

The Review of Funding for Schooling

by Chris Bonnor*

I had a privileged education. I was lucky enough to go to a rural school which enrolled just about every kid in town. I mixed with everyone: the kids of the solicitors and shopkeepers, millionaires and mechanics. Such rural comprehensive schools were the pioneers of fully inclusive public schooling - and they may also be the last remnants of it.

I eventually became principal of a comprehensive school. I remember the day when an academically selective school was dropped into the next suburb. 'The choice will be good for you', the community was told. It was good for a few, bad for the rest - and that probably sums up the impact of free-market ideology of school competition and choice.

I soon learned that all schools are not equal. We had to fight much harder to retain a critical mass of achieving students. The experts said that good teaching would compensate and help sustain excellent opportunities for all our students. We believed it - we had no alternative.

Comprehensive public schools have become increasingly marginalized in the increasing differentiation between schools over a period of three decades. In that time we've seen a renewed growth of private schools, supported by an anxious middle class and fuelled by a regressive funding system. We have seen the social and academic gaps between schools widen as significant numbers flee to what they see as quality schooling.

But we have also seen growing unease created by research into our hybrid framework of schools - and a commentary

informed by international comparisons. The PISA testing program of the OECD is showing which policy and practices are associated with student achievement - and which are not. The evidence that our arrangement of schools isn't delivering for all our students has become too great to ignore.

The Gonski review

The disparity between schools, especially created by resources, is a constant source of acrimony. In 2010 the Review of Funding for Schooling was established with extensive terms of reference and a brief to produce recommendations by the end of 2011. There are many promising pointers to where it might take our schools. Perhaps the most significant, as indicated in the review's Emerging Issues Paper, is the panel's focus on student outcomes and its commitment to the view that "differences in educational outcomes should not be the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions". In effect the panel has defined equity in a way which can't be lost on those making submissions and which cannot fail to influence its recommendations.

The focus on equity of outcomes may have initially concerned those who believe that inequity of inputs, especially funding, should be front and centre of the review. The focus of the public debate has almost always been on the resource gaps between schools. At the same time the review panel is certainly aware of this and the review is considering all sources of income available to all schools.

Enter My Space

The Emerging Issues Paper was followed in March this year by the upgraded My Space website. The first website was seriously flawed, with claims about what it revealed bordering on the fraudulent. The second website more accurately describes the socio-educational profile of enrolments at each school and adds details about school finance. My Space is starting to reveal far more about the differences between schools.

Are these differences created by funding and resources? After all, not only do non-government schools receive substantial funding they can also supplement this with private income, mainly from school fees. Government funding of its own schools favours low socio-educational status (SES) schools. Government funding of private schools also favours lower SES schools, but the addition of private funding completely reverses this priority. What is less clear is the extent to which differences in funding and resources alone are creating a divide in student outcomes. Amongst non-government schools a higher total income per student is certainly associated with high NAPLAN scores; amongst government schools higher

funding is associated with lower scores. But this simply reflects different funding priorities and the SES composition of the schools, not the impact of resources.

My Space 2.0 is showing something else we have always known: that there is a social hierarchy of schools in Australia. High-fee schools and public selective schools stand at the top of the hierarchy of secondary schools, followed by Anglican, Catholic, Christian and finally other government schools in descending order. My Space also shows us the strong association between the achievement profile of schools and the SES profile of their enrolments. The NAPLAN hierarchy is almost always the same as the social hierarchy.

The real differences between schools

My Space shows that in just about every part of urban and provincial Australia – our framework of schools is substantially differentiated. PISA is warning that systems



that show high performance and an equitable distribution of learning outcomes tend not to be differentiated. They are more likely to be comprehensive, requiring teachers and schools to embrace diverse student populations. Our uneven distribution of students, by SES and ability, doesn't emerge as sound practice.

The impact of this differentiation is compounding both advantage and disadvantage. Children are not just passive players in schools; collectively they constitute a significant resource and have an impact, not just on the school's profile, but also on the achievement of each other. Regardless of their own socio-economic background, students attending schools with an advantaged intake tend to perform better than those attending schools with more disadvantaged peers.

In the majority of OECD countries, the effect of the school's economic, social and cultural status on students' performance even outweighs the effects of the individual student's socio-economic background. This conclusion is supported by other research.

Enrolling the best resources

The implications of this are profoundly disturbing but won't come as a surprise to teachers and principals. It means that the differences between schools are widened by their unequal capacity to entice through the front gate each day those students who will improve the profile of the school and the achievement of each other.

In the competition for these human resources some schools are well behind the starting line. Public schools are by law inclusive, secular and free. Their obligations – including who they serve - are far greater than those of non-government schools. As a consequence, the nature of their operation is significantly different: they are not easily able to discriminate in enrolments.

The capacity of parents to enrol their children in higher SES schools is determined by their family income, location, mobility and access to information and networks. But choice works both ways: the mechanisms available to private schools to choose students includes school fees at various levels, waiting lists, extensive application and interviews, prior school records, references, scholarships, religious criteria and sometimes entry tests. Some public school principals, especially those in middle class schools are able to employ a smaller range of more subtle discriminators.

What advocates for the free market see as a variety of schools offering welcome choice is, in reality, a hierarchy created by the schools' unequal capacity to choose. What My Space shows is the impact of this on student outcomes. The consequence is that, to use the words of the funding review panel "differences in educational outcomes" are very considerably "the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions". It is a zero-sum game: one child's advantage is at the expense of others.

Looking for solutions

Educators must be careful not to excessively attribute the success of schools to external factors such as SES and diminish the contribution of excellent teaching and school leadership. But education policy and reform in Australia has tended to focus on the latter while ignoring the former. The compounding of underachievement in low SES schools, created by pooling of disadvantaged students is a significant problem. Arguably the best solution is to create a far more balanced enrolment in all our schools - but even in the most favourable public opinion climate this would be hard to sell to families who seek an advantage for their children in higher SES schools.

A new funding model must include the following:

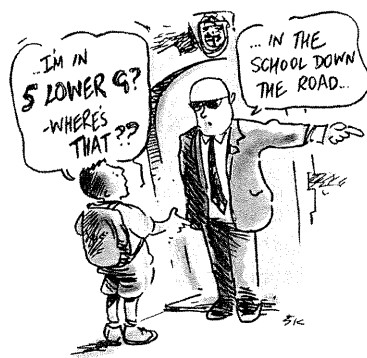
- Low SES schools must be strongly supported to make them attractive to all families. They must cater for all and create a culture of quality/expectations.
- The lowest performing students must have, as a priority, the best possible teachers. This is not about "waiting for Superman or Wonderwoman" – the teachers have to be supported in ways that improve their odds, and the odds of their students, of success.
- We can improve these odds if we also deliver proven innovative learning and school structures. More of the same won't work in production-line school contexts. Innovative structures, such as Big Picture education must be

systemically supported.

- We should still improve the mix of students in each school/class and anticipate that a needs-based funding model can still achieve this in some measure.

- We should explore ways to give low achievers greater access to their higher achieving peers, through online sharing, joint activities, more mentoring within and between schools, online gifted and talented programs etc.

The real test for the funding review will come when it delivers its recommendations. If these come down firmly on the side of equity of outcomes the panel must unveil the evidence and sell its recommendations. In effect the review needs to make its work and its recommendations bullet-proof. Only in this way will the changes promised by this review survive the vagaries of politics and the timidity of governments.



Conclusion

There is now substantial evidence of inequity in education outcomes and evidence that the social

and academic divides between schools are increasing. In the absence of fundamental reform these divides will continue to mock the efforts of governments to improve the opportunities for our most disadvantaged students, schools and communities. In particular we need to accept that students themselves are a most significant resource, yet one which is distributed in ways which compounds advantage and compounds underachievement.

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insurgent ink



Work and avoiding failure

Here we go again- it has been established that the world financial crisis of 2009 was caused by the fallout from unsustainable price rises in the US real estate industry. Now world bankers are starting to increase interest rates again for fear of inflation, so look forward to another financial crisis soon. Our world can't sustain failure upon failure in its present non-mathematical way.

Yes, work is our greatest discipline, as Voltaire said all those years ago: "work spares us from three evils: boredom, vice and need." Without full and satisfying employment, we can look forward to continued terrorism, crime and a general chaotic state. Yes, there can be very little bribery, corruption and vice where there is a sufficiency of everything, because the need is not there.

Humans invented mathematics, which gives us some rules for an intelligent way forward and then, in the financial realm, refused to live by their own rules. Yes, 2 and 2 is 4, not 5 or 3 as at present. As a start to a better way forward, the Euro single currency represents the financial integration of Europe, and this initiative should be the forerunner of a single world currency which would mean no Asian or other meltdown, thereby no recurrent global financial crisis. Science and engineering are about solving problems and building things, while our failed financial world is about causing problems and pulling things down. This is a new millenium and the truth herein could be the spark, the catalyst for a better world of peace and understanding. Here are some examples of what this would mean for Australia:

Water: The Murray Syndrome - Rationing is only tinkering and killing rural Australia. We don't get major cleansing snow flows, ours is the driest continent. To drought proof the Murray we need more dams on connecting rivers. Dams have done more for world ecology than anything, the whole catchment is under environmental control and becomes a haven for native animals, and dams improve fish stock.

Bush fires - Australia is the driest continent and most fire prone, so it needs satellite spotting system and Elvis-type helicopters at the ready to douse fires at source before they become uncontrollable. In Canberra, 500 houses and some lives lost by the time fire trucks arrived from way out in the scrub could have been saved with this system.

Electricity - Breaking up our efficient integrated system is a disaster, as we revert back to a multiple of costly inefficient private systems. Sadly, Australia once had perhaps the right balance between government and private sector, but now like sheep we go backward with the rest of the chaotic world.

Privatising everything has been a failure as we have lost economies of scale.

Asylum Seekers - Both political sides in the debate are wrong. Where is human compassion? Most of these desperate people are being treated like animals. They should be processed in Australia, say Darwin. Perhaps their stay should be conditional on them remaining in our sparse northern regions for the first 10 years, because that's where we need to populate.

After 2000 years of human failure, we should all make the world a better place and there would be no need for asylum seekers, that result from the world's problems.

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