The Finn Red Line

Chester E Finn Jr talks to **Jennifer Buckingham** about tensions between school autonomy, parental choice and the need for better educational standards

In English-speaking nations around the world, public school systems and the governments responsible for them are facing similar challenges. Rising disaffection with public education due to changing and intensifying demands of parents and employers has resulted in increasing numbers of students enrolling in private schools. This has forced governments to examine the quality of the schooling offered in all schools, including curriculum content and standards, and has led to calls for a national curriculum. As most private schools (more than 95% in Australia) have a religious affiliation, it has also raised questions about the effect religious schools might have on social cohesion. In the US as in Australia, these debates are yet to be resolved and the two countries have much in common, but also much to learn from each other, as US education expert Chester E Finn Jr discovered when he visited Australia in May this year.

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Jennifer Buckingham: Concerns about variability in school quality between the states has made the subject of national curriculum a hot issue in Australia. However, there is a risk that centralisation of this sort will make curriculum content more vulnerable to bias and that standards will end up being anchored to the lowest common denominator. What is the best way to avoid these pitfalls?

Chester E Finn: We are still having the argument in the US on the theoretical level of whether we should do such a thing and there is still considerable interest in not doing it at all and, instead, continuing with 50 states having their own standards. This has produced a problem in two ways. One is that our federal government's *No Child Left Behind Act*, which tells each state to set its own standards and then judges schools' educational performance against them, creates an inevitable incentive for states to have low standards. Additionally, in a highly mobile society it is questionable whether state-specific standards make any sense. We at the Fordham Foundation put out a publication six months ago that laid out four different models for national standards. The most draconian and politically least likely is for the federal government to establish a set of national standards that the states would have to adopt. That's not going to happen in the US. The most that may happen in the US will be some form of voluntary national standard that states would then be free to subscribe to if they want to and free to go their own way if they would prefer. I think that version has a serious political chance over the next five years were it to be done right.

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Right now we have two possible ways of going about this in the US in terms of things that already exist that could be built upon. We have the National Assessment of Educational Progress which is a national sample-based test based on standards that have been carefully set by a diverse body of 23 people called the National Assessment Governing Board. That exam and the standards that underlie it could be a basis for national standards.

The other option is a non-governmental group called Achieve, a voluntary compact of governors and business leaders that was formed about 15 years ago to advance the cause of standards-based reform. Achieve has come up with a respected product called the American Diploma Project (Fordham took part in creating this) which specifies outcome standards for the end of high school, in English and Math only. These standards for twelfth grade were formulated by synthesising the demands of universities and employers (I'm talking about modern style employers with complex and challenging jobs, not old fashioned industrial jobs). The problem with ADP at present is that it says nothing about the earlier school grades and has no exam attached; so for it to evolve into the national standard, Achieve would have to backward map down from twelfth grade and specify what that means for eighth grade, for sixth grade, and so forth, and also to construct an exam to match the standards.

JB: We've come to the realisation that most states are doing a pretty poor job in setting curricula but I think there are a lot of us who are yet to be convinced that the federal government will be any better at it. Government tends to go to the same old organisations all the time and history has shown that they have been involved in getting us to the point we are at now, so what is to say that given a bigger role that they won't make the same mistakes.

CEF: I've decided after many years, decades even, of involvement in education that all education policy disputes can be distilled into a single question, which is, who do you trust? In particular, who do you trust to do right by the kids? If you can satisfactorily answer *that* question, then answers to all of your other education dilemmas will follow. Some people say I only trust the parents, some people say I only trust local authorities, some say I only trust teachers and so on. Whatever your answer to that question preordains how you deal with all these other challenges.

There is enormous distrust in the US about either the Congress or the executive branch setting

the education standard. There could be another mechanism waiting to be devised for creating national standards, but our country, like yours, is not well organised to do this kind of thing. It's as if we have a missing organisation or agency. The absence of such as mechanism creates a real challenge, indeed has been a challenge for the last 18 years of American history with respect to standards-based reform.

JB: There is apparent conflict between belief in the importance of school autonomy and strong parental involvement and competition, and the mandating of consistent standards and national curriculum. How do you resolve the two?

CEF: The two great sources of reform dynamism in the US today, and for at least the past decade, are, on the one hand, the movement towards standards, external assessments and accountability, and, on the other hand, the movement towards full school choice. I've come to see them as complimentary to each other, even supportive. Each of those reform ideas turns out, at least in the US, to have significant defects. Standards-based reforms are very good at identifying bad schools but very bad at fixing them, and so millions of children are stuck in schools that we know are bad schools and that don't get any better. Solution: let them go to other schools, let them exercise choice. In that regard, I think school choice contains an answer to one of the great shortcomings of standards-based reforms. Conversely, parents trying to exercise choice find themselves in a very unsatisfactory marketplace in which they really don't have good information, particularly comparative information about the relative quality or effectiveness of individual schools. Answer: use the state or national standards and tests as the measure against which to compare the performance of schools. In that sense I think the standards-based reform idea has at least a partial solution to the great shortcoming of the choice movement.

I should add that what these two reform ideas have in common is that, by and large, both have been imposed from outside the education profession and the education profession has generally resisted both of them. The profession has also pushed back with its own reform agenda, which one could fairly term 'professionalism'. Its message is 'trust us, we are experts, we know how to run schools, we know how to do right for the children', and that becomes the third option if you are looking for education reform. That also makes for a three-way tension that we are living with now in the US.

JB: There is an undercurrent of concern in Australia—which has been put off a bit by the debate over national curriculum but I think it will become important again—about the rise in the number of religious 'fundamentalist' schools in our country. Do you see a role for government in regulating the cultural character of a school? How much freedom is too much freedom when it comes to parental choice?

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CEF: Some people regard Roman Catholics as fundamentalists and would be just as nervous about parents selecting a school with a crucifix on the wall and Trinitarian religious instruction. It's just that we are accustomed to that form of independent, aided school because it has been around for a long time. Indeed, pure secularists and atheists are very nervous about any religious instruction and so it is important to keep in mind that you are really talking about a continuum here in which today's fundamentalist religions, typically Protestant but sometimes Islamist or others, are the newest manifestations of an anxiety which, a century ago, would have been about Catholic schools and Jewish schools and Lutheran schools for parallel reasons.

In Australia, as I understand it, all such schools, in order to receive government aid, must teach the state curriculum. US private schools don't have to do that (and of course don't get much government aid, either). Your religious schools, as

I understand it, also have to employ certified or state-registered teachers. That doesn't happen in the US, either, except in one or two states. So your private and religious schools are already subject to quite a lot of regulation with respect to the core of their curriculum and who is able to teach it. So if people are concerned about what such schools are teaching, they are concerned about additional instruction on top of the state curriculum.

I don't know about Australia but in the US the regular government school system also harbours some eccentric and seemingly separatist schools. We have Afro-centric government schools, we have Hispano-centric government schools, we have government schools that focus on a single history or single culture. I sometimes note, admittedly with slight exaggeration, that every odd thing I see in the private sector of education I can also find in the government sector. So I am left wondering whether people are employing a kind of a double standard: if it's weird and outside the government sector, they don't like it, but if it's weird and inside the government sector it's fine because the government is responsible for it. On balance, I believe that if a school is teaching the state curriculum and employing state approved teachers, has got itself a state licence and parents want to send their children to it, it has met the essential requirements of operating, unless it does something egregiously wrong such as preaching terrorism or something.

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JB: There have been reports of that kind of influence in some Muslim schools. Not from the teachers themselves necessarily, but that school libraries have videos of jihadist preachers, for example.

CEF: In the US, a completely different set of laws and rules deals with fostering civil disruption or terrorism. If one is worried about social cohesion and potential social disorder, one can think about schools as one of many cultural institutions that contain that possibility. Radio stations, your local branch of Al Jazeera TV, even movies and theatre, certainly religious institutions, might at some point might step over the line from free speech to inciting violence. At that point, society needs rules but I don't think they are education rules. They are more like rules for maintaining civil peace. In any free society, of course, those are sticky because they collide with free speech. As with pornography, we are in endless difficulty in the US as to where if anywhere does one place limits on freedom of expression. There must be such a point—we draw the line, for example, at pornography involving children—but I think this is the framework within which to consider your concern, noting that the schools you're concerned about have already conformed to the society's general rules for the operation of independent schools.

JB: We have a fundamentalist, separatist Christian group here called the Exclusive Brethren, whose schools reportedly refuse to use computers or teach the use of information technology. In this case, it is not about undermining social cohesion, it's more like educational negligence for these particular children.

CEF: Australia has an easier way of addressing this concern than the US does because your registered private schools must accept the state curriculum. That's not so in America. Our answer would be that society is not going to aid those schools or those children but, if their parents want to pay out of their own pockets, and these schools want to operate completely outside the government sector, that is their own business.

JB: So where government funding stops, government responsibility ends.

CEF: Pretty close. The remaining sticky wicket in the US is that even an unaided private school must in some sense be recognised by the state. That's because each of our states has what is called a compulsory attendance law, stating that children must attend school between certain ages. Once you have a compulsory attendance law mandating

that children must attend school you then have to have a definition of what is a school. A 7/11 store is not a school, for example. But this question has been undermined and weakened by the political influence of the home-schooling movement. For the most part, our state governments are unwilling to finesse the 'what is a school' requirement because they don't want to tangle with the homeschoolers over this. Still, if you actually put out a shingle and say 'This is a school, this is not a home school', in every state you have to get some kind of licence to operate it. Those rules, for the most part, do not include curriculum. A few states have figured out ways of giving certain subsidies to private schools for things like textbooks, but if a school does not want to participate in the rules of the aid program then it is deemed completely private and is free to operate quite independently.

JB: We haven't really talked much about charter schools in Australia. Could you explain the charter school movement and how it fits within the education landscape?

CEF: Charter schools are a hybrid. They are independently operated government schools that don't charge any tuition, that may not restrict admission, and that must participate in state standards and assessments. Yet they can be operated by a group of parents, by a group of teachers, by a private non-profit organisation or even a private for-profit corporation. There are about 4000 charter schools across the US today, serving, in aggregate, about 2% of all the children in the country, in contrast to private schools that serve about 11% or 12%.

The thing about charter schools in the US, and this would be true here too I suspect, is that they are all the creatures of state law, and the laws of our various states vary enormously in terms of how much freedom the charter school actually has, how equitable its funding is and how heavily it is regulated. For example, some states do not require certified teachers in charter schools while others do. In some states, there is no limit to the number of charter schools that can exist while other states limit them.

JB: Most states have charter legislation don't they?

CEF: Nearly all—about forty out of fifty today—have some version of charter legislation but in some cases it is so weak and unpromising that there has been little or no response to it. In other states, the charter movement is flourishing. In the most restrictive cases, for example, only the local education authorities get to license charter schools. Generally that's a formula for nothing to happen since the whole impulse for a charter school is to escape from the control of the local education authorities.

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The Fordham Foundation is an authoriser of charter schools in Ohio, currently responsible for nine of them. In that respect, we are the agent of the state. Now Ohio has a new governor who is opposed to charter schools and would love to put a lid on the whole thing. What's interesting is that Ohio now has about 60,000 children attending charter schools. That's a lot of parents and children who are saying to the governor, 'Don't you dare close down my charter school.' It amounts to an interest group of parents pushing back now against the governor. So there are two kinds of charter movements. There is a sort of think tank version, initially support by theorists and advocates convinced that it would be a good thing to have charter schools; then later, once the schools starts, we find a populist base for a charter movement, consisting of families, teachers and others who are actually participating in such schools.

For me, however, the big lesson from charter schools over these last 15 years is that it is really hard to do a good job of this and simply placing the word charter over the door of a school does not prove that anything good is going to happen inside. We have as much diversity within and among charter schools as we do between the charter sector and the traditional government sector.

JB: I imagine that the way that charter schools are held accountable would be critical in whether or not they succeed or fail. Too tight regulation is a recipe for failure but by the same token if there

aren't any accountability criteria then you are going to end up with failing schools and kids not any better off than they were before, so it's a matter of getting that right again.

CEF: Exactly. The pure market doesn't work as well here as one would wish because many parents seem content to keep their kids in a school that is not very good academically so long as it is a safe and convenient school with friendly teachers. Non-academic considerations may be dominant. I don't fault parents for this. If your children have been in an unsafe school, just having them in a safe school is a considerable gain. Still, in an era when all our schools are being judged by their academic performance, charters are not exempt. This, of course, also brings us back to the problem of what happens when state standards themselves aren't any good.

JB: Is the weighted student funding initiative—where school funding is based on individual student need and 'follows the child' to any school—still at the stage of planting the seed of an idea or is there some hope that it will actually happen?

CEF: No state has yet done anything like this on a statewide basis. Some individual school districts and cities are struggling with different variations of it. For it to work perfectly, however, you would need to include the state and federal dollars in addition to the local dollars, with all being distributed according to this weighted student funding formula. Nobody is close to doing that now. One bold venture was in New York City, but recently it took a step backward when the mayor conceded to the teachers union that he was not going to make teachers' salaries subject to the weighted student funding formula. Since teachers' salaries are the bulk of the money it's a big disappointment.

In my view though, like vouchers, charter schools, standards and all these other things, weighted student funding is an important idea that has a lot of merit and inevitably some day we are going to be closer to it than we are now. Consider that, twenty years ago, if you said vouchers in the US people would say, 'no, never'. Now we don't say never; we just ask where is the next place that vouchers will pop up and what will the rules be?

One advantage of weighted student funding is that it produces a kind of Left-Right political convergence, which is why we at Fordham got so many signatures from the Left and Right on our policy manifesto. For the Left, it offers a better approach to equitable funding according to children's different needs, while for the Right it's a way of assuring that money follows children to the schools that they choose to attend. So for each it contains an important form of progress, even as it is something that Left and Right can agree on, at least up to a point.

JB: We have seen an increasing number of politicians and others acknowledging the need for a shake up school funding but little action.

CEF: It's a very wonky technocratic thing and it's not the sort of thing that makes it into election manifestos. There are a variety of things that you can get people into the streets to demand or march for. Weighted student funding is probably not one of them and there are always plenty of vested interests with their enormous capacity to block change, especially if there is no constituency in favour of the change except a bunch of think tankers.

JB: Well, thank you from this think tanker.

CEF: My pleasure.