions in these schools.'

In Australia, the overall level of education funding is less a matter for debate than the way it is distributed among schools and school sectors. The Howard government has presided over big funding increases to non-government schools, apparently to encourage and support parental choice. A long-term drift to non-government schools has resulted in almost four in 10 senior secondary students attending Catholic or independent schools.

It is likely this trend will continue, creating concern that public schools will become safety nets instead of common or community schools. The Australian Education Union and the Australian Greens believe the solution is to withdraw public funding from non-government schools and invest it in the public system.

Brian Caldwell, dean of education at Melbourne University, is equally concerned about the possibility of the 'residualisation' of public schools but proposes a different solution. He argues for a common funding formula for all schools, so parents can exercise personal choice, and to end the divisive debate over public and private schools. He suggests private investment and public-private partnerships to boost education funding and greater community involvement.

In a speech at the University of Melbourne last year, Caldwell said, 'The concept of public must be broadened to include public values and the matter of ownership should no longer be a factor in determining whether a school is a public school.' Caldwell's vision brings Catholic and independent schools under the umbrella of government, making them subject to the same level of accountability and the same regulations as state schools.

Free-market economists have argued for equal per-pupil funding for public and non-government schools for decades. Mark Harrison is an economist and education consultant who recently published a book on New Zealand schools. His model would distribute funding to families to spend at the school of their choice, rather than giving it to schools as a block grant. 'The wide range of abilities and needs of children mean that different types of education are suited to different students. There simply is no best education for everyone,' Harrison says.

Schooled in freedom of choice

27 July 2006, *The Canberra Times*

AFTER years in the policy wilderness, support has been growing for school choice. Politicians on both sides, including federal Education Minister Julie Bishop, Wilson Tuckey, Warren Mundine, and Craig Emerson to name just a few, have endorsed the idea of choice. Former Australian Competition and Consumer Commission chairman Allan Fels, former OECD education director Barry McGaw, and other respected bureaucrats and academics have spoken out in favour of school choice in recent years.

Not everyone agrees on the exact policy instruments, but school choice has two fundamental principles. First, parents should be able to choose the school they believe is best for their child. Second, schools should be free to respond to the needs of their students and the community. The aim is that all schools should be schools of choice. All around the world, research evidence is steadily accumulating on the benefits of school choice.

The aim is that all schools should be schools of choice.

'Voucher' schemes, shorthand for funding policies where the money follows the child, are the most common reform in Western countries, but private schools are also proving to be an important part of the educational landscape in developing countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Anyone familiar with this research would have been astonished to read that school choice advocates are 'unable to point to any persuasive evidence on the supposed educational benefits of these schemes,' as asserted in a report issued by the Australia Institute yesterday.

The opposite is true. It is difficult not to be persuaded. Most statistical evidence comes from the United States, where prolific education researcher Jay P Greene of the University of Arkansas recently published a book titled *Education Myths*, in which he details the research on school choice. Of the dozens of studies conducted over the last decade, which overwhelming show positive effects of school choice, eight are 'gold-standard' randomised trials of school voucher schemes. All eight showed positive effects for students who were able to use a voucher entitlement to choose a school, seven of which were statistically significant.

Importantly, not only is there evidence that choice helps those who have it, there are overall benefits. Again in the United States, Harvard University economist Caroline Minter Hoxby has repeatedly demonstrated that the competition created by choice leads to a general rise in school achievement across entire school districts. Studies of the Florida 'scholarship' program show that schools at risk of losing students (and therefore funding) to other schools made remarkable academic gains.

The strongest supporters of school choice in the United States are low-income and minority families.

And there is no reason to believe that choice would inevitably lead to segregation by ability, socio-economic status, or race. The strongest supporters of school choice in the United States are low-income and minority families. When these families are given the ability to exercise the choices available to wealthy families, such as through a voucher scheme, it leads to less segregation.

The present funding arrangements in Australia are more likely to entrench segregation on cultural and class lines. A fully taxpayer-funded education is available only in the public school system, so children whose parents are unable to pay fees have limited choice of schools. In some states, students are 'zoned' to attend a particular school making it difficult to choose even among public schools. Since people tend to cluster according to socio-economic status and ethnicity, the effect is that the school experience of many children is defined by their postcode.

School choice is not just about increasing enrolments in non-government schools, it is about widening educational opportunities for all children. Public schools should not be a default option but be able to compete effectively using the resources and incentives a voucher system offers.

Problems arise mainly when people fail to see that voucher schemes can be tailored precisely to avoid the pitfalls created by the existing funding regime. Weighted student funding would provide students who have the greatest need with higher levels of funding. A basic student entitlement could be supplemented for students with learning problems, with physical or intellectual disabilities, or with disadvantaged home lives. Recognition of the extra cost of educating these students would make it easier for schools to enrol them and support them appropriately.

No school choice scheme will be perfect, and no one has ever said it would be cheap. The question is, is it necessary? Last year non-government schools gained 20,000 students, while government schools lost 4,000 students. In a few decades, non-government schools will be the majority. Without significant reforms that extend choice to all, the public system will eventually be for the poor minority. The tide has already turned. We need funding policies that ensure it lifts all boats.

Private hurdles for kids

21 April 2009, *The Australian*

THE NUMBER of school students with disabilities is increasing every year. The government school sector has the largest number of these children. In 2007, 5.7 percent of enrolments in government schools were students with disabilities. In the non-government school sector, the proportion was 2.5 percent.

That non-government schools have fewer students with disabilities is not in dispute. What is debatable is the reason. It is not a case of non-government schools actively seeking to avoid enrolling children with educational disadvantages, but rather that non-government schools are denied the level of public funding that is available to these children in public schools.

For parents of children with a disability, the need to be able to make the appropriate choice is critical.

A child with severe physical and intellectual disabilities is eligible for additional education funding of close to $36,000 if enrolled in a mainstream public school, as well as access to a variety of support services such as hearing and sight therapies and aids. With the notable exception of Western Australia, the very same child would receive about $6,000 of additional education funding in a mainstream non-government school, and would have limited access to support services. It varies slightly from state to state, but there is a gap of around $30,000 per student per year.

Parents unable to come up this extra money themselves are effectively locked out of the non-government school system. The funding gap is largest for the most severely disabled children, but the problem also exists for all children with mild to moderate disabilities, whose families are often already under significant financial stress.

Children with disabilities in non-government schools are not just disadvantaged by a reduced level of funding, but they are also restricted in the type of school they can attend. To be eligible for reasonable levels of funding, they must attend special schools, not mainstream non-government schools. Around a quarter of children with disabilities in the independent school sector attend special schools, and these children are among the most severely disabled children in Australia.

People choose non-government schools for a variety of reasons. For parents of children with a disability, the need to be able to make the appropriate choice is critical. Children with even mild intellectual disabilities often find large state schools overwhelming and distressing. Being able to attend a smaller non-government school, with the same level of funding support, can make a profound difference in their life and their family's quality of life.

The number of children with disabilities in non-government schools increased by 30 percent in the years from 2003 to 2007, despite the funding and eligibility

barriers. But it remains the case that many children with a disability who might benefit from a non-government school cannot access them because they can't take their funding with them from the public sector.

Likewise, many non-government schools that would like to enrol more children with disabilities are unable to because the cost burden on the school is so high. These costs involve not just the child's day-to-day education and care requirements but also any modifications to school infrastructure. The average low to moderate fee school may be able to absorb the cost of one or two children with disabilities by raising fees for other parents, or reducing spending in other areas, but any more than that sorely stretches the school's financial capacity.

In acknowledgment of this, former federal Education Minister Julie Bishop commissioned a study by Monash University to investigate the possibility of making school funding 'portable' for children with disabilities. The report was completed in June 2007, but it was released only last week.

The majority of non-government schools want to more equally share the responsibility of educating children with disabilities, but they can't do it from their existing share of the resources.

The report confirms that there is a 'marked difference' in the level of funding of students with disabilities in the government and non-government school sectors, although the aggregated and averaged figures in the report tend to mask the real extent of the disparity in funding for individual children when they are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Nonetheless, the report's recommendations are strongly in favour of substantial reform, including constructing a funding model that more closely reflects the actual costs of achieving good outcomes for students with disabilities, and which provides a higher level of certainty for students with disabilities and their parents that they will receive at least the same level of support if they change schools, sectors or states.

The majority of non-government schools want to more equally share the responsibility of educating children with disabilities, but they can't do it from their existing share of the resources. Parents just want funding parity and equity of access for their children so they can give them the best quality of life possible.

School Funding

Homework needed on school funding
13 October 2000, *The Newcastle Herald*

THE FRACAS over federal government school funding documented by the media in the past few weeks presents a compelling case for a complete overhaul of the school funding system, both state and federal. The current arrangements are cumbersome and complicated, and cause destructive divisions and conflict between the private and public school sectors.

With the focus on the federal government's proposed new funding arrangements, the much larger role of state and territory government funding seems to have been completely forgotten. The fact is that when state and federal government funding for schools are combined, average per student public funding for non-government schools is substantially less than that for government schools.

When state and federal government funding for schools are combined, average per student public funding for non-government schools is substantially less than that for government schools.

Comparisons between the increase in federal funding to high-fee independent schools and to public schools in similar areas, while striking, are patently unfair. For one thing, they compare extremes. For another, the reference point is the increase in funding rather than the absolute level.

It may be true that the increase in federal funding to Newcastle Grammar is greater than that for, say, Newcastle High School, but this does not take account of the base amount of funding these schools receive from both state and federal governments.

Even including the extra $1,126 per student in federal funding that Newcastle Grammar would receive in 2004, per capita Commonwealth government funding for a secondary student would be $2,959. State government funding would bring the total to around $3,500 per capita. If this is held up against the average amount of $7,865 per secondary student provided for government schools in the 2000–01 NSW state budget estimates, the comparison is again striking, but this time the public school is the clear winner.

Furthermore, when all funding sources are combined—private and public—there is very little difference in the average expenditure per student in government and non-government schools. If this is the case, why are so many public schools

so clearly under-resourced? This is a systemic problem that both state and federal governments must address as a matter of urgency.

Ultimately, however, any resolution of the current funding debate is only a temporary solution. As long as there are two separate systems of funding controlled largely by different levels of government with different agendas, the government and non-government school sectors will be pitted against each other. Such divisions are destructive, wasteful of precious time and resources, and divert energies from the more important pursuit of educational excellence.

The pointless conflicts that have recurred over the past year, and for many years before, could be avoided if Australia had a single system of school funding that does not discriminate according to the education provider.

One option for a common system of funding is through tax rebates. Families would be able to spend their own money on education rather than 'churning' it through government departments. A tax rebate scheme for spending on education—private or public—could be extended to friends, families and even businesses. For poorer families, choice could be exercised for public or private schools through bursaries equivalent to a tax rebate approximating the average cost per student of a public education. Such a system could be progressive and, therefore, satisfy equity concerns.

School choice, where school funds are directed through parents, has many potential benefits. Parents will be empowered to become involved in their child's education, and to make sure that their money is being well spent. Since funding would be dependent on enrolments, schools would be compelled to provide a quality education in order to attract and retain students. Schools or systems of schools would have the autonomy to diversify and to innovate. Admittedly, this could not happen overnight, but it is time to seriously consider how and when such a system could be implemented.

The inescapable fact is that parents are demanding an education other than that provided by the state.

It must be acknowledged sooner rather than later that the old paradigm of 'free' public education versus user-pays private education is obsolete. The arguments for one-size-fits-all schooling put forward by public education advocates, including the NSW Director-General of Education, Dr Ken Boston, are also becoming irrelevant as more and more people realise that the government does not own the right to provide their child's education, any more than it has the right to provide their food and clothing.

The inescapable fact is that parents are demanding an education other than that provided by the state. Presently, the number of parents who can vote with their feet by leaving the public system is restricted by the public schools' monopoly on funding. Without these artificial constraints, public schools may still prove to be the choice of the majority, but the fact that public education advocates are so vehemently opposed to putting their system to the test speaks volumes.

A fair go for all schools

24 January 2001, *The Herald-Sun*

IT IS possible to deceive people without telling lies. In its campaign against the federal government's education policies, the Australian Education Union (AEU) put an ad in the *Australian Women's Weekly* that says, 'The present Federal Government spends only 32 per cent of its education funding on the 70 per cent of children in public schools.'

This is true, but what the AEU doesn't say is that state governments spend more than 90 percent of their much larger education budget on children in state schools. When these amounts are combined, parents who send their children to a state school get more public funding than parents who send their child to a private school, even if they have the same income.

This is fact and there are no exceptions to this rule. The amount of public funding a family gets depends not on family income but on what type of school they choose. So a $50,000-a-year family that sends a child to a private school gets less government funding than a $100,000-a-year family that sends a child to a state school. This is clearly inequitable, yet precisely what government funding policies for school education amount to.

So a $50,000-a-year family that sends a child to a private school gets less government funding than a $100,000-a-year family that sends a child to a state school.

Supporters of compulsory public education might claim that since the first family chose to opt out of the public system, their situation is of their own making. But this is a false understanding of the concept of choice. True choice exists only when the options are unconstrained. In this case, the family that does not want a state-provided education faces a financial penalty for seeking an alternative.

How can we devise a system that treats every family and every child equitably, that allows both the state and private systems to flourish, and that provides real parental choice?

Several possibilities have been proposed over the past decades, the best of which is a system of tax credits. At present, people pay taxes and the state and federal governments fund schooling on their behalf. Under a tax credit system, people could claim their education spending against their tax bill and pay their school fees directly to the schools. To avoid disproportionate spending on education at the expense of other publicly funded goods and services, the credit might be capped.

For example, the maximum claimable amount might be set at the average cost of educating a child in a state school. Those parents who decided cricket pitches and rifle ranges were worth the extra expense would have the right to pay for them.

To allow for lower income families who pay less tax than the credit threshold, the tax credit could be 'refundable.' That is, such families would receive a cashable allowance to make up the difference. Extended families, friends, and businesses might also be allowed to claim education tax credits to help out low-income families. Students with special educational needs might be allowed a larger tax credit.

For parents who want secular schooling and have faith in their government, state education will still be their choice.

This system has several advantages. First, it extends to all families the freedom of choice that is presently available only to families who can afford private tuition fees. Second, it allows families to spend their own money, which makes schools more accountable to them and reduces the costs of government 'churning.' Third, by granting all families the same basic level of public assistance, whatever their income or chosen school, it is fairer for all families. Last, all schools will be compelled to prove themselves worthy to their students.

A funding system that values all types of schools equally does not mean the end of state education. Most private schools, including the newer low-fee independent schools, have religious affiliations. For parents who want secular schooling and have faith in their government, state education will still be their choice. Likewise, if state schools are given the opportunity to prove themselves, the educational opportunities of all children will be enhanced.

Funding cracks exposed, but posturing mars the debate

16 August 2004, *The Australian*

THE SENATE inquiry into Commonwealth funding for schools has exposed the cracks in the federal funding system for non-government schools. What it has not done is provide the basis for a suitable and widely acceptable alternative.

Instead of identifying the problems within the funding mechanism and investigating ways to rectify them, the inquiry has taken us back to square one by questioning the fundamentals of non-government school funding.

In theory, the socio-economic status (SES) funding mechanism allocates funding according to need, as determined by a fairly simple formula applicable to all non-government schools. In practice, there are concerns about the model's accuracy. It makes assumptions about the income of families based on where they live, which do not always hold true. Anomalies have arisen where some schools serving mainly low-income families are receiving less funding than those serving mainly high-income families.

Contributing to the problem is the fact that more than half of non-government schools are exempt from the model and on artificially high funding levels under

the 'funding maintained' condition. These problems could be fixed relatively easily. The 'funding maintained' condition could be phased out. And instead of using census data to estimate need, real household incomes could be obtained. This is intrusive, but people already submit to this to obtain family assistance payments.

The real sticking point is an ideological one about need. The federal government's SES-system defines 'need' as capacity to pay school fees rather than how much parents actually pay. It embodies the concept that all children are entitled to a level of government support for their education, then applies a means test to determine that entitlement.

The real sticking point is an ideological one about need.

This definition reflects the level of sacrifice parents make to pay school fees, and puts families at the centre of the model. The ALP and the Democrats believe that need should instead be defined by the actual resources of the school, which would put schools at the centre and make private spending on schools a marginal investment. This is a somewhat unusual position for these parties. They usually champion the principle that low socio-economic status is a disadvantage requiring government financial assistance. Likewise for the Australian Education Union, which continually argues that more funding be delivered to low SES communities in the interest of equity. But only if it goes to public schools, it would seem.

A reading of the transcripts of the public hearings in *Hansard* shows that ALP and Democrat committee members started out with the conviction that SES is not sufficient to determine need, and they were unwilling to be persuaded from it.

One example is evidence given by Dr Louise Watson from the University of Canberra, whose research comparing resource levels of government and independent schools has received a lot of attention. The committee was apparently impressed by Dr Watson's research, but only to a point. It accepted her criticisms of the SES-funding model, but rejected her conclusion that the model is basically sound, and that equity concerns could be addressed by making fairly simple changes.

The committee ultimately recommended adding a resource component to the SES-model, with the Democrats making a case for adding yet another factor—educational need such as disability. Such a piecemeal solution is unlikely to satisfy anyone. Both the AEU and the independent schools associations oppose this model, albeit for different reasons. Trying to reconcile two different concepts of need by adding bits here and there will bring very little gain while undermining the SES model's most important features—simplicity and focus on families.

The senate inquiry brought some important information to light, but was compromised by political posturing. How long can this debate go on, and how much money will be wasted?

Diversity argument does not stack up

27 September 2004, *The Australian*

ONE OF the most interesting aspects of the recent study published by researchers at the Australian National University (ANU) is the change over time in the socio-economic status of students in the three school sectors.

As choice among schools has increased, the distribution of students across schools has also changed, but not in ways you might expect.

As choice among schools has increased, the distribution of students across schools has also changed, but not in ways you might expect. Because students get less government funding in non-government schools, these schools have to charge fees. This means families willing and able to pay these fees are more likely to choose non-government schools.

So non-government schools tend to have a higher proportion of high-income students than government schools, no surprises there. As more public funding has been made available to non-government schools, more families, led by higher SES families, have moved into the non-government sector. Again, no surprises there.

The interesting part is that although, as the report emphasises, the average SES of the non-government sector as a whole has changed little, this includes Catholic schools and conceals a sizeable change in the independent sector. The average SES of the independent sector dropped 4.8 percent, compared to a 2.9 percent drop in the government sector. That is, a significant amount of the drift to the private sector is among lower SES families.

The ANU researchers, Chris Ryan and Louise Watson, conclude that government funding for non-government schools has driven the drift from public to private. The corollary of this is that the funding policy worked. Rather than simply providing more money to parents already in the non-government sector, increased government funding has allowed (encouraged, say Ryan and Watson) more students, from a wider variety of family backgrounds, to choose non-government schools.

One of the most common concerns about allowing parents to choose schools is that students will become stratified according to socio-economic status: There will be rich schools for rich kids and poor schools for poor kids. It is often argued that public schools reflect society and have more diversity in their student populations than non-government schools.

This does not stack up in theory because public schools enrolments are location-based and, therefore, reflect the population of the surrounding suburbs. A public high school in a wealthy suburb is unlikely to reflect the wider society.

It doesn't stack up in practice, either, according to the ANU study. The report

does not make this explicit, but Ryan confirmed the following: the relationship between student SES and school SES—the likelihood that a student will be in a school with students of similar SES—is 'pretty similar' among the three sectors.

In other words, students in government schools appear to be no more likely to be in a school that reflects the broad socio-economic circumstances of society than students in non-government schools.

A reasonable question is what would happen if there were more school choice: if students were able to take their 'national resource standard' funding of $9,000 or $12,000 to whatever school they wanted?

It would be unwise to assume that students would simply reorganise themselves among existing schools. Even with limited per-student funding and arduous registration requirements, more new schools open every year. 'Portable' funding to the full cost of school education, coupled with reforms allowing new schools to be more readily established, would see education being re-conceptualised. New schools would be set up around new priorities rather than the old hierarchies. Traditional schools would continue to be popular, but more freedom in the school sector could well see social stratification broken down rather than entrenched.

Furore over private school fees is just a distraction

20 January 2007, *The Australian Financial Review*

A COUPLE of times each year, there is a lot of fuss about increases in private school fees. This causes much consternation among people who oppose public spending on non-government schools. Fee increases are often greater than inflation, taking tuition in a handful of private schools to $20,000 a year, and there are a substantial number of schools with fees above $15,000 a year.

This is a huge amount of money. It is net of tax and is for tuition alone. You could reasonably add another couple of thousand dollars for building funds, school uniforms, excursions, laptop computers, and other non-optional items.

There are two sides to the story, of course. Private schools have to charge fees. Their government funding alone is insufficient to offer an adequate, let alone a quality, education. The highest-fee schools tend to have the lowest government funding—as little as $1,500 per student. And, as educators of the public, they are clearly entitled to government support.

But most non-government schools charge modest fees. The pertinent question is why do some charge so much? When the average per capita cost of schooling in both the public and non-government sectors is about $10,000, why do some schools need income of more than twice that amount?

Spokesmen for independent schools have offered a variety of explanations. The Association of Independent Schools of Victoria recently pointed to the fact that the consumer price index for education is higher than the general CPI.

This is a fallacious argument. Rising school fees are one of the causes of a high CPI, not the other way around. Some heads of independent schools, including Barker College in Sydney, have said the fee increases are necessary because 'to offer the very best education there has to be a corresponding cost, and we want to give our parents the very best.'

For those of us who believe in school choice, the issue of high fees presents a bit of a quandary.

For those of us who believe in school choice, the issue of high fees presents a bit of a quandary. On the one hand, we don't want undue government interference in the affairs of private schools. On the other hand, very high school fees undermine community support for the principle of government funding for independent schools.

But the real reasons for high and increasing fees make the position somewhat clearer.

The first reason is straightforward. The largest single expenditure item for schools is teacher salaries. With a national shortage of highly qualified teachers, particularly of maths and science, private schools pay more to get the best teachers, including people from outside the teaching sphere, and this is reflected in fees.

The second reason is that some private schools, being responsible for their own buildings and facilities, are hugely in debt and rely on fees to service these debts as well as cover running costs.

The third reason is that the education market allows schools to charge high fees. Most of the high-fee schools have long waiting lists and elite schools will charge as much as people are willing to pay. Why parents are willing to pay up to $20,000 a year for school is the critical issue. There is so little comparative, quantitative information available about schools that many zealous parents use price as an indicator of quality. If more information were available on performance, parents would be able to more accurately determine whether $20,000 is really buying a quality education or just lavish facilities. A poorly informed market impedes competition and allows inflated prices.

The fourth reason is instability in government funding. Non-government schools are in fact heavily dependent on federal government funding. They fear that the election of a Labor government will see their income substantially cut, and some schools have been lifting their fees to create cash reserves in case this happens.

Australia has a quasi-market in school education that is less efficient and less effective than it should and could be. We need real choice. All schools should be funded on a per-student basis that is not subject to political whim. Parents need to be able to make informed decisions. If they still want to spend their hard-earned cash on performing arts centres, rifle ranges, and Olympic swimming pools, that is their prerogative.

Three keys to improving our schools

7 April 2008, *The Age*

THE FEDERAL government's Australia 2020 Summit is less than a month away but already school education, which falls into the 'productivity' session, has attracted controversy. Given the range of interests and views of the participants, this is likely to continue.

It is possible to list dozens of specific problems that need to be resolved to improve the quality of school education. Given the short time available, these will have to be prioritised, but it is imperative that three aspects of school education are on the agenda.

The funding system for most state schools is based more on teacher salaries than on student need.

First, school funding needs a massive shake-up. It must become centred on the needs of students and be allocated in a transparent way. This is particularly important for state schools. The funding system for most state schools is based more on teacher salaries than on student need. There are various types of add-on funds that are supposed to provide equity for needy students, but they are often inadequate to deal with the multiple educational and social problems some schools are burdened with.

State schools should be funded on a per-student basis, with all students entitled to a standard grant, with graduated loadings for students who cost more to educate, such as those with disabilities or from disadvantaged homes. This is known in international education policy circles as Weighted Student Funding.

Education Minister Julia Gillard has already expressed an intention to change the way the government funds state schools so that the allocation of funds better reflects the real needs of individual schools. This sort of thinking is welcome.

Ideally, though, both government and non-government schools should be funded under a single system through cooperative funding from the state and federal governments (along with much more encouragement of private investment). If the mechanisms of school funding were open, fair and defensible, there may finally be an end to debate on the topic.

Second, there must be a focus on the nuts and bolts of getting high-quality teachers in classrooms. There has been a tendency to place too much emphasis on the number of teachers in schools with little regard for their aptitude. Low cut-off scores for university education courses attest to this.

Teacher quality rests on two conditions: recruiting good people and training them properly. Teaching needs to become more attractive to intelligent and energetic people who could have any job they want. More rewarding salary schedules, a more flexible career structure, and an emphasis on acquiring high-quality candidates in the key disciplines would be crucial in re-energising the teaching profession.

The recent decision of the NSW government to give public schools the opportunity to select teachers locally puts it among the states such as Victoria that have embraced modern employment practices that provide schools with much more latitude in managing their resources. This is a significant positive step and recasts teachers as professionals in charge of their own careers, rather than 'workers' in a union and state-controlled industry.

The second bastion of teaching is training. To be registered, all teachers have to undertake university-based teacher education courses. The problem is that there is widespread discontent with the training these courses provide. There are 102 government reports telling us that teacher training is too variable and is largely unsatisfactory to both teachers and principals. New teachers now spend four years and thousands of dollars at university being poorly prepared for the classroom.

A proper audit and evaluation of individual teacher training programs is required to document the content and format of each course and collect data that shows the quality of teaching it produces among its graduates. State teacher institutes accredit teacher education courses, but because graduate teachers move around the country, a national approach to the quality of outcomes is also required. Teaching Australia is well placed to take on this task.

The failure of state and territory governments to fulfil their obligations to provide a decent education to generations of Indigenous children is profound.

Third, decisive efforts must be made to improve the disgraceful standard of education achieved by our Indigenous students, especially in remote communities. There is a separate 'Indigenous Issues' session at the Australia 2020 Summit, but Indigenous education needs the attention of mainstream education experts as well as Indigenous justice advocates.

The failure of state and territory governments to fulfil their obligations to provide a decent education to generations of Indigenous children is profound. The federal government needs to step in where others have failed, and all levels of government must immediately commit to begin turning the situation around within the next 12 months.

Governments are willing to spend billions of dollars subsidising child care for wealthy families. An Indigenous population that is literate is not an impossible dream.

Non-government schools

Free the teachers to help students

23 January 2002, *The Australian*

A SYSTEMATIC comparison of the academic results of state and non-government schools has been a long time coming. Last week, the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) released a report confirming what many have suspected but have not been able to prove.

After taking into account differences in family circumstances and the attitudes of students, non-government school students achieved significantly better academic results than state school students. That is, non-government schools, particularly independent schools, do something for their students that goes beyond any advantage conferred by parents' income, occupation and education.

Non-government schools, particularly independent schools, do something for their students that goes beyond any advantage conferred by parents' income, occupation and education.

The first possibility that springs to mind is that the better average results in non-government schools can be explained by their much higher level of expenditure. We can compare the average expenditure per student in the different school sectors with their average results to see if this explanation holds up. But it doesn't.

The average Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Ranks in independent, Catholic and state schools were 78.2, 72.8 and 66.7 respectively. Average per student expenditures in 1998 were $8,112, $5,330 and $6,425 respectively. The state school figure does not include payroll tax, long service leave, or the user cost of capital and so underestimates the true value by about $1,500, the addition of which makes expenditure differences almost disappear.

This is consistent with the findings of sophisticated studies all over the world that show financial resources are not directly related to school performance.

Another possible explanation is that a number of high-performing students in non-government schools elevate the average results. According to the ACER research, however, the success of independent schools has more to do with their ability to 'markedly improve the performance of students who performed poorly in Year 9.' Independent schools seemed to achieve high averages not by just pushing the most talented students to the extremes of their ability but also by lifting the performance of less able students.

What do non-government schools provide that state schools don't? Research by the ACER's Ken Rowe has shown that teacher quality explains the greatest amount of variation in student achievement. Do non-government schools, particularly independent schools, have better teachers than state schools? This seems doubtful.

IT is more likely that good teachers and principals are enabled to have a greater impact in non-government schools. The main operational difference between non-government and state schools is their greater freedom to make decisions about how best to spend their resources and educate their students. A study of results in the Third International Maths and Science Survey found that performance was closely related to the level of budgetary and educational control allowed to individual schools and teachers. Given the opportunity and motivation, it is conceivable that state schools would benefit from such freedoms. Victorian state schools are leading the way.

In the past 30 years, the proportion of children in non-government schools has increased steadily. In 2000, more than 30 percent of all students and more than 37 percent of senior secondary students attended Catholic and independent schools. It seems that parents may have long known what academics and educators either didn't know or wouldn't admit.

Now that we have hard evidence, what is the appropriate course of action—for parents who want the best for their children, and for educationists and others who seek to maximise the educational opportunities of all children? Clearly, we need to make choice between state and non-government schools more readily available to all parents through either a system of tax credits or vouchers. Careful research during the past decade in the United States and Britain has demonstrated that parental choice in schooling provides benefits for children and schools across the board. Where parents are given more choice in schooling, all schools raise their standards, parents become more involved with their children's education, and both parents and students say they are more satisfied.

Clearly, we need to make choice between state and non-government schools more readily available to all parents through either a system of tax credits or vouchers.

What's more, according to US research, parental choice of schooling has led to less ethnic, religious and socio-economic segregation. And private school students are more likely to volunteer for community projects, have more cross-racial friendships, and are involved in fewer race-related conflicts.

Student-centred funding and school choice have been on the agenda in other countries for many years. Yet they still provoke knee-jerk responses and vitriolic abuse when raised in a public forum in Australia. To ignore this new evidence is shameful, and condemns us to another decade of ineffective policy and talking in circles.

Independents set strong trend

18 October 2004, *The Australian*

WHEN Phillip O'Carroll started Fitzroy Community School in a Melbourne terrace in 1976, a number of parent groups were starting schools. O'Carroll and his wife, Faye Berryman, had been involved in several school start-ups, and being all too aware of the red tape involved they didn't bother. They just found a suitable venue and started teaching kids.

The Victorian Department of Education eventually acknowledged their existence and registered them as an authorised non-government school in 1980. By that stage O'Carroll and Berryman had a functioning primary school with plenty of supporters. 'You couldn't get away with that now,' says O'Carroll. 'There's so much more regulation.'

The number of independent schools in Australia grew from 803 to 979 in the decade 1993 to 2003, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, an annual increase of 17 schools each year. It might not look many, but in comparison with the Catholic and government sectors it's an important trend. Catholic schools increased by two over the same period, while government schools dropped by 436.

Educators and community school advocates believe that the growth of non-government schools would have been much greater if it was easier to start a school. According to O'Carroll, the regulations imposed on non-government schools by state governments are so onerous they act as an impediment and a deterrent to prospective schools.

Educators and community school advocates believe that the growth of non-government schools would have been much greater if it was easier to start a school.

'It's a roundabout way of minimising new schools,' he says. 'We are in a situation where our major competitor decides whether we exist. It's structurally unjust.' Although the federal government provides most of the government funding for non-government schools, to qualify schools must be registered with their state or territory government.

Requirements vary, but the process usually takes between one and five years. Numerous conditions are attached, including that the school must be non-profit. New schools are required to provide evidence that they meet the government's standards on buildings and facilities, policies on discipline and child welfare (corporal punishment is usually expressly forbidden), the qualifications and character of school staff and operators, and the curriculum.

While this list appears straightforward, it is far from it. In NSW, just the checklist of documentation schools must provide for registration runs to 14 pages. Vern Hughes, executive director of Social Enterprise Partnerships, an organisation that encourages and facilitates community-based provision of

social services, says that the complicated process of registering turns many people off. 'The hoops people have to jump through are ludicrous,' Hughes says. 'For many people it proves too difficult.' In some states it is more difficult than in others.

When the Commonwealth government's new schools policy was abolished by then federal education minister David Kemp in 1996, many states took the opportunity to establish new schools committees to regulate openings. In Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia, applications are assessed against the impact they are likely to have on existing schools. Some in the independent sector have likened this to giving Pizza Hut power over which restaurants can open, and where.

The Grimshaw review of the registration and accreditation of non-government schools in NSW recommended this year that the same process be established in NSW, but it was not accepted into legislation. Instead, in NSW a committee has been established to exchange information about new schools and expansions between the school sectors.

Terry Chapman, executive director of the Association of Independent Schools, says this committee is 'to allow sensible planning, but does not make decisions about limiting the number of schools.'

Non-government schools fill a gap, whether at the bottom or at the top.

It's not just about competition, though, according to Hughes. Rather than drawing students from other schools, Hughes believes there is an unmet demand for certain types of schooling and that non-government schools can provide a better quality of education, as well as relieving some of the burden on the government system.

'There are networks of parents of children with disabilities and learning difficulties who are interested in schools with an orientation that is specific to their needs,' Hughes says. 'The Victorian government ideology of inclusion (of students with disabilities in mainstream classes) places unreal expectations on teachers and kids. Much of the debate has been on high-achieving kids, but the options at the other end are terrible.' The ALESCO Learning Centre in Newcastle, NSW, is a prime example of a non-government school succeeding where others have failed.

Opened in 2002, ALESCO is located within the WEA community education centre and housed in a largely unrenovated 100-year-old building in the inner city suburb of Cooks Hill. It provides a secondary school curriculum to students who have high levels of educational and social need, using only its government funding—which is substantially less than what government schools receive.

'If we did not exist, these kids could not attend a government high school or TAFE,' says Rowan Cox, the school's administrator. 'Non-government schools fill a gap, whether at the bottom or at the top. The beauty of a non-government school is that we can be more flexible. We are based in an adult learning environment as part of a registered training organisation (RTO), but have adapted to account for

the fact that our students are adolescents and need more support.' Cox says she has never before been involved in so much paperwork as with ALESCO, but sees the need for schools to be accountable for their expenditure of public funding and for the responsibility of caring for young people.

While Cox does not resent the 'phenomenal' amount of documentation and evidence the school is expected to produce at any time, she thinks it unfair that government schools are not always held to the same standards.

'There is an inequity there. It seems that since they are government schools, if there is not enough time or resources to monitor them, then that's okay,' Cox says. 'We have an important social capital role. Since we opened, crime has gone down and youth unemployment has gone down. That is often not recognised, especially with regard to funding.' Back at Fitzroy, O'Carroll is less complacent about the level of accountability to government. He has seen the paperwork grow each time the school has to re-register, every six years, to the point where he is sending off a wad of paper 'centimetres deep.'

'The process has become quite ridiculous. Many of the aspects monitored have nothing to do with education, things like town planning and building minutiae. You have to write separate 'vision' and 'mission' statements for the school.'

'Schools without much money have to divert energy from their real work to engage in a tedious bunfight, wading through mountains of clumsy regulations,' O'Carroll says.

In the United States, the burgeoning charter school movement has created a niche for organisations that help new non-government schools establish themselves. Charter schools are independently operated schools receiving public funding on the condition that they meet the educational and operational expectations set by the local school district—the 'charter' or contract. In the United States, as in Australia, the approval process and securing funding are highly complicated, and there are no government offices set up to help.

In the United States, the burgeoning charter school movement has created a niche for organisations that help new non-government schools establish themselves.

This is where the 'school incubators' come in. The Apple Tree Institute in Boston and Washington, DC, and the Innovative Schools Development Corporation in Delaware, offer their services to people who want to start a school but need help getting through the legal quagmire. Their services range from seed-funding, like an education-version of venture capital, to full management of the school under the direction of the charter holders.

Vern Hughes sees a need for such an organisation in Australia. Although independent school numbers are steadily growing, Hughes says that those that succeed in opening their doors 'represent but a tiny proportion of those that could be established if more support were available.' Hughes would like to see a 'community school incubator' established in Australia to help people who have an

educational imperative but lack financial, technical and legal expertise to start a new school. 'We need to simplify, demystify and provide connections,' Hughes says.

For many community school advocates, including O'Carroll and Hughes, the arguments for community schools are based on performance and principle. According to O'Carroll, it comes down to whether you believe parents have the right and responsibility to be the primary educators of their child, and to pursue their best interests.

'Regulations should cover teacher suitability and the core curriculum, but beyond that if fee-paying parents are satisfied that the school is satisfactory it is unnecessary for bureaucrats to step in. In a democracy we are supposed to have freedom of association, free trade and respect the prior rights and authority of families. The strong interference by central authorities is a barrier against the spirit of democracy.'

Money-driven education a distant reality

1 November 2004, *The Australian*

THE IDEA of running a school for profit makes people uneasy. Often they can't explain their feelings about it, but it just seems wrong somehow.

There is a perception that money going into a school should stay there, the profit motive would lead to corners being cut, and the care and education of children would be inferior as a result.

In Australia, one of the conditions for non-government schools to receive public funding is that the school must be run as a non-profit organisation. This simply means that if the school has a surplus of money at the end of the financial year, the money must be retained as savings or invested back into the school. The surplus cannot be distributed between the school's owners, and the school cannot have shareholders.

Because for-profit schools cannot receive public funding, there are only a few in Australia, serving a highly specialised clientele—mainly overseas students.

This doesn't mean that the money must be spent in ways that directly benefit students, such as curriculum materials, books, or infrastructure. It can, for example, be used to give the school executive a big pay rise. There is nothing to prevent this, other than the fact that fee-paying parents would not let them get away with it for long.

Because for-profit schools cannot receive public funding, there are only a few in Australia, serving a highly specialised clientele—mainly overseas students. It is not difficult to understand why this is the case. It is difficult to make a profit in a market where the competition is heavily subsidised.

In many American states it is legal for schools to be run by a for-profit firm. Charter school laws allow private organisations, or entities such as parent-teacher coalitions, to run schools and these schools receive public money as long as they satisfy the requirements of the charter. School districts can contract for-profit companies to run single or multiple schools.

Most charter schools are run by individual organisations, but some are run by large companies formed specifically to compete in the education market. The largest and best known of these is Edison, which has started some new schools and taken over the management of others. The first Edison 'academy' opened in 1995 and, at last count, there were 157 Edison schools across the United States, with 71,000 students. While this is only a small proportion of American schools, it is significant.

Put together, Edison schools is the equivalent of the 45th largest school district out of almost 15,000 school districts in the country, according to the journal *Education Next*. In addition, Edison runs after-school and holiday programs, extending its reach to almost a quarter of a million children.

Edison's schools in Philadelphia, like most charter schools across the United States, are overwhelmingly schools with high levels of disadvantage.

Edison has a chequered history of successes and failures in school operations, the emphasis changing depending on who you ask. The American Federation of Teachers, one of the two largest teacher unions in America, whose attitudes to for-profit schools, and indeed any non-public schools mirror those of their counterparts in Australia, claim that Edison schools produce no benefits. Edison's annual reports, however, claim that students in their schools have annual test score gains three to four times greater than state or district averages.

Falling in between these claims is a report by Western Michigan University, funded by the National Education Association (the other major teachers union) but apparently conducted and published independently. Published in 2000, the report looks at student performance at 10 Edison schools and compares it to other schools over a three-year period.

The study found the sorts of variation that would be expected in any group of schools, but concluded that, in general, 'while students in Edison schools often start out at levels below the national norms and district averages, they progress at rates comparable to students in other district schools.' Things have possibly changed in the last four years, but at that time Edison was doing, at the very least, no harm.

More recent evidence comes from the Edison experiment in Philadelphia. Despite strong opposition from unions, some teachers and some members of the public, 73 failing Philadelphia city schools were contracted out to private companies two years ago, 20 of them to Edison.

According to the school district CEO, Paul Vallas, it has been a success. Fifteen of the 20 school principals hired by Edison are still there, and recent tests have shown that Edison students improved more than the other privately-contracted schools, although they haven't yet caught up to the district average. Edison's schools in Philadelphia, like most charter schools across the United States, are overwhelmingly schools with high levels of disadvantage. About 70 percent of Edison students are from very low-income families, and more than 80 percent are black or Hispanic.

Steven Wilson, a senior fellow at the Centre for Business and Government at Harvard University, and a former heavyweight in another for-profit school management company, Advantage Schools, says that the jury is still out. 'I think it is too early to say definitively whether these companies are operating better schools,' Wilson said in an interview on TV station PBS. 'But I think we can say that there are many important ideas that they're bringing to public education, and particularly to urban public schooling.'

'It's a fallacy to see the interests of investors and the interests of quality as being opposed. If Edison does not deliver a product that is unequivocally better than the existing public schools, they will not retain their existing accounts and they certainly will not be invited to manage other schools around the country,' Wilson said.

One indication that quality is put ahead of profits is that Edison is yet to make a profit. Its share price has fallen dramatically since it went public in 1999, and new investors have had to be recruited. Henry Levin at the National Center for the Study Privatization in Education writes that 'the ability of EMOs to be profitable is, at best, problematic.' Levin says the usual economies of scale theories often do not apply in education, and blames high cost structures of central headquarters and the need for marketing activities.

On the other hand, for-profits offer several advantages, including efficiency, increased competition, responsiveness to clientele and innovation. One could add to this the potential for increased investment. It is easier to raise large sums of money for education quickly if there is a chance of a return, rather than as a donation.

Given the amount of time spent debating the merits of allowing private companies to own school grounds in Australia, a for-profit sector in school education providers will probably be a long time coming. The incentives are not there at the moment. The most that can be said is that the federal government does not seem inclined to investigate the non-profit nature of schools beyond their official status on the funding application forms.

It is not difficult, however, to imagine where gaps might open up for profit-making schools in the future. As non-government schools sacrifice more and more of their autonomy in exchange for government funding, there may eventually be a niche that a brave entrepreneur with a vision would like to fill.

A new order for New Orleans

9 November 2006, *On Line Opinion*

MUCH OF the media interest in the first anniversary of the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina in August fixated on the negative. Sometimes, however, hurricanes have silver linings: when Hurricane Katrina demolished New Orleans's public school system it gave the city's educational landscape a much-needed clean slate.

According a New York Times report, New Orleans public schools were 'among the most abysmal in the nation before the storm.' In the 2004 Louisiana General Exit Exams (GEE) for high school students, 96 percent of New Orleans public school students scored below 'basic' in English and 94 percent scored below 'basic' in maths. The public school district was corrupt and debt-ridden.

Now New Orleans is at the centre of a different storm, one that education pundits around the world will be watching carefully. Hurricane Katrina has indelibly changed schooling in New Orleans by giving it the opportunity to rebuild, almost from scratch.

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And there have been big changes in the Big Easy. The old centralised public school system has been all but scrapped and the large majority of students now attend either charter schools or private schools. Before Katrina, there were 123 traditional public schools. Post-Katrina, in the most recent school year, there were only seven traditional public schools, even though more than half of the city's students had returned.

'Overnight, New Orleans, with nearly 70 per cent of public school students in schools of choice has become one of the most chartered cities in America,' write Kathryn G. Newmark and Veronique de Rugy in a recent article for the journal Education Next. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are independently operated. They have budgetary and educational autonomy and are free to hire and fire staff but are accountable to state standards.

More public schools are set to open in the current school year but they will do so in a decidedly different environment. There are no assigned schools, meaning that any student can register for any public or charter school and they are enrolled on a first-come first-served basis or by lottery. Public schools will have to compete with the stronger and more adept charter schools for students and funding.

Not everyone is pleased that New Orleans is becoming a national model on choice, of course. The United Federation of New Orleans Teachers wants to return to a centralised system, but teachers unions have less power in the new order. Not only has union membership fallen from 4,700 to 300 since 2003, the traditional object of their influence, the once omnipotent school district central office, has shrunk from 1,000 staff to 57.

There is also a long-running debate on the educational merits of charter schools versus traditional public schools. A recent study by the US National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) found that test scores of charter school students are no better and sometimes worse than traditional public school students. But the findings are problematic in the way that many such studies are. The NCES study looks at test scores from a single point in time, and by its own admission, does not adequately control factors that may have distorted the findings, such as the possibility that charter school students begin with lower test scores.

Any study worthy of consideration must compare students drawn from similar populations, and ideally, evaluate gains in learning over time. These studies have been more favourable to charters. For example, research by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research found that charter schools in 11 states performed better than nearby, comparable public schools.

In research for the Goldwater Institute, analysis of the test scores of 60,000 Arizona students found that charter students enter school with lower test scores than public school students and show greater achievement growth. There is also highly sophisticated research from Harvard University showing that competition from charter schools improves public schools.

Additionally and importantly, research findings on the quality of charter schools vary significantly with the quality of charter laws. Some US states hold charters to high standards, closing or sanctioning those that fail, while others do not. The closure of bad schools shows that the policy is working.

Many see charters as the brightest hope for school choice because they offer a middle ground between unpredictable market-style reforms and the current public school system intransigence.

Many see charters as the brightest hope for school choice because they offer a middle ground between unpredictable market-style reforms and the current public school system intransigence. They are tethered to common standards but have greater scope to meet and exceed them.

There is no doubt that charter schools have given great opportunities to children across America. For example, last year, the highly successful KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools started a charter school in Houston to serve 400 refugees of Hurricane Katrina. These students improved by an average of two grade levels in reading and maths while at the school. The school's principal and many of its teachers will be moving to one of five new KIPP charter schools planned for New Orleans.

The situation of Australian students is nowhere near as dire as those in New Orleans but their education is no less important. They deserve charter schools like KIPP and the benefits they offer just as much. Let's hope it doesn't take a natural disaster to get them.

Religious schools

Keep the faith in education

6 October 2006, *The Courier-Mail*

IT WAS only a matter of time before simmering tensions about religion spilt over into schools.

Recently the education editor of a Sydney newspaper made some inflammatory comments about religious schools. Small religious schools were described as ghetto schools, and it was claimed small Christian and Islamic schools teach creationism and hatred of homosexuals.

If this wasn't provocative enough, a direct causal relationship was drawn between Christian fundamentalist and Islamic schools and the growth of religious bigotry. The suggested solution: abandon choice in schooling.

While a defence of the specific teachings of Christianity and Islam is best left to religious scholars and leaders, it is important to take a rational look at these claims about the effect of religious schools on our society and the usefulness of the proposed policy response.

It is easy to fall into the trap of believing in the romantic ideal of public schools. In public school utopia, every school has a racial and ethnic profile that reflects Australian society. Every teacher is energetic, inspiring, and entirely free from prejudice. All students embrace each other's differences and learn together in a spirit of harmony and respect.

The reality is that no school meets that ideal, whether it is public or private, secular or religious. Every school falls short in some way. Given that there is a common and agreed set of values that should be promoted by all schools for the benefit of society, the question is, are religious schools more likely to fail at this role than public schools?

The reality is that no school meets that ideal, whether it is public or private, secular or religious.

For example, some religious schools may teach against the practice of homosexuality but they also teach that above all else, one should love thy neighbour. Public schools teach that homosexuality is normal and acceptable, but you would be hard-pressed to find a public school that is entirely free from homophobia.

No school is perfect, just as no school is intrinsically flawed. There is no evidence that religious schools create bigotry and hatred any more than public schools prevent it.

Nevertheless, the extent of religious freedom allowed to schools has long been a subject of interest to education policy analysts. No one believes that schools should be allowed to inculcate antisocial views and promote unjust cultural practices. How to define these, and where we draw the line, is a matter for thoughtful debate. Knee-jerk responses are unhelpful and arguably counterproductive.

Ending the policy of school choice, and limiting the freedom of parents to choose their child's schooling, will not promote social cohesion. Parents will continue to seek faith-based education for their children as they have always done. Reason says that it is better for this to take place in schools that are part of the education system rather than drive religious education out of the public eye and under the radar. Instead of alienating Christian fundamentalist and Islamic schools, the community should actively embrace them and in doing so avoid them becoming ghettos.

The appropriate policy response is not to reduce choice but to create more of it. It is not at all easy to open a school in Australia. There are a great many logistical, financial and legislative hurdles. This goes a long way to explaining why 95 percent of non-government schools are religious schools. Organised religions are well placed in this arena. They have the human and financial capital and are accustomed to working with government agencies.

In order to provide more variety in schooling, particularly secular schools, a number of changes to legislation are required. First, the requirement that schools be non-profit should be removed. This would create more choice in the non-government school sector as investors and entrepreneurs seek to fill the gap in the market for secular schooling options.

There is no evidence that religious schools create bigotry and hatred any more than public schools prevent it.

Second, charter school legislation should be enacted. Charter schools are independently run public schools. Charter schools can be run by groups of teachers, by professional charter school operators, by charity organizations, or any number of alternative scenarios. They are funded on the same basis as public schools on the condition that they meet the terms of their charter, which can include attendance and enrolment benchmarks and achievement standards.

Religious schools and public schools in Australia have a proud history. Social cohesion is a complex issue and requires a more sophisticated community and policy response than to eliminate schools on the grounds of their religious affiliation. Even to suggest it demonstrates intolerance of the kind that such a move is supposed to curtail.

Don't demonise private education

4 March 2008, *The Australian*

SIGNIFICANT and increasing numbers of children are attending religious institutions for their education. About two-thirds of the 2,710 non-government schools are Catholic schools. Of the remainder, known as independent schools because they are not part of a system, only a few dozen are independent secular schools.

This situation has arisen in part because of the politically charged history of Catholic schooling in this country, which set a precedent of public funding to religious institutions.

It is also due in part to the way schools are funded. To be eligible for government funding, schools must meet a raft of regulations dealing with governance, curriculum and administration. Religious organisations are well placed to meet these challenges. They have the bureaucratic structures in place, communities of like-minded people willing to work towards a common goal, and a source of extra funds through their congregations.

Not all parents choose religious schools because they are themselves religious.

Not all parents choose religious schools because they are themselves religious. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes in 2005 found that close to one-third of students in other non-government schools—mostly Christian and Muslim schools—came from families that had never belonged to a church or religious organisation. These families are seeking an alternative to the available public schools, and religious schools are often the only alternative. Whether this is a good or a bad thing is an important question.

The possibility that religious schools create a segregated society and a decline in social cohesion must be carefully considered. That religious schools may inculcate intolerance and bigotry must be appraised and analysed, using good evidence.

Unfortunately, this rarely occurs. Critics of religious schools tend to focus on the usual gripes secularists have with religion: their teachings on the origins of the world and humanity, and on sexuality and family formation.

The debate over intelligent design versus evolution is an issue of curriculum and can be resolved fairly simply. All schools should have to adhere to basic and essential curriculum standards. These include teaching about the theory and overwhelming scientific evidence of evolution.

The approach a school takes to sex education is a relatively small part of schooling, but it is important to parents. Christian Schools Association chief executive Stephen O'Doherty has said one of the main reasons people choose Christian schools is because of their 'ethical and moral view' on sex education. This may be true, but it is likelier that rather than actively seeking an anti-gay,

pro-marriage message, most parents are simply trying to avoid the excessively liberal and explicit approach to sex education in public schools.

However, survey data suggests that schools have little influence on attitudes to sexuality.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes in 2005 asked people whether they agreed that gay and lesbian couples should have their relationship recognised in a civil union. There was no difference in the proportion of people who had attended different types of school who agreed. The same survey assessed attitudes to immigration. People who had attended other non-government schools were least likely to say immigration should be reduced and least likely to say immigrants increased crime rates. (People who had attended public schools were most likely to agree with these statements.)

Not exactly proof of rampant intolerance emanating from the non-government school sector.

Rather than demonising religious schools, we need to think about why these schools are attractive to parents. We also need to think about why there are so few secular independent schools.

Survey data is by no means the final word on the role of religious schools in a secular society, but they do suggest stereotypes can often be wide of the mark. An intelligent discussion on the future of school choice in Australia is well overdue. Rather than demonising religious schools, we need to think about why these schools are attractive to parents.

We also need to think about why there are so few secular independent schools. What policies are preventing successful innovative school ventures such as the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools in the United States being established in Australia? Is there room for a new system of independent public schools that abide by public school values on enrolments and curriculum but have more autonomy, similar to charter schools in the United States and independent schools in Sweden?

When the Rudd government eventually reviews the non-government school funding model, it must do more than fiddle with the formula. It is an opportunity to seriously consider the public responsibilities of schools and the private responsibilities of parents, and how government policy mediates between them.

Autonomy & Leadership

Re-educating the powers that be
27 March 2001, *The Daily Telegraph*

THE UNIQUE feature of the fracas over the closure and restructuring of a dozen or so public schools in Sydney's inner suburbs is that everybody is right.

The NSW Department of Education is right to make constructive changes to improve the services it offers in a competitive education environment. Teachers, parents and students in the schools affected are right to be upset they were neither consulted nor informed.

John Aquilina, Minister for Education and Training, is right in saying that it is impractical to consult 15,000 people in advance of such a decision. And Dr Ken Boston, Director-General of Education and Training, is right that schools must be responsive to the demands of the people they serve.

If all schools were governed and operated locally and autonomously, the decision to close, amalgamate or restructure schools could not be made externally and imposed coercively.

If there are lengthy waiting lists at single-sex schools and declining enrolments at co-educational schools, one does not need a crystal ball to see what is going on.

If all of these people are right, who or what is wrong?

The centralised nature of the public education system is the culprit. In order to maintain efficiency as a system of schools, no individual school is indispensable. Thinking that they are defending certain public schools, of which they are often understandably proud, many people are in fact defending a system that is insensitive to their needs at a local and individual level. A monolithic system is the captive of majority trends. This is the major distinction between public and private schools—not funding or facilities.

If all schools were governed and operated locally and autonomously, the decision to close, amalgamate or restructure schools could not be made externally and imposed coercively. The only people who could make such a decision would be the people directly involved. No central agency could dictate the philosophy or structure of a school, be it single-sex, coeducational, comprehensive, selective, large or small.

Each of these characteristics of a school offers particular benefits and such a decision would rest with the people whose interests are at stake. NSW Federation of P&C Associations president Bev Baker is also right—one size does not fit all.

Sometimes compromises have to be made. For example, small schools and large schools each have advantages and disadvantages. The choice between a small school which offers a limited curriculum, but teaches it well and is more personal, and a large school with the full range of curriculum and facilities, is one that ought to be made by parents and students. Small schools are only inefficient if they are forced to replicate large schools instead of being allowed to develop their own character and strengths.

If public schools are given greater autonomy under a devolved and decentralised funding system which empowers parents and educators alike, there is a good chance of revival.

Public schools are in a difficult situation. An increasing number of parents are prepared to pay private school fees rather than enrol their child in a public school. This is not a new development; it has been a steady trend over three decades. The government has neglected to respond until now. A cynic might say that it has been in the government's interest to allow this flow of students into the private sector, because, no matter what anyone tells you, students in private schools still receive only a fraction of the total government funding available to students in public schools.

But it has now reached critical mass in inner Sydney—the point at which the decline in enrolments has made many public schools unsustainable.

An insightful survey of government primary school principals recently conducted by Max Angus and Harriet Olney at Edith Cowan University revealed that most primary school principals support the concept of parental choice of schools, yet are wary of competition. The reality is that you can't have one without the other. The survey also tentatively indicated that principals who had been exposed to autonomy and competition were more positive about it than those who had not.

To get back what they have lost, public schools have to be given the freedom, the tools and the authority to compete with the growing private sector as they see fit. Clearly, decisions made on their behalf are unwelcome. If public schools are given greater autonomy under a devolved and decentralised funding system which empowers parents and educators alike, there is a good chance of revival. Leave it any longer and it may be too late.

Principals at stake, but little help

18 April 2005, *The Australian*

PRINCIPALS have been hitting the headlines lately. In Sydney over the last few months there have been a number of highly public stoushes between parents and school governing bodies over the appointment of principals.

The most well-known is the upheaval at Ascham, an independent girls school in Sydney's eastern suburbs. The mysterious departure of principal Susan Preedy revealed a large rift over school leadership styles between the powerful Ascham school council and a large and vocal group of parents. At two government schools in Sydney—Newtown High School of the Performing Arts and Greystanes High School—similar battles were brewing.

Parents of students at these schools were dissatisfied with the government processes of appointing new principals, claiming that the field of candidates was too narrow and their concerns about the suitability of the new principals for the particular needs of the schools were not being taken seriously.

The growing awareness of the strong influence of teachers on academic achievement has put the spotlight on principals as the creators of the environment in which good teaching can flourish.

The modern-day principal is more than an educational leader, however. Increasing accountability requirements and public scrutiny, along with rapid curricular, technological and industrial change, means that principals must be multi-skilled and efficient managers of people, finances and, importantly, time.

A report to the OECD in 2003 warns of the dangerous perception of the 'superprincipal'—which report author Bill Mulford of the University of Tasmania says is a 'largely unobtainable ideal of mythical proportions.' One of the dangers is that good principals burn out trying to be all things to all people. Another is that it is a strong deterrent to taking on the job in the first place. Mulford's report cites survey data from 2001 showing that 88 percent of teachers had no intention of becoming principals, believing the job too stressful, demanding and unrewarding.

One of the dangers is that good principals burn out trying to be all things to all people.

A principal can be lauded as the saviour or the scapegoat of a school, and can polarise or inspire school communities, but in many cases principals are ill-prepared for the pressures and responsibilities of their role. A number of universities offer masters degrees in educational leadership and management, and some state departments of education provide short professional development courses for school leaders, but there are no specific, profession-based courses for prospective or self-improving principals.

Ted Brierley, the president of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, estimates that fewer than 10 percent of principals and deputy principals have any formal training in school leadership, but also says that university courses have limited usefulness anyway. Brierley has high hopes for the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) plan to establish a leadership training program. NIQTSL is currently evaluating tenders and expects its first cohort will begin in 2006.

A recent damning review of post-graduate courses for principals in the United States recommended that school leadership courses be run through business schools, in the manner of an MBA, rather than schools of education. The criticisms are similar to Brierley's—too much academic sociology and theory and not enough of the fundamentals and practicalities of schools as complex organisations.

It's hard to imagine the business concept being embraced by NIQTSL, and Brierley is sceptical, but it's something an enterprising business school with an eye to a gap in the market might consider.

Charting a new course through schools red tape

15 October 2007, *The Age*

THE STATE school system in Victoria has gone further towards empowering individual schools and enabling parental choice than any other state or territory in Australia. Victorian schools have local selection of teaching staff, enrolment zones have been abolished, and funding is pretty close to a student-based model. So what happens when a lot of parents make the same choice, with the result that some schools have more kids than they can handle and others have empty classrooms? The answer depends on whether schools have the capacity and inclination to adapt to their circumstances.

While it is true that large schools have economies of scale, small schools also have a great deal to offer and can be a selling point, especially in the primary years.

State school systems are notoriously inflexible. This is an inherent characteristic of a system where a distant bureaucracy has authority over a large number of schools. There have to be rules, and the same rules have to apply to everyone. Funding is limited, and economic and political decisions are made that are not always in the best interests of individual school communities.

Despite Victoria's progress towards decentralisation, major difficulties remain. In Education last week, Caroline Milburn ('The great divide') described the uneven distribution of students among schools and the dilemma this has created for schools and for the government.

Oversubscribed schools are unable to expand to accommodate increased enrolments because the government will not give them the capital funding necessary. Undersubscribed schools are unwilling to close or merge with other schools, because they have no incentive and no compulsion. A dark cloud hangs over these schools, making it hard to plan.

For parental choice to work for all children, government policy has to enable schools to be dynamic and responsive. If schools cannot expand and contract, if successful schools cannot grow and branch out, if declining schools cannot close, and if new schools cannot open, that's when the market fails. That's when you have the same kids shuffling among the same schools, and some people will inevitably be dissatisfied.

While it is true that large schools have economies of scale, small schools also have a great deal to offer and can be a selling point, especially in the primary years. Many parents prefer smaller schools and would understandably resent being forced to make a different choice.

If funding to schools also included a capital component, schools would not have to ask the government to finance their expansion; their increased student enrolments would cover it. Likewise, if capital spending was a school responsibility, schools experiencing a decline in enrolment would be able to sell unneeded assets and use the money to offer better programs for existing students. There would be no need for government to set targets on what size school is 'viable' and what sort of facilities and programs a school must offer outside the core curriculum and adequate and safe buildings and grounds. Schools are too often couched in terms of bricks and mortar, when a school is really made of teachers and students.

Schools are too often couched in terms of bricks and mortar, when a school is really made of teachers and students.

Highly effective private schools are being run in converted houses and offices in Australia, and elsewhere around the world just about any space is used as a school.

It is sad when a school closes. If the school is not doing its job it is for the good. But sometimes it is because the school does not fit within the parameters set by the system. The only way to fix that is to change the system. That would involve giving schools the resources and the ability to respond to the ebbs and flows of demand. It involves opening the door to new players, such as charter schools.

Charter schools are independently governed public schools. They are publicly funded and must follow agreed curriculum, regulations and accountability regimes, but are operated by non-government organisations such as non-profit groups, charities, or parent-teacher collectives. They can open new schools or take over existing schools.

Changing the system would make it unnecessary for government to intervene except on the basis of poor results.

The financial ramifications of school size would be left to the school. Some small schools will be able to function effectively while others will be left with no choice but to cut their losses and close or seek new management.

Schools would have to be willing to make decisions and be responsible for them. They would have to relinquish the safe haven of expecting governments to make the tough decisions and then getting upset when they don't like the decision that has been made. Schools can't have their cake and eat it, too.

No excuses for not establishing great expectations

9 August 2004, *The Australian*

THERE is a well-known story among educators and education researchers about a teacher having difficulties with the behaviour and achievement levels of her class.

The teacher was worried that some of the children might have learning disabilities, so she looked at the IQ scores in their confidential student files. To her surprise, many of the students had high IQ scores, including some of the worst troublemakers. So the teacher changed her strategy, setting more challenging work and expecting the students to complete and master all tasks set, accepting no excuses. Months later, they were the highest-achieving students in their year.

When the school's principal asked the teacher to explain the turnaround, she confessed to looking at the confidential files, only to discover that what she had thought were IQ scores were actually locker numbers.

This story has appeared in various forms, but derives from a study conducted in San Francisco in 1968 by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson. Primary school teachers were told that certain students were on the brink of a period of rapid intellectual growth. In fact, the students had been picked at random.

The study revealed that achievement was higher among the selected students than among other students of similar ability, and the researchers concluded that intellectual development was influenced by what was expected and how expectations were communicated.

Fairfield High School principal Bob Dunne communicates his expectations to his students and teachers in a way no one could misunderstand. Dunne tells his students they have two responsibilities: turn up, and do the work.

'I then say to them, "Who are you competing against? Are you competing against the 20 students in your class or the 60,000 right across the state?" That is starting to bite,' he says.

When it comes to the school's academic achievements, the goals are clear and measurable. There are no qualifying statements about educating the whole child or working towards improvement. The targets are explicit and fit on a single page, posted in the foyer for all to see—as well as in Dunne's office and every classroom, as a constant reminder. While Dunne recognises the hardships that many of his students face, he does not see that as a reason to believe they are capable of less than they really are.

High expectations feature on every list of the characteristics of effective schools.

His sense of duty to his students and their families is unflinching. To teachers, he says, 'If these were your children, would you expect second-best?' Dunne says the answer is no. 'Parents send you the best kid they have. They can't go and get another one. Our job is to give their kids the best we can.' According to education research, Fairfield High is on a winner with this approach.

High expectations feature on every list of the characteristics of effective schools. One of the most dramatic demonstrations of the influence of expectations can be found in a study published in the book No Excuses by Samuel Casey Carter. Carter profiles 21 high-poverty schools in the United States, all of which have outstanding achievement records. They share a philosophy that disadvantage is no excuse for lack of effort or poor outcomes.

The test scores of no-excuses schools were above the 60th percentile in national tests. Eleven of the 21 had median scores in the top 20 percent of the country. These schools had at least three-quarters of their students qualifying for the free-lunch program for low-income families. Schools with similar numbers of poor children typically score in the lowest 35 percent in national academic tests.

Often people see money as the great enabler, but when you look at the other characteristics that define effective schools, many do not rely on increased spending, just wise spending.

Carter identifies a number of traits that apply to each of these schools. High expectations is one. Of course, expecting great things of students will be pointless if schools do not help them to achieve their goals. Often people see money as the great enabler, but when you look at the other characteristics that define effective schools, many do not rely on increased spending, just wise spending.

Australian Council for Educational Research chief executive Geoff Masters also lists high expectations when he defines a good school. 'There is a deep belief in the ability of every student to learn and achieve high standards,' he writes. Masters and Carter also include measurable goals, great teachers, regular testing, motivation to achieve, parental involvement and an emphasis on learning as priorities.

Carter's list has one more item—freedom for principals to create the necessary conditions for teaching and learning. The book makes the point that increasing choice for parents in low-income areas requires more than greater access to private schools. It also requires freeing up public schools so that they can compete for parents' support.

One of Dunne's concerns is that the rigid funding formula for state schools hinders innovation and flexibility at the school level. This prevents a results-driven principal from doing his job as well as he might. There are no excuses for that.

Class size

Why smaller class sizes don't add up
20 February 2003, *The Newcastle Herald*

IN THE area of school reform, class size reduction seems to hold all the aces. It is popular with academics, teachers, students, and parents alike. It seems intuitive that to have fewer children in a class is better.

Many people, including the authors of the recent Vinson Report on Public Education in NSW, would have us believe that research confirms this. Thorough examination of the research on class sizes and student achievement, however, reveals that this belief is misplaced.

First, many studies have methodological problems that make their application in a real world context doubtful. For example, in the largest and most frequently cited study Project STAR in Tennessee, teachers involved in the study were arguably motivated to ensure that the findings were in favour of smaller classes. This incentive would not exist if small classes were implemented across the board.

The large majority of studies have found no significant effects of class size on student achievement.

Second, many studies introduced other reforms such as curriculum changes at the same time as class size reduction, making their separate effects impossible to determine.

Third, even setting aside these methodological problems, the large majority of studies have found no significant effects of class size on student achievement. The remainder have shown small benefits, usually only when classes have fewer than 20 students.

Fourth, class size effects are mediated by the competence and effectiveness of the teacher.

In fact, the single most important influence on student achievement (apart from intelligence) is teacher quality. What teachers do in the classroom has more effect on how much a student learns than class size, family background, or gender. Unlike class size, this relationship has been consistently confirmed by research both in Australia and overseas.

It makes sense. A great teacher in front of a large class is better than a mediocre teacher in front of a smaller class. Conventional wisdom on class size does not stand up to the same scrutiny.

The most common argument for smaller classes is that teachers can spend more time on individual instruction. Average kindergarten to Year 2 class size in NSW is just over 25 students. The recent Vinson Report recommends reducing maximum class size to 20 students. This extra cost of $1,150 per year per student, amounting to billions of dollars over the next few years, would buy an extra two minutes per day of individual instruction.

Furthermore, class size research has found that teachers' aides, or team teaching, has no effect on student achievement. This again suggests that the ratio of staff to students is less important than the teacher's qualifications.

What constitutes effective pedagogy is another issue, but there seems to be agreement that teacher education in Australian universities is inadequate in imparting both pedagogical and behaviour management skills to teachers. There is too much emphasis on the theoretical over the practical. New teachers have usually spent only a few weeks in teaching practicum, and support for them in the extremely difficult first year in a school is patently inadequate.

Another problem is the lack of ongoing professional development for classroom teachers. The NSW Department of Education undervalues the need for teachers to be aware of new developments in both curriculum and pedagogy, and teachers have too few incentives to seek out professional development opportunities for themselves.

When it comes to teachers, quality is far more important than quantity.

Smaller classes are hugely popular with classroom teachers, and understandably so. It seems obvious that having fewer students makes their jobs easier. The trouble is that this does not necessarily translate into significantly better learning outcomes.

The reality is that governments have a limited amount of money to spend, even on imperative services such as education. Decisions have to be made about how to spend money in the most effective ways. When it comes to teachers, quality is far more important than quantity.

The push for class size reduction serves only to weaken the case for more urgent and supportable investments, such as improved teacher education, better professional development, and a salary structure that rewards good teaching well.

Curriculum

More stay to Year 12, but do easier subjects

1 September 2003, *The Canberra Times*

AN ARTICLE in this newspaper last month ('Students turn to "job" classes,' 21 August) was eerily similar to several reports that appeared in the English press one week before. Apparently, in both Australia and England, students are opting for 'easier' subjects in their senior secondary schooling.

Enrolments in the traditional academic subjects—physical sciences, history, geography, and foreign languages—as well as advanced mathematics and English, have declined. Instead, Australian students are choosing business studies, arts and music, computer studies, and food technology. Students in England also show preference for these subjects over sciences and foreign languages, but their choices also increasingly include psychology (which is now rivaling history in popularity) and media, film and TV studies. What is most surprising is that anyone finds this surprising.

The Australian Council for Educational Research study, from which the subject enrolment data comes, notes that the proportion of students going on to Year 12 has doubled in the last 20 years. This means that schools have to cater for a much wider range of abilities and interests at the senior secondary level. In our efforts to keep young people in school longer, preferably until they complete secondary schooling, a whole raft of new subjects has been introduced.

In our efforts to keep young people in school longer, preferably until they complete secondary schooling, a whole raft of new subjects has been introduced.

Put simply, if you offer it they will take it. By introducing skill-based vocational subjects and other contemporary studies to the range of options available, educational authorities have largely succeeded in maintaining the interest of the less academically inclined. But this may have been to the detriment of highly capable and clever students who often, understandably, take the low road to make the journey to university easier.

Only the most highly motivated (or pressured) students will take more difficult subjects if they have a choice. In some schools and for some families, the prestige of highly demanding subjects is a factor, but most students know that their final mark will be best if they choose subjects in which they expect to do well,

rather than ones that challenge them. Most university courses do not have prerequisites, places being offered on the basis of an overall scaled score or rank, so advanced English, maths, physics, and chemistry hold few attractions in the face of media studies.

The problem is not so much that these newer subjects are available, it is that they are provided as alternatives to the traditional disciplines rather than additions. To give one example, psychology (which is also offered in Victoria) should not be studied without maths. Psychology is taught at universities as a science, requiring reasonably high levels of statistical understanding and proficiency.

There are ramifications beyond secondary schooling. First, students who do not intend to continue their education after school may leave with a relatively narrow knowledge and skill base, with fewer employment choices and an education that could become quickly outdated.

Second, students who plan to attend university may be leaving school insufficiently educated in the field of study they wish to pursue. Students applying for a science degree need not have even studied a science in Year 12, let alone have achieved a mark of an adequate standard to allow them to embark on undergraduate studies successfully. The same is true for many other degrees, and the flow-on effect has been that first-year university courses have had to adjust their standards so students can cope.

The way individual and school successes are presented to the public does not help the situation. In NSW, the only information on Higher School Certificate performance is a list of 'distinguished achievers'—students who have achieved a score of more than 90 in an HSC subject. No distinction is made between physics and physical education.

The unpopularity and high failure rates of A-level maths in England have prompted the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to revise the syllabus, some saying the new course will be easier. While the QCA disputes the 'dumbing down' accusation, it does not deny that it is trying to make the course 'more accessible.'

The best strategy is not to make senior secondary schooling less challenging, but to make the challenge worth the effort.

Australian education systems should not follow suit. Today's students are no less clever than their counterparts a decade or more ago. The best strategy is not to make senior secondary schooling less challenging, but to make the challenge worth the effort. Schools and universities need to be more prescriptive about the acceptable and desirable courses and combinations of studies, and the incentives and rewards must also be greater for those who take the high road.

Choice is best for curriculum

31 July 2006, *The Age*

SCHOOL curricula and the standards of students seem to be constantly under fire, with discussion over the last six months centering on senior school leaving certificates. Proposed changes to the Western Australian Certificate of Education have copped the most flak, while the NSW Higher School Certificate has managed to escape relatively unscathed.

A report commissioned by the federal government recommends the replacement of all state and territory Year 12 qualifications with a national assessment and, by default, a national curriculum created by a national standards body. Some state education ministers have responded ambiguously but NSW's Carmel Tebbutt has strongly resisted, believing the HSC is already the gold standard.

According to those in favour, a single national high school qualification—an Australian Certificate of Education—would solve the problems of impoverished curricula, weak standards and state-based inconsistencies by creating a more rigorous benchmark for achievement.

Despite these claims, there is only one sure benefit of replacing the nine existing Year 12 qualifications with a single national certificate: a reduction in the cost of producing curriculum and assessment materials. With all states and the ACT producing their own, the duplication of effort is enormous and arguably wasteful. But this benefit is far outweighed by the risk associated with centralising curriculum development.

When centralisation of curriculum and assessment at the state level has failed, does it really make sense to centralise even further?

When centralisation of curriculum and assessment at the state level has failed, does it really make sense to centralise even further?

It is naive to assume that a national standards body will be any less vulnerable to ideological or philosophical bias, or the temptation to embrace educational fads, than the state boards of studies and curriculum authorities. It does not matter who is in charge; many of the heads of state boards of studies seem eminently sensible and intelligent but the subject committees have minds of their own.

The big risk is this: if the national standards body is no better or even worse than the state boards, instead of having the variation in quality we currently have (some states are good at some things), we will have universal mediocrity.

There is a case for developing national curriculum guidelines and standards but they should not be mandated. If the guidelines are any good, parents, teachers, employers, and universities will pressure state authorities to adopt them.

There is a better way forward than an Australian Certificate of Education, and it involves more choice rather than less.

Schools should have more freedom to adopt the best curricula and qualifications for their students. They might come from the traditional government sources, or from universities, or from the private sector.

The International Baccalaureate is a pertinent example of a curriculum of choice. Because it is not mandatory, it does not have to please everyone and therefore does not compromise. For the same reason it is not appropriate for all schools but there are many other possibilities, some so obvious they have been overlooked.

For example, schools should be allowed to use the curricula of other states and territories (or even other countries) if their own state's curriculum is proving unsatisfactory.

To take the case of Western Australia, if schools that still have substantial concerns about the new WACE were able to adopt the NSW HSC curriculum, for instance, it would remove the inherent difficulties of implementing all-schools-in or all-schools-out reform.

With more choice and a little help, a standard national qualification may well emerge naturally, simply through schools exercising professional judgment about quality curricula and receiving good comparable data about outcomes.

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school accountability and 'league tables'

Parents need report cards on schools
2 January 2003, *The Sydney Morning Herald*

IT WAS wishful thinking on the part of the federal government and supporters of funding based on socio-economic status to expect that increasing public subsidies to non-government schools alone would create downward pressure on prices.

Such pressure comes only from competition between providers. Competition occurs only when supply exceeds or closely matches demand and when people can freely make informed choices. At present, none of these conditions exist in school education.

Increasing tuition fees in many non-government schools are therefore not a puzzle. The number of places at non-government schools falls far below the number of children whose parents wish to use that system and this places non-government schooling (and certain state schools) at a premium.

But as neither non-government schools nor state schools are required to provide comprehensive public information about their performance, and in the absence of such objective information, parents have to rely on subjective measures such as reputation and prestige. If better information about school performance were available, including a credible value-added measure, the true merit of a school would be more accurately revealed.

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The public, as the financiers of education, ought to know how their money is spent and what are the measurable outcomes of this expenditure. Detailed annual reports such as those recommended by the Review of Non-Government Schools in NSW (the Grimshaw review) are a good way to do this. This information should also be collated and made accessible to interested parties. Data made available to and published by *The Sydney Morning Herald* each year is welcome but incomplete and often unfair.

If accountability measures such as performance and financial reporting are to be introduced, however, they must be applicable to all schools. The Grimshaw review reveals that 'neither government nor non-government schools are the subject of any regular, independent, external evaluation and reporting.'

If individual non-government school budgets are to be open to scrutiny, so then must individual state school budgets. It is no more clear whether the much larger sums allocated to state schools are distributed fairly or spent effectively than those given to Catholic or independent schools. Some state schools are struggling to provide the necessary services with the resources allocated to them, yet others are not.

According to the recent independent inquiry into public education in NSW, up to 25 percent more is spent per student in state secondary schools in low socio-economic areas than schools in 'middling' socio-economic areas, yet low socio-economic status schools reportedly have younger, less-experienced and, therefore, less expensive teachers. On what is the money spent and are students benefiting in any measurable way? These issues never receive the same attention as funding discrepancies between school sectors.

Accountability is not a benign concept, and simply making information available is not sufficient. There must also be consequences. In an open education market, it is relatively simple: accountability is achieved through competition. A school that fails to provide what is reasonably expected would lose students and therefore funding. As independently operating organisations with the power to make important decisions, schools would be wholly responsible for their performance and directly accountable to students and parents.

There is no question that public funding mandates public information and accountability, but it must apply equally to all schools.

In the system we have, accountability is much more difficult to determine. Who should judge the quality of a school, education bureaucrats or parents or the public? And when schools are operated and/or regulated by a state government with multiple levels of authority, who should take ultimate responsibility? Should it be the minister, the district officers, the principal, the teachers, or even the students? Finally, what should happen to the person or persons deemed responsible?

Parents, when given opportunity and reason, can be powerful instigators of change. Although the lack of accountability of non-government schools is often lamented, headmasters' jobs were in jeopardy in several high-fee private schools in recent years as a result of parental dissatisfaction with lower than expected academic performance.

A similar situation occurred at the academically selective Manly High School several years ago. This is accountability, but to parents rather than government, which is arguably more effective.

There is no question that public funding mandates public information and accountability, but it must apply equally to all schools. It must also be accepted that apportioning responsibility is pointless without consequences. Establishing a system of reporting on school operations and performance is only one side of the accountability equation. Who is to be credited or blamed and how they should be disciplined, helped or rewarded are important questions that must also be resolved.

Secrecy fosters low expectations in schools

31 December 2003, *The Newcastle Herald*

IT IS highly unusual for any person or organisation to conceal information that reflects on them favourably. This is no less true of governments. What, then, are we to make of the fact that almost no information is available to parents or the public about what goes on in schools? The reasonable assumption to make is that there is something to hide.

On the basis of information available in NSW, one might reasonably conclude that the only good schools are selective state schools, a number of independent schools in Sydney, and a handful of comprehensive state schools.

The annual jostling of a couple of dozen metropolitan schools for a position in the top Higher School Certificate rankings means nothing to parents and students in the other 2,000 or so schools in the state. For parents, it is not a question of whether North Sydney Girls High achieves more HSC distinctions than Abbotsleigh. They want to know that the schools in their area are meeting appropriate standards and which school is best suited to their child's abilities, interests and aspirations.

State and territory governments have huge data archives about your children and the schools to which you have entrusted them.

Information that would answer these questions is denied them. This is not because the information does not exist. State and territory governments have huge data archives about your children and the schools to which you have entrusted them.

Teachers' unions and governments have conspired to keep this information a secret. Ostensibly, this confidentiality is to protect schools from unfair comparisons because different schools have different capacities to achieve. In reality, it allows low-performing schools to provide sub-standard education without scrutiny and fosters a culture of low expectations. It also allows schools in both the state and non-government sectors to capitalise on, or suffer from, undeserved and unsubstantiated reputations.

A consistent, fair and meaningful system of reporting on the performance of all schools in receipt of substantial public funding is long overdue. Statisticians have warned that even the most sophisticated methods of evaluating school performance are imperfect. Yet, they also admit that while these indicators cannot rank schools precisely, they can, with some confidence, reveal which schools are especially good and which are particularly poor.

Ranking every school is not the primary objective, and this is not an argument for 'league tables' of schools. Nor is it an argument against them. They are perhaps an inevitable result of publishing performance information, but the issue should not stand or fall on them.

Parents are well aware that a single statistic cannot convey the value of a school. They want information on a variety of indicators, academic being only one—an insight the opponents of performance reporting do not seem to credit. Likewise, the public reporting of school performance is not necessarily justification for greater government intervention and regulation.

A balance must be struck between setting sound standards in the core business of schooling without restricting the ability of schools to respond to the needs of students and the desires of parents and without compromising the professional autonomy of teachers.

It should be enough to provide good information and allow parents and the community to use it as they see fit and to decide whether and how schools should be held accountable. That is, top-down setting of standards according to community expectations, and bottom-up accountability for meeting them.

In the case of underperformance, those parents who view the centrally set standards as important can respond, either by attempting to affect change or by taking their children elsewhere, while those who are happy with their school as it is will be no worse off for knowing.

The policy of keeping information from them because they might 'misunderstand' it is unsustainable.

Schools' performances should be made public

22 January 2004, *The Age*

IT'S FRUITLESS to pit school sectors against each other if we don't know all the facts. The amount of public funding going to non-government schools is increasing, along with the number of children in those schools, although which has preceded the other is debatable.

The largest growth has been in small, low-fee, non-denominational Christian schools. We, therefore, have a non-government school sector almost entirely composed of students in religious schools of some kind, including Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, non-denominational Christian, and Islamic schools.

It would be easy to see this as directly reflecting the desires of parents. Prime Minister John Howard clearly thinks so, saying recently that state schools have become 'too politically correct and values-neutral' (*The Age*, 20 January).

This is backed by surveys of parents in non-government schools in Queensland and Victoria. These surveys found that parental choice of a non-government school was based mainly on the school's 'ethos': that is, the values it espoused, as well as attitudes to pastoral care and discipline. Academic performance also figured highly.

One might therefore conclude that more and more parents are seeking a religious school for their children. But this is not necessarily the case. Some parents choose religious schools because they are the only alternative to the state system. Parents who rarely set foot inside a church are putting their children into religious schools because there are so few secular non-government schools.

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The domination of religious schools in the non-government sector can be attributed to funding arrangements. It is very difficult for anyone other than an established organisation to start a school. Churches, however, are perfectly placed. They have the networks, the infrastructure, the non-profit status, the people, and the fund-raising capacity, not to mention the potential enrolment pool of church families. This is how the Catholic system survived years of tenuous government funding, and why other Christian schools are thriving now.

In Sweden, it's a different story. Since 1992, independent schools in Sweden have been provided with the same level of funding as municipal (local government) schools. In the 10 years to 2002, the number of independent schools increased more than five-fold, yet only 15 percent of these were religious. The growth in schools run by teacher-parent cooperatives, non-profit organizations, and private corporations by far outstripped the growth in church schools.

If Australia were to adopt a similar system, where funding follows the child to the school of their choice, it is likely that a greater variety of secular non-government schools would be the result.

This all suggests that there are two groups of parents involved in the flight from state schools—those who expressly favour a religious school education, and those who are fleeing the state system. The latter includes parents who might prefer a secular education, but are reluctant to trust the state school sector.

Why might this be the case? The main reason is lack of information. On this matter, the Prime Minister is entirely right when he says, 'The more information parents have about schools and their performance the better' (*The Australian*, 20 January). It is rare for governments to conceal information that reflects on them favourably, so when information on school performance is kept secret, it is reasonable for people to assume the worst. This creates a situation in which schools can suffer from, or capitalise on, unsubstantiated reputations.

All schools receiving substantial public funding—be they state or non-government—ought to be publicly accountable for their performances.

There are methods of reporting school performance on a broad range of indicators that are fair, meaningful and accurate. Parents know that differences between schools cannot be defined to a pinpoint, but it is possible to identify which schools are doing a lot worse and which schools are doing a lot better than might be expected.

The Victorian government provides more information than the NSW government, but it is still narrow. Both states offer only end-of-school results, and neither state has a value-added measure. NSW and Victoria, like all the states and territories, have the data they need to provide better information—they just don't let us see it.

Parents have to base their judgments on reputation and generalisations, instead of being able to evaluate individual schools on their merits. It is this lack of information, and the suspicion it breeds, that is drawing families to non-government schools, where there is at least some obligation to satisfy parents.

When all families can make an informed choice between individual schools, we might finally be able to move past the fruitlessness of pitting school sectors against each other, and focus on important issues such as ensuring quality teaching for all students.

Every good parent deserves truth

20 November 2008, *The Sydney Morning Herald*

STATE governments have reams of data about schools, but parents—and anyone else interested in education—get to see little of it, at least in any meaningful form. Take this year's Higher School Certificate results. They will be released next month, but parents will again struggle to get any sense of how well particular schools are doing, as the statistics published by the NSW Department of Education are meagre, only the number of high achievers in Year 12 from each school.

Earlier this year, the federal government announced its intention to use 'cooperative federalism' to provide parents and the public with information about school performance.

For the past decade, the think-tank I work for, the Centre of Independent Studies, has called for state governments to publish detailed information on all schools so parents can compare their achievements.

Earlier this year, the federal government announced its intention to use 'cooperative federalism' to provide parents and the public with information about school performance, in the interests of 'transparency and accountability.' The question now is how best to go about it.

A trip to New York earlier this year by the Education Minister, Julia Gillard, was highly influential on her thinking. The New York Department of Education's schools chancellor, Joel Klein, will be in Australia next week spreading the word about his school reporting and accountability scheme.

The department gives all schools an annual report card with information and statistics, including academic performance. Each school is compared to the

average for all schools in the city and to a group of 'like schools' with similar demographic characteristics.

The most contentious aspect is the overall letter grade to each school—A, B, C, D, or F. Schools that persistently receive failing grades face strong sanctions, including closure. The program is still in its infancy, but initial research indicates that schools given F and D grades improved performance substantially the next year.

A similar scheme was introduced in Florida in 1999. Studies of its impact found schools receiving an F made bigger improvements in subsequent years than other schools. Florida's overall test score gains have exceeded the national average by far, and the biggest gains were for minority groups. In 1999, 53 percent of the state's fourth-graders achieved the 'basic' level or better in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Last year, 70 percent did. Over the same period, the proportion of students making the 'advanced' level doubled.

Other countries make school performance information public to varying degrees. The OECD's report on the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment—which tests reading, maths and science—looked at the characteristics of different education systems.

It found students in schools that publicly posted their external exam results performed significantly better than students in schools that did not. That remained the case even after accounting for the demographic and socio-economic background of students and schools.

Providing information is only part of the equation. There must be rewards and consequences. Rather than state sanctions, the best approach is for a government to set standards for educational performance, against which parents and the public can evaluate schools and make informed choices. The Florida system combines accountability with parental choice. Students in failing schools are given the option to attend one that performs better. If a school closes, it is because it has lost the confidence of parents and the community, not because of government decree.

Most arguments against reporting are based on concerns about low-performing schools, and the possibility they will be stigmatised.

Performance reporting inevitably raises the spectre of league tables. Most arguments against reporting are based on concerns about low-performing schools, and the possibility they will be stigmatised. What this argument really says is that no one should know students in low-performing schools are getting a poor education. But students in these schools have the most to gain. Identifying them may cause schools some initial pain, but history suggests that the long-term outcomes are positive.

Test results can be influenced by factors beyond the control of schools, but there are ways to provide information that is sensitive to such circumstances. And while there is much to like about the New York and Florida systems, we don't have to adopt them wholesale. Australia could have a system of school report cards that are easy to understand, but without the contentious grades. We can learn from the flaws of other countries' systems, and create a reporting system that is as meaningful and fair. Parents and the public have been kept in the dark too long.

Education research and statistics

Time lag plagues education statistics
6 December 2004, *The Australian*

BEING a member of the media makes it easier in some ways to get information from governments. It helps that government education departments have media units especially to deal with requests from people like me. (I am not saying for certain that 'parent liaison officers' don't exist, but I have never seen one in education department organisational charts.)

However, it is more difficult for the media in other ways. In a previous life as a researcher for a non-profit policy think tank, I would ring the education department and speak directly to the most knowledgeable person on the particular topic of interest. It might have been a 5- or 10-minute call. Now that I work for a newspaper, the same people either can't or won't talk to me, so I have to make all requests for information through a media liaison person—a process that can take dozens of calls and emails over days, if not weeks.

You might think that it would be a relatively simple task to get the most recent statistics on student achievement in literacy and numeracy testing.

You might think that it would be a relatively simple task to get the most recent statistics on student achievement in literacy and numeracy testing, especially with the current focus on basic skills and some children's lack thereof.

It's not at all simple. Despite the fact that this year's literacy and numeracy testing was completed in all states and territories at least six months ago, and there are a lot of people employed to crunch numbers, some states have not yet released their state-wide results for 2004.

Worse, most parents have only just received their children's results. With just a few weeks left until the end of the school year, it will probably be another three months before that information can be acted on—a time lag of nine months.

Time lags seem to be endemic in education statistics, and nowhere more than at the national level. A six-month gap between testing and reporting at the state level is nothing compared with the national report card on schools.

Among the major responsibilities of the Ministerial Council on Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) is to produce national literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and to compile and publish the annual National

Report on Schooling. As we approach the end of 2004, the 2001 National Report on Schooling is still not finished. Admittedly, these reports contain a lot more than literacy and numeracy data, but it beggars belief that it can take three years to write a several hundred page report. By the time it is finalised, its only value will be as a historical document.

The most recent available national statistics on literacy and numeracy are those for 2001. According to MCEETYA, it is 'unlikely' the 2002 data will be published this year, and they will appear 'perhaps early in 2005.' Again, admittedly the production of national statistics requires a complicated alignment of the various state tests, and then the apparently lengthy 'process of negotiation by ministers.' But two years?

As a point of comparison, consider the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The program tested 300,000 students in 41 countries in various aspects of language literacy, science and maths in 2003. Not only will the OECD publish the results tomorrow, the statistics will be presented in much more detail and with much more analysis than our governments see fit to provide us with.

Australia has an international reputation for its poverty of education statistics, both in terms of the quality of information collected and its accessibility.

Perhaps it is a problem of supply and demand. According to a spokesperson at the Victorian department of education and training, my request for state-wide literacy and numeracy data from 2001 to 2004 was proving difficult because no one had ever asked for it before. If true, that's extraordinary.

It is gratifying to see that the problem has not gone unnoticed, at least in the federal government. The 2004–05 Commonwealth budget for education made specific reference to national reporting, listing as one of its 'key deliverables' for the current financial year: 'Education authorities will be required to commit to the timely publication of the ANR (annual national report on schooling) within one year of the end of each program year.'

For that to happen, MCEETYA would have to publish the complete reports for the four years 2001 to 2004 in the next 12 months. That might be an unrealistic target in the short-term, but this is a problem that needs to be sorted out.

Australia has an international reputation for its poverty of education statistics, both in terms of the quality of information collected and its accessibility. In a small country that spends millions of dollars on education bureaucracy, it's unacceptable.

Trumpeting PISA results a little hasty

13 December 2004, *The Australian*

THE PISA results for 2003 released last week can be viewed in a couple of ways. It is certainly pleasing that Australia's results are among the best of the 40 countries surveyed.

In raw rankings we were fourth in reading, sixth in science, and 11th in maths. But even these ranks may underestimate Australia's performance, because in some cases scores were so close as to be statistically inseparable. It is also pleasing that Australia has made progress in alleviating the effect of socio-economic status on academic performance (as predicted on this page in September.)

Some have taken comfort from these results. The Australian Education Union has used our literacy performance to question the necessity of the national reading inquiry. One can make the relevant points about averages masking the proportion of kids failing, and the tragedy of the Indigenous literacy results, but there are additional reasons to take the PISA results with a grain of salt.

While it is true that on the PISA assessment we look good compared to other countries, it is worth considering whether this assessment is comprehensive, and whether the comparisons are exhaustive.

First, there are serious concerns about the PISA definition of literacy. At the back of the Australian report of the 2000 assessment was the statement that children were not marked down for errors of spelling and grammar. Many people would object to a definition of literacy that does not require accuracy in communication.

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Likewise, the PISA 2003 Australian report uses the words 'spelling' twice and 'grammar' only once. On page 101, in the section on reading literacy, it says 'answers with mistakes in spelling and/or grammar were not penalised as long as the correct point was made.'

Yes, the test is for reading literacy, not writing literacy, but one has to wonder if performing well in a test that marks this answer from a 15-year-old as correct—'because before than it disapeared completly and at that time it reapeared' (sic)—is a dubious honour.

The other major international study is the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS). It is run by the IEA (International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement) and differs from PISA in important ways. Where PISA tests skills rather than knowledge, TIMSS is curriculum-based and therefore tests both knowledge and skill.

TIMSS also has several countries that do not participate in PISA, including Chinese Taipei and Singapore, both of which were in the top three countries in maths and science in TIMSS 1999.

Comparing TIMSS and PISA is interesting. Countries that do well in PISA do not always do well in TIMSS. Finland, for example, was a high flyer in PISA 2003—ranked first in science and second in maths. In TIMSS 1999, however, Finland was placed 10th and 14th. On the other hand, Hungary was an average performer in PISA 2003—ranked 17th in maths and 25th in science, but had been third in maths and ninth in science in TIMSS 1999.

In the years since then, Australia has embraced educational concepts that prioritise the development of skills over content knowledge—'learning how to learn.' Specific subject disciplines are often eschewed in favour of cross-curriculum learning, in some states to a greater extent than others. This sits well with the PISA assessments, but since TIMSS also tests subject knowledge, we may see a division.

The 2003 TIMSS results will be released this week. It would be nice to think that our grand experiment in curriculum and pedagogy has not worked against us, and we'll still be on top of the world.

The problem with education research

28 February 2005, *The Australian*

TWO simultaneous teaching inquiries are being conducted in Australia. One is an inquiry into the teaching of literacy in schools, and the other is into the way universities prepare teachers to teach. The overlap between these two projects is clear—the type of literacy training teachers receive will directly impact on their ability to teach children to read.

What few people may be aware of is that a large proportion of teachers have received no literacy training at all.

Most people would be aware that there is wide variation in the teaching of literacy, and equally wide variation in the effectiveness of the different approaches. The approach used by a particular teacher will depend partly on their school's preferred strategy, state curriculum documents, and the sort of training the teacher received.

What few people may be aware of is that a large proportion of teachers have received no literacy training at all. A study conducted for the Australian College of Educators by Griffith University researchers Cheryl Sim, Claire Wyatt-Smith, and Neil Dempster used data from a census-style survey of about 10,000 teachers.

Their analysis, in the 2002 publication 'How Well Prepared Are Australian Teachers to Meet the Challenge of Raising Standards Of English Literacy?' indicates

that 74 percent of teachers had no literacy training during their pre-service teacher education.

The problem is not confined to older teachers. Only 40 percent of 21- to 30-year-old teachers said they had pre-service training in teaching literacy.

It is difficult to believe that this most fundamental objective of schooling is completely absent from many teacher education programs. Our universities could not be so negligent. Perhaps the reason teachers claim they had no literacy training is because the training they received was unrecognisable as such, or was not useful.

A third project under way at the initiative of the federal Department of Education Science and Training—the development of a Quality Research Framework—is not obviously connected to the two teaching inquiries, but its rationale has serious implications for each of them. The terms of reference of both the literacy inquiry and the teacher training inquiry include an investigation of the extent to which teaching practice in schools is informed by research.

The proposition that teaching should be evidence-based is indisputable, but it assumes that the evidence basis is sound. In fact, educational research is often far from sound.

With a few notable exceptions, most of which exist outside university education faculties, a great deal of empirical educational research in this country would not withstand much scrutiny. Many Australian education journals, for example, contain very little quantitative research of the kind that would be relevant to policy or practice. Look at the papers presented at the conference for the Australian Association for Research in Education and you'll find that the findings presented are often based on case studies, or small sample sizes.

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Education's attachment to qualitative research over quantitative is a relic of its long association with the arts. You will rarely find an education department that has strong links with the science faculty, or an education academic with a science background. At the University of Sydney, education is neither an arts subject nor a science. It is the faculty of Education and Social Work.

Problems with educational research are certainly at least in part a question of funding. The Australian Council of Deans of Education last year reported that education research accounted for only 2 percent of Australian Research Council grants in 2004. Education is the poor cousin, but is also partly the victim of its own poor reputation.

Data-intense, statistically valid research is expensive, but necessary. If evidence-based teaching is the goal, the research foundations must first be solid.

Brightest and best miss out

6 November 2008, *The Australian*

WHEN the OECD described Australia as a high quality, low equality country in its 2000 Program for International Student Assessment report, it fuelled an existing preoccupation among educators and academics about the variation in student achievement levels.

Since then, there has been much talk about the long tail of educational underachievement in Australia.

Ask just about anyone with at least a passing interest in education to name Australia's most significant educational issue and they will almost certainly say that we have too many children who are failing to get an adequate school education. Much less worried about, however, is whether there are too many children who are not getting an excellent education. While the achievement gap is closing—in the 2006 PISA report Australia moved into the high quality, high equality category—there is a real danger that Australia is trading off one for the other.

That we should work hard to lift the low achievers is unarguable. Even one functionally illiterate and innumerate child is too many.

For this reason, a large proportion of government policy and funding is aimed at minimising the number of children who do not achieve at least a basic level of proficiency in the essential skills of literacy and numeracy. For Indigenous children, it is especially crucial.

It is widely thought that if we could just raise the performance of the lowest groups, we could rest easy. Not so.

It is widely thought that if we could just raise the performance of the lowest groups, we could rest easy. Not so. Our ranking in international tests is pretty good but by no means secure. In the PISA rankings, conducted by the OECD every three years since 2000, we have held our position of equal third in science, but our rankings in maths and literacy were lower in 2006 than in 2000. In literacy, we slipped from equal second to equal sixth. In maths, we slipped from equal fourth to equal ninth. In a different set of tests, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, we have also moved down in the rankings in maths and science.

This is not because of the low achievers. Our proportion of students in the lowest achievement band in both tests has been stable through time and is close to or less than the international average. Test scores at the lower end of the scale have changed little or, in some cases, have improved significantly.

Our big problems are at the top. In the 2000 PISA tests we had 17.6 percent of students performing at the top literacy level, the third highest proportion in the OECD. In the 2006 tests, we had just 8.6 percent of students in the top group,

putting us at ninth place. And it wasn't just our relative position that deteriorated. Australia was the only previously strong performing country that saw an absolute decline in literacy scores from 2000 to 2006, which the PISA analysis says is attributable to a decline at the higher end of the performance spectrum.

The TIMSS results are even more striking. The proportion of Australian students in the highest achievement bands is much smaller than high-ranking countries. In the TIMSS 2003 results, Australia had 7 percent of Year 8 students achieving at the highest level in maths, whereas Singapore had 44 percent of its students in the top performance level.

These statistics are the result of a serious shortcoming in Australia's education game plan. The emphasis placed on identifying and assisting children at risk of failing to achieve at least a basic education, particularly in the early years, is necessary for personal and public good reasons. But the children who have the potential to excel rarely get a look-in.

There are plenty of examples of this. A recent one is the NSW government's Best Start program, which will assess the literacy and numeracy skills of all children beginning kindergarten. The aim of the program is to identify children who are behind their peers when they begin school and who may develop learning problems. The assessment is set at a level that cannot identify children who are ahead of their peers and may also benefit from special attention.

Similarly, the terms of reference for the 2007 national numeracy review mention improving numeracy outcomes for disadvantaged learners, underperforming students, and Indigenous students. There is no mention of extending the abilities of the mathematics whiz-kids.

In all levels of government and in most schools, concerns for underperforming students eclipse the need to provide a high quality education for highly capable students. The large majority of literacy and numeracy funding at state and territory level is aimed at remedial programs such as Reading Recovery. All schools are supposed to cater for gifted and talented students, but the funding, staffing and policy support they attract is minuscule by comparison.

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In his new book *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing American Schools Back to Reality*, Charles Murray argues that we need to expend more effort on thinking about the kind of education needed by the young people who will run the country.

Failure to do so will have effects far beyond international test results, reaching into the calibre of our universities, our global competitiveness in technology and innovation, and even the quality of our future governments.

Teacher employment and teacher pay

Merit pay must benefit students

21 February 2005, *The Australian*

ARE THE tides turning? Principals in NSW now have some, if limited, say on who teaches in their school. This was once unthinkable. Is there hope for merit pay, too?

Voices in favour of merit or performance pay for teachers have grown in number over several years and now include both sides of federal politics. Even education academics and some teachers are getting on board.

Research on the importance of teacher quality has drummed home the message in public education that not all teachers are cut from the same cloth. As in all professions, there are wide variations in teachers' commitment and effectiveness. Talk of a looming overall teacher shortage, as well as current difficulties in finding teachers for particular subjects and particular areas, have created the need to examine the old taboo that one teacher could, and should, be paid more than another.

It is one thing, however, to champion the idea of merit pay in principle, as many have done. It is another thing entirely to come up with a way in which it might be implemented. What defines merit and how to measure teacher performance remains to be addressed with any seriousness.

As in all professions, there are wide variations in teachers' commitment and effectiveness.

It is inconceivable that teachers and their representative organisations would accept student achievement levels as the sole measure of teacher performance, or that it should be left up to principals. A common argument, and one that is often given as though it is the final word on the matter, is that there are too many factors at play; that differences in student ability and motivation negate any possibility of fair comparisons. (Of course, non-government schools have paid teachers differentially for decades without the sky falling in).

One of the key goals of the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership is to develop standards that will identify accomplished teachers. National standards for teaching, when eventually ratified by the profession, represent an opportunity to renew the debate over merit pay for teachers, because they assess what teachers do, not just what comes out of the box at the end of the process.

In the United States, accomplished teachers can apply for certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Teachers have to demonstrate the quality of their classroom practice and are assessed by other teachers. Thirty US states offer annual salary bonuses of up to $US7,500 per year, with the *Washington Post* recently describing it as 'the single most powerful merit pay system in public education today.'

Salary incentives attached to advanced teacher standards have a number of advantages. They would have most effect at the end of the salary scale where increases are most needed—the top end. Beginning teachers in Australia have salaries comparable to most professions. The problem is that they hit a relatively low ceiling after 10 years on the job. In order to be paid more, teachers must leave the classroom.

Beginning teachers in Australia have salaries comparable to most professions.

Another advantage is that assessment against agreed standards takes into account the school environment and the special challenges in each classroom. By being peer-assessed, standards-based teacher assessment would be more acceptable to teachers. There is also the potential for national standards to give some structure to teachers' professional development, which currently has no framework and no process for determining the effectiveness and usefulness of programs.

However, the drawbacks are equally numerous. The assessment process is extremely time-consuming. Candidates for the NBPTS certification process report spending between 200 and 400 hours preparing their portfolios. There is also the tendency for statements of standards to be vague and difficult to assess, as has been a criticism of the NBPTS standards, or to be set so low as to be meaningless. But these are potential problems rather than an inevitability.

The most important thing to consider is that teacher process is only part of the equation. What is achieved in terms of measurable student outcomes is just as important. A teacher may use the most theoretically sound pedagogy, and set the most innovative class work imaginable, but this is only impressive when judged against how much their students learn.

Any system of merit pay, while a welcome departure from history, must not lose sight of that fact if it is to provide benefits to students as well as teachers.

Reward key in educator quality equation

19 July 2006, *The Courier-Mail*

IN ALMOST every profession, people who are good at their jobs are paid more. This makes perfect sense as it helps to keep good people in their jobs and it is an incentive to work hard.

In the teaching profession, hard work is not rewarded with higher salaries. Instead, teachers get a small salary increase each year for the first 10 years they are in the classroom. Only a tiny proportion of teachers are ever denied their pay rise. The upshot is that poor teachers are paid more than they should and good teachers paid less than they deserve.

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After 10 years, if teachers want to earn more, they have to accept extra responsibilities that take them out of the classroom. It is easy to see how this policy is counterproductive to quality teaching and teacher retention—both of which are high on the national educational agenda.

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop last week broached the idea of merit pay, proposing a federal government-funded 'incentive fund' to reward high-achieving teachers. Predictably, the Australian Education Union was outraged. Even though the minister's idea is more carrot than stick, teacher unions will not consider any policy that would differentiate between teachers. For them it's solidarity or bust.

Of course, arguments by teachers' unions against merit pay are not framed in that way. They claim it is impossible to judge teacher quality because there are too many factors involved, not least those pesky students. There has been a tendency to view students as beyond the direct influence of teachers and therefore to exclude them from the teacher quality equation.

The US National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) provides teacher certification based on teaching methods and evaluations by colleagues. Even though there is no student learning component, NBPTS qualifications are recognised in every US state and are rewarded with salary bonuses and increases of up to $6,000.

Lawrence Ingvarson at the Australian Council for Educational Research has written a report for our national teaching institute, Teaching Australia, recommending a similar credential. It would extend the teacher pay scale to reward long-serving teachers who excel in their field. The scheme would recognise professional development and performance in the classroom. Taking results into account would, however, be 'problematic.'

But is quality teaching what a teacher says and does in the classroom? Or is it how much their students learn?

US researchers Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson describe these as the 'task' and 'achievement' aspects of teaching and argue that evaluation of teacher quality should consider both. They write that 'at some point we must give up saying that we are involved in teaching if no learning ever follows from our actions.' Teaching and learning are interdependent.

This is why any merit pay scheme must include some measure of student performance. The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence's (ABCTE) fledgling Master Teacher program is one such scheme. Developed in response to a small but growing number of school districts in the United States that are embracing the idea of merit pay, the ABCTE program certifies teachers that demonstrate high levels of mastery of their subject and can show significant gains in student learning.

Schools or individual teachers could opt-in to be eligible for the financial and professional rewards of being identified as a quality teacher.

The key part of this is student gains or 'value-adding.' Teachers with high-performing students are not advantaged because the emphasis is on how much students have learnt over time, not one-off test scores.

Meantime, it is not necessary for governments, either state or federal, to devise new pay schedules for all teachers. There is no need for a confrontation with teachers' unions or changes to industrial regulations. Merit pay schemes need not even be system-wide, but can be voluntary. Schools or individual teachers could opt-in to be eligible for the financial and professional rewards of being identified as a quality teacher. Their union 'representatives' should get out of the way.

Power (and cash) to the principals

7 February 2007, *The Australian*

ALTHOUGH much has been made about the poverty of educational standards in Australian schools lately, it is surprising that things are not a good deal worse. On many important aspects of education policy, state governments are in the grip of teacher unions, creating a situation where public school systems are not being run first and foremost for the benefit of students.

Public school teachers in all states and territories except Victoria are appointed by centralised teacher allocation systems that give public school principals and school communities very little say over who is hired to teach in their school, who stays, who goes, and how they are paid. These decisions are made by government bureaucrats, and merit is typically at the bottom of the list.

Ironically, in centralised staffing systems aggressively defended by teacher unions, teachers themselves have little control over the terms of their employment.

They cannot apply directly to a public school with a vacancy and be hired on their ability and suitability for the position. Instead they languish in a queue until the people ahead of them resign or retire. A career in teaching is a waiting game.

Patience is rewarded over excellence. Teachers earn 'transfer points' for working in hard-to-staff schools. Transfer points are used as currency to get a more appealing teaching position and are supposedly the only way to ensure a supply of teachers to hard-to-staff schools.

In reality, transfer point systems deliver neither quality nor equality in teaching. It is well known that the least experienced teachers are concentrated in the most challenging schools, creating the added problem of high turnover. Many teachers who do not leave teaching because of the difficulty of beginning their career in hard-to-staff schools stay there just long enough to accumulate sufficient points to transfer to a more desirable school. The children who most need quality and consistency are least likely to get it.

Principals and teachers are unhappy with the system, as survey data and commissioned reports show. A 2004 report for the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, for instance, found that 'many teachers feel that they are being marshalled and not treated like individuals' and are also 'unconvinced that the system works equitably.' Teachers in focus groups said it was at odds with their self-perception as autonomous professionals and denied them the freedom to make choices.

In centralised staffing systems, not only are public school principals unable to appoint teachers on merit, it is extremely difficult to get rid of incompetent teachers. Teachers are more likely to be shuffled between schools than disciplined or dismissed, with obvious detrimental effects on students, and serious repercussions for the teaching profession.

Sheltering poor teachers affects morale and reflects badly on the teaching profession as a whole. If public schools are to flourish into the future, the nexus between the teacher unions and state governments must be broken.

Teachers whose careers are determined by a remote and faceless state government department understandably feel as if they need the security of a strong and politically active union. The union, in turn, uses its clout to aggressively and publicly pursue its agenda against the government, blurring the line between professional and industrial matters.

The vital first step in a decentralisation process that would reduce both union and government bureaucratic influence over public schools is to give greater staffing autonomy to schools. Schools should be given their entire personnel budget to select the mix of staff they require.

Schools that have traditionally had difficulty recruiting and keeping staff should be given budgets proportionate to their needs so that they can offer the types of incentive packages they believe to be most effective.

International evidence from the largest and most credible studies indicates that one of the hallmarks of effective schools is the ability to make important

decisions that have an impact on the quality of education they can offer. For example, an analysis of results from the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment shows that schools with greater autonomy, particularly in relation to staffing and school budgets, tend to have higher performance.

For teaching to be seriously considered a profession, teachers must be given more freedom and responsibility for their career paths. Public school principals, who are increasingly being held accountable for the performance of their schools, need to have authority over their school's most important resource: teachers. Policies that prevent principals from hiring the best and removing the worst teachers do students, and, ultimately, public education, no service.

Scale pay to meet demand
29 May 2008, *The Australian*

IT IS regularly argued that teacher pay in Australia is too low and that this is a disincentive to enter the profession. Yet by international standards, Australian teacher salaries are relatively high. Starting teacher salaries in Australia are in the top one-third of the OECD and compare favourably with starting salaries in other professions in Australia.

Teacher salaries are, however, quite compressed. It takes on average only nine years for public school teachers to reach the top salary level, and the top salary for classroom teachers is only 43 percent higher than the starting salary. To earn more, teachers have only three options: leave the classroom, leave the sector, or leave the profession. On this aspect of teacher's compensation, Australia's position is less favourable internationally, among the lowest one-third of countries for salary progression for senior teachers.

To earn more, teachers have only three options: leave the classroom, leave the sector, or leave the profession.

On this basis, it can be argued that the teacher salary scale needs to be extended. The Business Council of Australia's (BCA) proposal to significantly increase the top teacher salary to $130,000 is an audacious one.

Unfortunately, there is no obvious or simple relationship between teacher salaries, teacher quality, and student performance. High performing countries such as Finland and Sweden have starting teacher salaries similar to Australia's (close to average gross domestic product per capita), and both have top salaries lower than Australia's. Obviously, there is something other than pay at play in these countries.

There is some Australian research showing that increased salaries would attract people of higher ability into teaching, but this evidence is related to starting salary. Other international evidence on starting and average salary is mixed, and suggests that working conditions are more important.

One of the interesting aspects of the BCA's proposal is that teachers achieve the top salary by merit. It is not automatic with years of service. The BCA's criteria for merit do not include evidence of student learning, such as test scores. Teachers would become eligible for the top salary by undertaking professional learning such as masters degrees. This is interesting because it is hard to imagine successful business leaders running an organisation in this way, paying people who do courses more than those who make profits.

Again, there is scant evidence to support this approach. Research on teacher effectiveness has found that there is little relationship between student achievement and masters degrees in education. The strongest factor is the teachers' verbal literacy and depth of subject content knowledge.

There is no doubt that salary is an important factor in attracting and retaining teachers. Most teachers do their job for love rather than money, but this principle can only go so far. Teachers have families and mortgages just like everyone else. All students should have good teachers and good teachers should be properly remunerated, and it is necessary to look beyond the status quo to find ways to do this.

Merit-based pay schemes have a chequered history. The reasons are numerous, but one is their failure to look beyond the public sector mentality of lock-step salary ladders. Adding another rung to the ladder does not significantly change the incentives for teachers and simply puts enormous strain on education budgets.

With regard to salary, flexibility is key. In Sweden, the salary schedule indicates only the base rate of pay. Higher rates are individually negotiated between teachers and employers. This is also how it works in the private school system in Australia, and indeed in the whole private sector, which is where the BCA should be seeking inspiration.

In the private sector, salary is based on demand. We need to seriously consider this approach to address teacher shortages. For example, we need more qualified physics teachers so perhaps we need to start offering to pay them more to compete with the salaries and conditions available in other industries.

Higher salaries would come with higher expectations. Using physics as an example again, where there is a shortage of highly qualified physics teachers, they should be used in the most effective way.

Present staffing models put a highly qualified physics teacher in one lucky school, and an underqualified physics teacher in another. Options should be explored to maximise the use of excellent teachers, through innovative timetabling, technology, and more use of allied staff. It may be that a high calibre physics teacher earns top dollar, but should not be confined to one school.

While there remains debate about the preferable format for salary increases—by performance, by qualifications, or by skills demand—there is a growing consensus that salary differentiation is necessary. The difficulty with the BCA's proposal is that it simply adds another layer to a stale cake.

Teachers need lesson in job appointments

19 June 2008, *The Newcastle Herald*

LAST month, all NSW public schools effectively closed for a day because the NSW Teachers Federation called on its members to take part in a 24-hour strike. And last week a round of rolling stoppages began.

Traditionally, parents of children in public schools have been pretty tolerant, if not supportive, of strike action by the union. Most parents think their kids' teachers are good people who sometimes do a tough job.

On this occasion, however, parents have a right to be miffed because the union's reaction to changes in the staffing of public schools is overblown. From the amount of noise being made by the teachers' federation, you might think that the state education department was threatening to make all teachers reapply for their jobs at a lower rate of pay.

The real story is that the state government is trying to drag the teaching profession into the twenty-first century.

Until early May, teachers were allocated to NSW public schools by a staffing system that rarely involved schools themselves in the selection. If a school had a vacancy for a teacher, the education department's staffing unit sent them a teacher. The appointment would not be based on how good the teacher was, but where the teacher fitted into the pecking order.

According to policy, this is how teachers were selected: 'Classroom teacher positions not filled through priority transfer, service transfer, the Permanent Employment Program, special fitness appointment or through a mix of resumption of duty from leave, the Graduate Recruitment Program, scholarship holders, teachers completing targeted training programs, or from the employment list, will be externally advertised and filled by merit.'

In 2006, schools were directly involved in the appointment of only 7 percent of classroom teachers.

The glaring feature is that merit is at the bottom of the list. A less obvious feature is that schools were largely locked out. In 2006, schools were directly involved in the appointment of only 7 percent of classroom teachers. Half of these were advertised and selected on merit. The other half came from the 'employment list' teachers who don't fit into the appointment hierarchy.

Even then, schools were given only five candidates from the list to choose from. This would not be so bad if it was the best five, but it was the five who had been on the list for longest.

The message this staffing process sends is clear and the effect is stultifying. Patience is rewarded over excellence. There is no incentive or recognition for hard work. Teachers have little control over their career paths, and they are treated

as interchangeable workers rather than professionals with identifiable specialist skills.

Change has been needed for a long time. Principals support the changes, with few exceptions, because they know that the key to the success of a school lies in getting the right combination of teachers. The teachers' federation claims that the staffing system is being 'dismantled,' while the NSW Director-General of Education and Training, Michael Coutts-Trotter, who has been up-front in the battle, describes the reforms as 'modest.' The latter is closer to the truth.

The new staffing agreement increases the ability of schools to advertise for classroom teachers and make their own appointments. It is by no means an open employment market, though. Schools will be able to appoint their own teachers only if there are no suitable candidates among those the department gives preference to.

Based on staffing statistics over the past several years, these candidates would cover almost three-quarters of teacher appointments. When the service transfer system is phased out in 2010, it will be closer to two-thirds.

It all boils down to giving schools direct involvement in about 25–30 percent of teacher appointments. Not exactly cut-throat. Especially considering that this is completely optional for schools. They can still absolve themselves from responsibility and let the department choose.

It is well known that the service transfer system results in a high turnover of inexperienced teachers in the most difficult schools.

Most of the fuss has been about the difficulties hard-to-staff schools potentially face when the service transfer system expires. Contrary to the teachers' federation's rhetoric that it is the only proven way to ensure equity, it is well known that the service transfer system results in a high turnover of inexperienced teachers in the most difficult schools.

There is still an issue about how to attract good teachers to these schools, which the education department is yet to address properly, and it would have avoided some problems by doing so from the outset. Nonetheless, the staffing challenge facing a minority of schools is not sufficient reason to subject the whole public school system to antiquated employment practices.

Teacher training

Tossing teachers in the deep end: does it work?
9 May 2005, *The Australian*

A RECENT paper co-written by Australian National University economist Andrew Leigh on teacher quality in America has important implications for Australia. Leigh and co-author Sara Mead from the US Progressive Policy Institute claim that teacher quality in the United States has declined over the past several decades, and that new strategies for improving the situation must be seriously considered.

While there is no similar evidence that teacher quality has declined in Australia, we have a related problem, that of a looming teacher shortage in certain areas and in certain subjects.

There are potentially two consequences of failing to attract teachers to fill available jobs. One is that some students may not get the opportunity to study the full range of subjects if there are insufficient teachers (and you can probably guess which students are most likely to miss out). The other is that in a bid to make up teacher numbers, the standard of teachers and teaching will suffer.

Either way, maintaining and preferably raising teacher quality is of paramount importance. That much is well understood. What is under contention is how to go about it. The obvious way is to recruit highly able people and then train them extensively.

The first of these is non-negotiable. Both common sense and research tell us that a teacher with high verbal and intellectual aptitude gets better results from students. So raw ability is important. What about teacher training? Again, common sense says that there are specific skills and knowledge that teachers need to be effective in the classroom.

Both common sense and research tell us that a teacher with high verbal and intellectual aptitude gets better results from students.

However, according to US educational research, certification, that is, the completion of a state-mandated teacher training course at a university, is not necessarily a good indicator of success in the classroom. At best, the evidence is mixed.

It has been argued as a result that teacher certification, by requiring a long period of extra study and imposing a significant administrative and financial burden,

deters would-be teachers and does not have the trade-off effect of improving quality. Leigh and Mead go further, suggesting certification requirements might have contributed to the quality decline because prospective teachers with the most attractive alternative career options are the least likely to choose a further year of study.

Not everyone believes that the requirements for certification are unnecessary, of course. And it is hard to dismiss the common sense notion that teachers need to be trained. But does this training have to be done in a formal setting?

A debate has flared in the United States recently over the Teach For America (TFA) program, which puts high-performing college graduates with no teacher certification into schools as classroom teachers. The objective is to fill the teaching gaps in challenging, hard to staff, urban and rural schools with bright young things who will learn teaching on the job.

A study published last year by research institute Mathematica showed that school students taught by TFA recruits did as well in reading, and better in maths, than students taught by certified teachers. Another study published last month, by leading teacher education proponent Linda Darling-Hammond, found that TFA teachers achieved significantly worse results from their students than certified teachers.

The methodological differences between the studies are numerous, and criticisms have duly flowed between the researchers, TFA and others. On the surface, it would seem that the situation is irreconcilable without delving into the technicalities, but the two conflicting studies do not necessarily cancel each other out. In fact, while the Darling-Hammond study challenges the idea that an uncertified/untrained teacher is as effective as a certified/trained one, it does not rule against achieving certification on the job. It found that TFA recruits who become certified after about two or three years do 'about as well' as other certified teachers.

It is early days to be declaring TFA an unrivalled success in raising teacher quality, but there is no doubt that it is clearing the first hurdle—attracting good candidates.

It is early days to be declaring TFA an unrivalled success in raising teacher quality, but there is no doubt that it is clearing the first hurdle—attracting good candidates. More than 17,000 high-achieving college graduates applied for TFA in 2005, of which only 2,000 were accepted.

England began a similar initiative called Teach First in 2003. Again, it's too early to say whether a crash-course in curriculum and behaviour management, combined with enthusiasm and raw ability, can always take the place of extensive pre-service training. What we can say with some confidence, however, is that the old way isn't working and the new way warrants a try.

Time to open gate to school-based training

2 November 2005, *The Newcastle Herald*

A FEW things are known about education. The most important influence on how much a child learns is the quality of teaching they receive.

Quality teaching, particularly in the key curriculum areas of maths and science, is determined largely by the teacher's depth of knowledge of their subject and their verbal intelligence; that is, their ability to communicate. There is little evidence, however, that mandatory pre-service teacher education at the university level has any consistent effect on teacher competence, at least for secondary school teachers.

Quality teaching, particularly in the key curriculum areas of maths and science, is determined largely by the teacher's depth of knowledge of their subject and their verbal intelligence.

A survey by the Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA) found that close to 40 percent of secondary teachers were teaching at least one class outside their subject area. This is seen as acceptable, even if not ideal, by many in the education community, whereas the idea of teaching without an accredited education qualification is intolerable and will soon be outlawed in both government and non-government schools.

Under these conditions of employment, schools are forced to accept people with mediocre qualifications in their subject field just because they have a diploma of education, yet are unable to hire a brilliant young maths graduate or experienced scientist without one.

According to the research on teacher quality, the emphasis on teacher training is wrong. And it may be counterproductive. Some researchers argue that extensive pre-service education and administrative requirements may aim to raise the bar, but might in effect be keeping out good potential teachers as well as poor ones.

It is no coincidence that almost all states and territories are experiencing difficulties filling teaching positions. The Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs estimates potential shortages of 20,000 to 30,000 teachers by about 2012. Shortages are unlikely to be across-the-board, however, and will probably exacerbate existing imbalances in the teaching population.

A survey published by the Australian Council of Deans of Science this year found that 41 percent of schools reported difficulty recruiting physics teachers and 31 percent of schools reported difficulty recruiting chemistry teachers. The survey also found that many science teachers were under-qualified, a significant proportion having completed only minimal science education beyond their own schooling. Recruitment difficulties in maths, physical sciences and

technology expand into other curriculum areas in rural Australia, where shortages are chronic.

Part of the problem is that Australia has a general labour market that rewards highly able maths, science and technology graduates and a teaching labour market that has failed to respond. The initial deterrent of having to complete a further year of study in order to qualify to teach is also significant.

On top of this, there are widespread concerns about the quality of pre-service teacher education courses. ASPA has described pre-service teacher education as 'extremely poor' and reviews of teacher training have identified the need for a greater emphasis on practical classroom experience.

Despite the clear need for new strategies to attract high-calibre teachers and to improve their training, the vast majority of education institutions have not been innovative and, rather than making it easier for able people of good character to enter teaching, the authorities are gradually making it more difficult.

Alternative forms of teacher certification, such as school-based teacher education, have the potential to increase both the quantity and quality of secondary school teachers.

Alternative forms of teacher certification, such as school-based teacher education, have the potential to increase both the quantity and quality of secondary school teachers. The Career Change Program being run by Victoria University is the sole example of such an initiative, involving only a couple of dozen teachers in a pilot program.

In school-based teacher training, the school is central. Teacher trainees would be recruited directly into schools. The trainee might be a recent graduate or a career-changer with suitable experience and education, and would be paid a salary as they undertake classroom duties. There would be a short period of intense course work and then a reduced teaching load while they complete the necessary university studies.

For school-based teacher training to have any impact, it will have to be endorsed by teacher institutes and registration boards, as these organisations are the gate-keepers to the profession. They will need to recognise that school-based training does not involve lowering the bar, but rather providing an alternative way to reach it.

Reading

Putting science into the art of teaching

24 May, *The Australian*

TEACHING has been described as an art and a science. Yet some believe there is too much art and not enough science, especially in reading instruction. This problem is being grappled with most publicly in the domain of literacy instruction.

A group of literacy researchers, educators, and psychologists recently published a letter in *The Australian* claiming that the dominant form of reading instruction used in Australian classrooms is ineffective for a large number of children. The letter says that the 'whole language' approach is still in wide use, despite research evidence showing that systematic and explicit teaching of the alphabet and phonemes is the most effective method.

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Identical concerns have been expressed in the United States and Britain, where there has also been strong momentum for reform. The British government has ruled in favour of phonics in schools. In the United States, the federal government will only fund literacy programs that have been scientifically proven. But some school districts are persisting with a 'balanced literacy' approach, usually understood to be a mixture of the whole-language and phonics methods.

Kerry Hempenstall, one of the signatories to the letter in *The Australian* and a lecturer at RMIT University in Victoria, has been a vocal proponent of explicit, systematic phonics instruction. Hempenstall says balanced literacy is a euphemism. 'It suggests that there are two sides to every story and that the truth lies somewhere in the middle,' he says. 'But this is not true of learning to read. The truth does not lie in the middle in this case.'

The debate over literacy instruction raises a broader question—to what extent is teaching practice in general informed by research? According to Hempenstall, teachers still tend to believe their own experience is the best guide, and 'there is very little outside influence on classroom practice.'

In contrast to teaching, Hempenstall says, medicine and psychology have moved away from the arts model, where you learn in the field and develop theory

and treatments based on experience and feedback, toward empirical research or 'evidence-based' practice. Hempenstall says education faculties have not embraced empirical research.

'This was understandable 20 years ago, when for every study showing one thing, there was another study showing the opposite,' he says. But now, more data is collected and 'there is no disagreement from the research perspective over how to teach basic skills.'

Teacher training is partly to blame, according to the findings of the 2000 Review of Teacher Education in NSW, known as the Ramsay Report. Too much emphasis is put on consolidating the content knowledge of teachers, and not enough on the best way to teach subject matter to students. There needs to be a greater emphasis on effective pedagogy.

Too much emphasis is put on consolidating the content knowledge of teachers, and not enough on the best way to teach subject matter to students.

The review found 'too often teacher educators seem to be driven by an interest in the academic discipline of education itself or an interest in passing on their own philosophies, rather than preparing their students to be excellent teachers.'

A federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) report, The Impact of Educational Research, found the dissemination and use of research by schools has increased since the previous report, a decade earlier. It found 'schools were demanding evidence-based policy which relied on broad research sources' and that there are clear, if indirect links between researchers, educators and schools.

Jennifer Gore, a professor in the school of education at the University of Newcastle, NSW, says that a lot of what goes on in the classroom still lacks a solid empirical-research base. But this may be due to the quality and usefulness of educational research rather than neglect. Gore says education research has tended to be small case studies, funded as one-off initiatives and not part of a larger research agenda, and 'research and theory need to be better connected to practice.'

This is supported by the DEST report, which found 'an increase in both interpretative and participatory research, a decline in the large-scale quantitative studies of the type school administrators seek to support policy decisions, and more small highly focused qualitative studies.'

But things are changing, according to Gore. 'Methods such as productive pedagogies and quality teaching are underpinned by a substantial body of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative,' she says. As a result, schools and governments are expressing interest, and practitioners are finding it useful. While there may still be some debate over what constitutes best practice, because contexts vary so much, Gore says what is clear is that 'when we ask more, kids deliver more.'

All teaching methods are not equal

10 November 2004, *The Australian*

THERE was once a time in everyone's life when they couldn't read, but few people can remember how they made the transition to literacy or imagine life without it.

But there are children who manage to get through 11 years of compulsory schooling without learning to read, or with very basic literacy skills. These children will become adults who don't read newspapers, novels, or even magazines. They'll struggle to fill out forms and will have to rely on their memory for important information.

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These are the children federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson has in mind when he speaks of the small but significant proportion of students who have not reached literacy levels expected for their age. More often than not it is boys, Indigenous children, and children in low socio-economic groups.

Some educators, including those who wrote an open letter to Nelson earlier this year, blame the 'whole language' method of teaching reading, which involves memorising and recognising words, and using pictures as cues to guess unfamiliar words, rather than sounding words out.

Whole language has been on the educational agenda since at least the early 1900s when the ideas of influential American philosopher and psychologist John Dewey became the new education mantra. It was introduced into Australia in the 1960s after gaining currency in United States and British schools, amid the progressive education movement that favours child-directed learning.

Now again, the situation in Australia closely follows that in the United States. Endemic poor literacy skills particularly among minorities and low-income students prompted the US federal government to offer money to states and school districts to set up special reading programs.

There's a catch. Reading programs must be 'evidence-based' to secure funding. Translation: must have instruction in phonics (letters and their individual sounds) and phonemic awareness (the sounds that make up a word) as components.

Reading First is a Bush administration initiative, but the research it uses to justify the phonics conditions for the program was commissioned in Bill Clinton's time. The National Reading Panel was convened in 1997 to provide a comprehensive report on the reading strategies that provide the best outcomes.

The panel looked only at high-quality, rigorous studies of reading, identifying 'phonemic awareness and letter knowledge as the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of instruction.'

The evidence on phonics was equally strong, showing it enhanced decoding (identifying words, but not necessarily understanding their meaning) and spelling skills in primary students of all ages and ability levels.

Research has been accumulating around the world in support of the National Reading Panel report, including brain-imaging studies, but how much effect this research is having at the coal-face of the Australian classroom is unknown.

Most schools say they use phonics instruction in combination with other techniques, including whole language, but how much phonics they use and whether it's enough is a matter for debate. The most effective phonics-based teaching method according to empirical evidence is 'direct instruction'—structured, systematic, and scripted classroom programs. Proponents of this approach claim that the need for expensive remedial reading programs would all but disappear if all kids were exposed to this method, with the bright sparks accelerated as they catch on and others continuing until they master it.

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Yet another national inquiry seems tedious when apparently research is firmly on the side of phonics, but it would help to know what techniques teachers are using before making assumptions.

Whatever the findings of an inquiry, it's doubtful that a government decree about reading instruction techniques would have much immediate effect. Teachers do what they think best, what they are comfortable with and, most importantly, what they have learnt in teacher training.

If a review of reading is to have any long-term effect, it's the schools of education in universities that will have to be convinced that all teaching methods are not equal.

Psychology dominates reading debate

2 May 2005, *The Australian*

SINCE learning involves the brain, you might think that the development of teaching methods would involve an intimate knowledge of how the brain works and the stages of its development.

Yet much educational theory (and research) has little to do with the interaction of neurons and how they store and assimilate information, and a lot to do with sociology, ideology and politics. Teaching methods that have no grounding in brain research, particularly the growing field of cognitive science, are inevitably hit-and-miss.

Enter the psychologists. Although education and psychology have had a long association, as a psychology graduate myself I have been interested to see the way that psychology-trained educationists have come to prominence in literacy research.

A few examples: the chairman of the current national inquiry into the teaching of literacy, Ken Rowe, studied psychology through to PhD level, and his research interests include the association between literacy and psychological disorders in children. The CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research, Geoff Masters, did his PhD in psychometrics.

Of the 26 academics whose campaign for reform in reading instruction arguably led to the national inquiry, 24 are psychologists or work within psychology departments. These examples just scratch the surface of high-profile psychology-trained people in education.

What do psychologists have going for them and why should they be even more involved?

For a start, they are strongly attached to the primacy of empirical evidence. Psychology has come a long way since Freud's fascinating but insupportable psychoanalytical musings. Today's psychologists are generally statistically and scientifically adept. With an understanding of what science can tell us about the brain, and what it cannot tell us about the human mind, psychologists establish links between the laboratory and the real world.

What, then, are psychologists saying about the teaching of reading? They are saying that early systematic phonics instruction is an essential teaching method, and that without it many children will not learn to read at all.

The academics that sparked the latest reading debate in Australia base their claims on professional expertise in dealing with children who have reading difficulties, as well as clinical knowledge of how the brain learns.

The Australian Psychological Society's recent submission to the national inquiry states that 'an accumulation of evidence now unequivocally shows that systematic phonics instruction is essential for effective reading.' Learning the alphabetic principle is the necessary first step in learning to read, followed by

learning (memorising) which letters and letter combinations represent which sounds. These principles must be committed to memory so that new words can be decoded. Cognitive science tells us that teaching them in a particular sequence makes the information easier to store and recall.

Psychologists, with much evidence to support them, acknowledge the whole-language approach to the extent that it emphasises the importance of reading for enjoyment and contributes to literacy in a broader sense, but stress that it is not an effective instruction method on its own. To be literate, children must first learn the mechanics of reading.

In the recent parliamentary inquiry into the teaching of reading in the United Kingdom (note the use of the word 'reading' rather than more broad term 'literacy'), submissions and evidence from psychologists were strongly influential.

One of the most striking pieces of evidence was the results of research performed in Clackmannanshire in Scotland. Research psychologists found that students taught to read by a program of 'synthetic' phonics had reading skills three years ahead of their expected reading age by Year 7. The greatest gains were made by students usually considered most at risk of reading failure—children from low socio-economic status families and boys.

Despite this and other strong and convincing evidence which tells the same story, the recommendations of the UK reading inquiry committee were disappointingly politically sensitive. While admitting that arguments for more strictly defined phonics programs were persuasive, the committee recommended more research be done. Meanwhile, millions of children will miss out on what is undeniably the springboard for a better education and better life.

Submissions for the Australian inquiry closed at the end of April. They have not yet been made publicly available, but there is little doubt how the issue has played out among the various groups involved. The committee will be under pressure to provide a 'balanced' perspective that gives credence to all perspectives, but hopefully the brain will triumph.
