

PARENT POWER

Ross Farrelly argues that the free market, rather than a centralised bureaucracy, should decide what children learn at school and how they learn it.

In December 2004, the then NSW Education Minister Andrew Refshauge was backed into a corner. In the light of the poor academic performance of Indigenous students, he could no longer insist that the 'one size fits all' approach to school curricula is the best model. Instead he proposed to relabel schools with high concentrations of Aboriginal students as 'community schools' and allow them to develop personalised study plans for individual students. He agreed that 'Aboriginal parents [should now] have a say in selecting teachers and managing public schools'.¹ He also broached the crucial issue of funding by acceding that 'teachers may be paid based on their performance, rather than the union award'.²

This points to the broader question of who should choose what the best is for Australia's children. Who is best qualified to choose the curriculum and the teaching methods employed in Australian schools? As each child is different, and therefore has different educational needs, and as parents are the ones who know their own

children most intimately, it is parents rather than educationalists who should choose the best education for the children of Australia. But parents will only be able to do so if the funding for schools is placed in their hands, and there is sufficient diversity in the educational marketplace to allow them to make a meaningful choice. These two factors, the ability for parents to choose where they spend every cent of their education dollar, and a school system which gives schools the freedom to tailor their wares to the needs of parents and students are the most effective means to improving school education in Australia.

The present system of centralised curriculum development by the states reflects the view that education is a highly specialised subject, which should be the exclusive domain of the experts. There is no effective method for the general population

Ross Farrelly is a Sydney-based educator and writer.

to influence the content of school curricula. In an environment where the curricula are 'fractured and distorted by competing ideologies',³ the only way proponents of a particular educational philosophy can secure a footing is to have the curricula developed exclusively by experts who share their views.

Each state has an organisation responsible for curriculum development. Victoria has its Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the Northern Territory has a Board of Studies, Queensland has a Studies Authority, Tasmania is served by the School Education Division of the Department of Education, Western Australia has a Curriculum Council, and the Department of Education and Children's Services develops curricula in South Australia.

In New South Wales, the Board of Studies (BOS) is responsible for developing the state curriculum. The Board appoints a Board Curriculum Committee (BCC) that carries out the development on a particular subject. A BCC comprises members of the Board of Studies, representatives from the

It is a very dangerous move to take the decision out of the hands of the ordinary people and give it to educationalists. It is the duty of a parent, not the state, to oversee the education of children.

tertiary sector, representatives from government educational bodies such as the Department of Education and Training, representatives from education unions, the Catholic and Independent sector and parent bodies such as the NSW Parents Council.⁴

The BCC reviews the current syllabus, consults with teachers and other professionals, researches current trends in curriculum development and then recommends changes to the Board. Proposed changes are then distributed to schools with a consultation and development timeline. Following this, the BCC publishes a draft writing brief on which teachers and other education professionals have a chance to comment. Surveys are sent out to schools and universities. Teachers, principals, and

academics are then invited to comment on the draft writing brief.

Apart from one NSW Parents Council nominee there is very little participation in the curriculum development process by anyone other than education professionals. The consultation process is supposedly open to the general community⁵ but in reality, very few members of the public know which curricula are under review and have an interest in participating in the review process. For example the 1999 BOS Consultation Report on the draft stage 6 English syllabus shows that academics, teachers and other educationalists were asked to comment but there were no comments from the general public.⁶

In June 2001 the NSW government launched the Vinson inquiry, a half million dollar government-funded examination of the public education system. If ever there was a time for parents to have their say, this was it. Politicians claimed that the inquiry was based on far reaching public consultation,⁷ but the fact is that virtually no private individuals had an input to the inquiry. Of the 100 submissions to the Vinson inquiry, 86 were made by educational institutions of one sort or another, one by a citizens and parents body and thirteen by private individuals.⁸ That means that of the nearly two and a half million households in NSW in 2001,⁹ only thirteen individuals who were not involved professionally with education made a submission.

It is clear that there is very little parental input to the NSW curricula. The curricula are in effect the product of a panel of expert educationalists.

It is a very dangerous move to take the decision out of the hands of the ordinary people and give it to educationalists. It is the duty of a parent, not the state, to oversee the education of children.¹⁰ Once the opportunity to fulfil one's duty is removed, the ability and power to do that duty withers and dies through lack of use. The power of citizens to think, consider, assess and decide on the education that their children are to receive is being usurped by the government and consequently these abilities are diminishing. Under this regime, our habit of dependency deepens and our complacency strengthens, until not only do we not care that the power to decide has passed from our hands, we no longer remember that the ability to choose even exists.

Centralised curricula are also demoralising for some teachers, forcing them to teach material they consider to be sub-standard. In the context of the teaching of history, Gregory Haines of Riverview College, Sydney puts it this way:

The value to the student of good history method and teaching argues strongly for the abolition of all government scripted syllabuses. This attainment, greatly to be desired, would also benefit historians and educators by encouraging true professionalism . . . Just imagine the havoc if good and even average teachers were actually teaching something they loved, and were teaching it with passion, rather than teaching to regulations.¹¹

If parents were able to choose where they spent their education dollars (via tax breaks or school vouchers) and the market was able to respond to diverse parental requirements by offering a range of different schools with different curricula and different leaving exams, parent interest in and input to curriculum development would skyrocket. School vouchers and a diversified education market would allow parents to ‘vote’ continuously, via the market, for whatever system of education they think best. If the government is really serious about parent consultation, why not let parents vote with their cash?

But even high levels of parental involvement in curriculum development would not bring about significant improvement while curricula are monopolised by the state governments. No single curriculum can possibly reflect the educational vision of the parents in NSW. Take the current English syllabus, for example, with its emphasis on deconstruction and postmodernism. In an open educational market, would such a curriculum dominate the marketplace as it now does now? Does it really reflect the philosophical understanding of the parent body of NSW? I think not. There should be a place for such a curriculum, but its extent and influence should be proportional to its acceptance in society, not to the influence of a small group of ideologues on the Board of Studies curriculum committee.

As we have seen, despite the appearance of consultation, NSW curricula are determined by

a small homogenous panel of experts. When they meet they are trying to solve a very complex problem which has many different possible solutions. The exact nature of the problem which the curriculum ought to solve is itself open to debate and will reflect one’s view of human nature and the meaning of human existence. Materialists will develop quite different curricula to those who believe that a human being is more than a physical body. Those who believe in the Christian salvation will educate their children quite differently to the utilitarians. Those who believe that the most important aim of human life is to support one’s society and nation will emphasise different aspects of history and character building to those emphasised by rugged individualists.

Deciding the aim of a school curriculum and the criteria by which we will judge its effectiveness is a complex and multifaceted task. It is especially complicated because there is no set number of

School vouchers and a diversified education market would allow parents to ‘vote’ continuously, via the market, for whatever system of education they think best. If the government is really serious about parent consultation, why not let parents vote with their cash?

predetermined options from which we must select the best answer, but there is, in a sense, an infinite number of different answers. Nevertheless, it is an example of what James Surowiecki, in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds* calls a ‘cognition problem’,¹² one to which some solutions are definitely better than others. Surowiecki argues such complex problems are not easily solved by single individuals or even by small homogenous committees, but by large crowds of people who have the means to pool their collective wisdom. He argues that, in general, the collective wisdom of a large crowd of people is superior to the wisdom of any individual in that crowd, so long as the crowd meets certain conditions necessary to make it wise, namely ‘diversity, independence and a particular kind of

decentralization'.¹³ He cites the example of the 1986 space shuttle Challenger disaster. Four companies helped build the spacecraft. When it exploded on lift-off, people wanted to know which of the companies was responsible. The collective wisdom of investors answered this question *on the day of the disaster* by wiping 12% off the value of the stocks of Morton Thiokol, the company that built the solid fuel booster, but only an average of 3% of the other three companies. Six months later the presidential commission of enquiry into the disaster concurred with the market's decision. This is just one of many examples Surowiecki gives of the collective wisdom of crowds.

A single syllabus formulated by a committee must inevitably be the result of compromise. But Surowiecki points out that:

An intelligent group, especially when confronted with cognition problems, does not ask its members to modify their positions in order to let the group reach a decision everyone can be happy with. Instead, it figures out how to use mechanisms—like market process, or intelligent voting systems—to aggregate and produce collective judgements that represent not what any one person in the group thinks, but in some sense, what they all think.¹⁴

A plethora of innovations such as the whole language approach to reading, fuzzy maths, functional grammar, outcomes based education . . . has been foisted on unsuspecting children.

Committees are susceptible to many shortcomings which negatively influence their decision making ability. They are liable to work from unquestioned assumptions. If there is a lack of diversity and independence in the committee, assumptions can go unexamined for long periods and the committee reinforces its own view of the situation. Groupthink takes over and possible alternatives recede, almost unnoticed, into the background. Surowiecki cites Kennedy's decision to invade Cuba as an example of a committee reinforcing its own mistaken view of reality.

A further argument against curricula being developed by homogenous groups of educational experts is the ease with which fads can be introduced to the curriculum. Over the last 30 years, a plethora of innovations such as the whole language approach to reading, fuzzy maths, functional grammar, outcomes based education and the 'progressive' education movement which promotes child-centred learning experiences and emphasises process rather than content have been foisted on the unsuspecting children who populate the NSW education system and the long-suffering citizens of Australia who have to fund these experiments through their taxes.¹⁵ Because the NSW education system is governed by a centralised board, these fads are not small, localised experiments which are tested to see if they actually work in practice. They are implemented in every school across the state. Considerable resources in the form of both money and time are invested in training teachers to adopt these new ideologies, resources which are wasted as soon as one fad is replaced by the next. A whole generation of school children becomes the guinea pigs upon which the latest fad is tested. I am all for innovation in education, but it should be as part of a flexible open market so that only those parents who wish to invest in new teaching techniques need do so, and the damage done by ineffective teaching methods is limited.

I suggest that the collective wisdom of the parent body of NSW would do a much better job of answering the question 'What ought high school students learn today in order to be well prepared for life beyond school?' than any committee. A parent body drawn from the whole population has each of the three characteristics Surowiecki identifies as necessary for a crowd to be wise; it would be *diverse*, it would be *independent* and it would be *decentralised*.

By independent I mean that parents are relatively free from coercion and influence of others when making deciding on what education their children will receive. Parents do discuss schools with each other and are influenced by friends, family and advertising, but ultimately the decision is their own and, since it is such an important decision, they are likely to rely on their own judgement rather than the judgement of others.

The benefit of having a large diverse parent body working actively to solve the problem of what makes a good education is that some parents will take a punt on unusual and radical ideas. Most of these will not work, and the market will quickly recognise this and these experiments will die a natural death, but a few of them will succeed and flourish. This is exactly how innovation happens in other markets, but it is virtually impossible for it to happen in education when curricula are developed by a small committee of educationalists who must attempt to be answerable to everyone.

Having established the many benefits which would accrue to students if the parent body were granted the means to directly influence the content of school curricula, let us now consider what would be necessary to place such power in the hands of parents and how such a system might operate. There are two indispensable prerequisites if parents are to have direct influence on the quality of our schools. The first is that parents have control over where they spend every cent of their education dollars. The second is that the educational marketplace is such that providers of education have the freedom to offer a variety of educational products.

How would this work in practice? The scenario I propose gives parents the ability to choose where they spend their money on education, and facilitates an education marketplace which allows providers to offer a range of educational solutions to cater for the diversity of parental expectations. In this scenario, schooling remains compulsory. Parents must send their children to a school which has been accredited by government inspectors. But the criterion for accreditation is not that the school fulfils the NSW government curriculum. Schools are accredited if they meet the following two standards: firstly that the school states openly and transparently what it is teaching. The school is obliged to make its curriculum available to parents and to explain in plain language what it intends to teach to its students. The second criterion for accreditation is that the school demonstrates that it is in fact teaching its curriculum to its students. Thus to be accredited a school must show how it assesses its students and how its students progress as they are taught.

Some opponents of transparent reporting of student achievement claim that less well funded

schools, or schools which teach children from underprivileged backgrounds would be shown in a poor light if the result of student assessment were to be made public. Obviously the results of a school which caters for students with learning difficulties or special needs will be far below a school which specialises in gifted education and so comparing absolute levels of student achievement between schools is not always meaningful. But there are forms of assessment which measure student *progress* rather than student achievement and particularly if this is adjusted for student IQ, this can be very meaningful for parents wishing to compare schools.

The second important aspect of this scenario is how schools are funded. The easiest way to put purchasing power in the hands of parents is through a system of school vouchers or tax credits. These measures have the advantage of lending

The easiest way to put purchasing power in the hands of parents is through a system of school vouchers or tax credits. These measures have the advantage of lending assistance to low income families without removing the spending power from parents.

assistance to low income families without removing the spending power from parents. Here is not the place to discuss the technicalities of how such a system of school funding would operate, but education expert Jennifer Buckingham has written an impressive monograph explaining how such a system could be implemented in Australia.¹⁶ In this scenario, government and non-government schools would compete with each other to attract parents. But they would be competing on a level playing field. All schools would be accredited in the same way, and if government schools wanted to group together and support a common curriculum development organisation such as the Board of Studies they would be free to do so, but they would have to find the funding for it from the income they could attract from parents. Schools would be

free to go it alone and seek to sell their brand of education on the open market or they could group together to adopt the services of an independent examining body. Such examining bodies would develop a leaving exam and associated curricula, and then make these available to schools and provide training and guidance in the implementation of their curricula. A system similar to this has been discussed recently in the UK.¹⁷ This would be applicable across the country which would also go some way to solving the problem highlighted by Minister for Education, Science and Training Brendan Nelson of parents moving interstate

Nelson's solution is to introduce a national curriculum which would exacerbate the problems associated with centralised state curricula.

and encountering incompatible state education systems.¹⁸ Nelson's solution is to introduce a national curriculum which would exacerbate the problems associated with centralised state curricula. The system of franchising curricula would maintain the economies of scale and avoid unnecessary reduplication, while providing parental choice and curriculum competition.

Another issue is how university and other tertiary education providers would cope with greater diversity in primary and secondary school curricula. Universities already have mechanisms to evaluate students who have studied the International Baccalaureate or sat leaving exams in countries other than Australia and they have devised comparability scales to accept students from any of the states and territories. This indicates that universities are willing to accept students with various forms of secondary education and there is no reason why this would not work with a more diversified Australian school system.

Under this scenario of curriculum competition and school vouchers or tax credits, the collective wisdom of the parent body would be brought to bear on the question of what constitutes the best education for Australian children. The net effect would be that educational outcomes would improve, parental interest in and engagement with

education would increase and innovation and development in education would be stimulated.

Endnotes

- ¹ L. Doherty, 'Aboriginal parents to have say on schools', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/11/30/1101577489963.html> (accessed 2 December 2004).
- ² As above.
- ³ A. Barcan, 'Ideology and the Curriculum', in *Education and the Ideal*, ed. N. Smith (Sydney: New Frontier Publishing, 2004), 13.
- ⁴ NSW Board of Studies, 'Syllabus Development Handbook', 17, http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/pdf_doc/syl_dev_handbook.pdf (accessed 15 November 2004).
- ⁵ As above, 50.
- ⁶ NSW Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Draft Syllabus Consultation Report*, http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/pdf_doc/english_consult.pdf, (accessed 21 November 2004).
- ⁷ J. Aquilina, *Education Reform Amendment Bill*, <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA19971022004> (accessed 18 November 2004).
- ⁸ Various, *Submissions made to the NSW Public Education Inquiry*, http://www.pub-ed-inquiry.org/submissions/bydate_index.html, (accessed 19 November 2004).
- ⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics., *Australian Social Trends, Family and Community*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/CBA7909D2420C5B6CA256D39001BC33A?Open>
- ¹⁰ W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Vol. I, (1826), 450.
- ¹¹ G. Haines, 'Histories Make Men Wise', in *Education and the Ideal*, 144, 145.
- ¹² J. Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, (Doubleday, 2004), xvii.
- ¹³ As above, xviii.
- ¹⁴ As above, xix.
- ¹⁵ K. Donnelly, *The Problem With Educational Fads*, http://www.mrcltd.org.au/include_files/comment1.cfm (accessed 1 November 2004).
- ¹⁶ J. Buckingham, *Families, Freedom and Education*, (Sydney: CIS, 2001).
- ¹⁷ S. Cassidy, 'Exam boards could be subject to market forces', *The Independent* (26 July 2003), <http://education.independent.co.uk/news/story.jsp?story=427641> (accessed 16 December 2004).
- ¹⁸ L. Doherty and N. O'Malley 'Ministers push for uniform rules on school systems', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (9 July 2003), <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/07/08/1057430208414.html> (accessed 16 December 2004).