


equity excellence and effectiveness

Moving **forward** on schooling arrangements in Australia
A discussion paper from Education Foundation
Australia's Case for Change Working Party

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“The main point to be made is that we need a new conception of public schooling, one which goes beyond definitions based on whether a school is wholly owned or funded by government””



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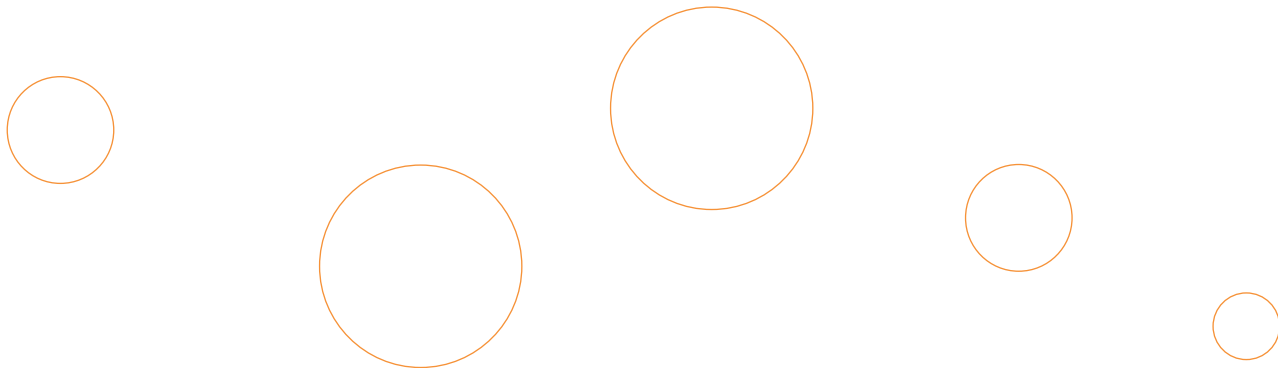
Education Foundation Australia is unique in Australia in its focus on support for public education. It is the only fully independent, non-profit organisation in Australia that strengthens public education by investing private monies (philanthropic and corporate) in primary and secondary schools. Our focus is educational excellence and equality of opportunity.

Every child, regardless of circumstance, deserves the best possible education. Our vision is that every student has the confidence, skills and creativity to seize life opportunities and to contribute to the nation's future.

Since 1989, we have raised \$7 million which has been invested in the support of public schools to make a difference to the education of students, especially those who are disadvantaged or in danger of dropping out of school.

“The role of Education Foundation Australia is to act as a social conscience for the nation. It has used its resources astutely to hold up a mirror to the educators of Australia at national and state level... its distinctive competence is to be original and to harness the support of community leaders and the community. The keynote is innovation.”

Sir Gustav Nossal, Patron of *The City Centre*



preface

In the 21st century, as the gap widens between those families and communities who enjoy the benefits of prosperity in the global economy and those who do not, liberal democracies face a dilemma. Will governments commit beyond rhetoric to the promise of democracy by which a strong public education system offers all children, no matter their circumstances, the opportunity of a positive future through quality learning? **In short, will all young people enjoy equal life chances?**

Education Foundation Australia was established in 1989 as an independent, not for profit organisation to support innovation in public education, to bring new approaches and new resources to areas where change is needed. The Foundation's programs have been committed to excellence and equity, to extending the most enlivening, challenging educational opportunities to students, especially those who might not otherwise enjoy such opportunities. The Foundation operates on a belief that the Australian community has a vital role to play in supporting public education.

In recent years while Australia's performance in education measures well overall against international standards, there is a marked gap between high and low performing students in comparison to countries like Canada, which have similar wealth and population characteristics. Discussion about educational performance in Australia has revolved around public versus private education, a debate which deflects attention away from the many complex issues that contribute to underperformance.

The *Case for Change Project* arose, then, out of a concern to understand more deeply the factors contributing to the widening gap in educational achievement and provision. Research was commissioned from Keating and Lamb (University of Melbourne) in relation to the Australian situation and from Demos, UK, in order to gain an international perspective.

Further, the Foundation began a process of consultation within Australia. This has revealed that there is concern among all sectors, (Government, Catholic and Independent), at the growing disparity within their sectors, as well as between sectors, and a desire to find a new way forward.

This paper reflects both that research and the consultation. Its prime intent is to build a constructive conversation and collective approach to the problems of disadvantage, to replace the separate efforts with a concerted common purpose and a new public framework that accommodates diversity within cohesion. To make this possible, all parties will have to respect the need for change.

The suggested steps presented here may prompt better suggestions. This would be welcome. Moving forward is essential. The number of children who currently miss out on an education that equips them for the 21st century is too high in a country that has the resources and capacity to ensure that all young people have a fair go and are able to contribute to the enrichment of all our futures.



Ellen Koshland
Founder and President
Education Foundation Australia

foreword: tom bentley, demos

Education is supposed to be the servant of opportunity. We all recognise intuitively that educational experience helps form young people's attitudes to life and their chances of success in it. Because it carries such basic moral purpose, it arouses strong passions. **But education is also an intensely personal and difficult choice for parents.** Through it, they put their children in the hands of others. The personal becomes bound up with the public. In such a situation the strength of feeling grows even further.

Over the last generation many parents have learned that, in the midst of social and economic change, educational success is the greatest boost they can give to their children's prospects. In country after country, a person's qualifications and years in formal education have become more directly linked to their later earnings.

Individually, it can only make sense to seek the best possible experience for our children. When competition for achievement is increasingly fierce, there seems little else we can do. And after all, if people are competing under the same rules, tested by the same standards, then surely the outcomes must, in some basic way, be fair?

The problem is that they are not. As this paper and the research behind it shows, the drift towards selection and segregation in Australian schooling means that some kids must jump far higher to get over the same bar as everyone else. They do not get the same support, or the same opportunity to shine. The penalties for failure are increasingly harsh.

For those who do not thrive, we may express concern, sometimes anger, at the way that changing fortunes have conspired to marginalise or exclude them. But in too many places this reaction is accompanied by a feeling of helpless resignation.

Equity, Excellence and Effectiveness shows that such fatalism is not just unnecessary, but also unacceptable.

Policymakers around the world are wrestling with how to reform education systems so that they become more flexible and personalised while also creating public goods like belonging and inclusion. They will not succeed without two insights that this paper spells out.

First, we need more active engagement of students and their families in learning and schooling. Simply making the right 'choice' of school will never be enough.

Second, real change depends on adjusting the dynamics of whole systems and communities, not just the performance of individual schools and sectors within them. The old levers of control do not help us to do this, so we must learn new kinds of influence.

In doing this, the meaning of 'public' can become richer, fuller and more relevant to the way we live our lives today. Public education systems were built out of moral passion and pragmatic, civic innovation over a century ago. Education Foundation Australia deserves every support in its determination to remake them in the 21st century.

Tom Bentley
Director
Demos

Demos is an independent research organisation based in the UK. www.demos.co.uk

The paper Demos prepared for the *Case for Change Working Party* is available on the Education Foundation Australia website at: www.educationfoundation.org.au

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introduction

This Paper arises from an Education Foundation Australia project that has included commissioned research and two invitational seminars. It is advanced by the *Case for Change* project working group as part of the process of developing an Education Foundation Australia view on the future of public education in Australia, with particular reference to the best approach to improve equity, excellence and effectiveness in all Australian schools.

The Paper moves from an analysis of the shortcomings of the current educational arrangements to a consideration of what new understandings and arrangements we might develop for public education that will address these shortcomings.

The main point to be made is that we need a new conception of public schooling, one which goes beyond definitions based on whether a school is wholly owned and funded by government. We need a definition which is based on public standards and on the values and practices of schools, which allows us to establish more cooperative, effective, powerful means of meeting the educational needs of all young Australians. The paper argues that current arrangements not only do not achieve this aim, they fail to address and even exacerbate the problems facing us in the areas of equity, quality and effectiveness.

The major issue which needs attention is inequity. Despite the good performance of Australian schools overall – Australia ranked fourth in reading, eleventh in mathematics and sixth in science out of the 40 nations involved in the OECD's Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) reported in December 2004 – the gaps between high and low performing students in Australia are unacceptably large, and beyond those of countries such as Canada which have similar patterns of wealth and income distribution to us.

This inequity is exacerbated by structural arrangements in the provision of school education in Australia. Contrary to the focus of our current debate on differences in outcomes between school sectors, the paper will argue that the level of inequity of educational outcomes between schools in the same sector can be as great as or greater than the level of inequity between schools in different sectors. This results from two factors: the impact of social geography (geographical patterns of social characteristics) and increasing levels of student selectivity by schools in all sectors.

These factors produce two kinds of outcome:

- A pattern of social and regional inequalities in the benefits gained by different groups of young Australians from their schooling; and
- A concentration of weaker students from lower socio-economic (SES) backgrounds in poorer performing schools, further limiting their opportunities.

These outcomes are observable in each of the education sectors, and are unlikely to be addressed while we continue to conduct unproductive and divisive debates about public and private schools. Such debates are unhelpful because they fail to consider the major issue identified by the research for this project: the degree to which inequity operates within as well as between educational sectors.

There are many historical and political reasons for the current structure of education in Australia. They do not, however, justify a system that gives us a high level of inequity, despite excellence in some areas. The social and economic cost of the growing disparities we see are simply too great for us to continue down this path.

The Paper argues for new initiatives which can address these problems of inequity by addressing their causes. These initiatives are designed to use the financial, regulatory, purchasing and provider power of State governments to bring together government and non-government schools which share common values, principles and approaches. This will enable a more efficient approach to the delivery of education, the improvement of quality, and a concerted approach to raising standards for all young Australians, especially the most disadvantaged, regardless of which sector's schools they attend.

The Paper does not ignore the complexity of the problems we face, the difficulty of tackling well-established ideological divisions, or the accretion of historical practice along the sectoral divide. Indeed the need to recognise these difficulties is a measure of what is required: the solutions proposed represent a dramatic shift in policy and practice, a shift which will be a challenge to most participants in the current debate. The alternative is to accept the maintenance of current arrangements which, according to our research, are damaging the educational outcomes and life chances of a significant proportion of the Australian school population.

new understandings from research

the importance of social geography

Despite the commonly held view that all students should have maximum economic and social opportunities in life, and that the state should help ensure this, the emergence of the knowledge economy has occasioned a growing disparity between regions in Australia.

As infrastructure tends to be concentrated in urban areas, and a city like Melbourne capitalises on its reputation as one of the world's most livable cities to attract knowledge workers, other regions miss out. The hollowing out of middle skill and income workers in favour of others at the high and low ends of the spectrum only exacerbates the trend, and hence the gaps in regional incomes and wealth.

Selectivity and geographical/regional variations have as much of an impact on differences in educational outcomes within the school sectors as they have on differences between the sectors

As Bentley et al have explained in research commissioned by Education Foundation Australia as part of its Case for Change¹ Project, a growing body of research exists to show that a child's life chances are largely determined by cognitive development prior to reaching school age. Much of the orientation, skill, and emotional and intellectual development which are formative of schooling success have taken root before school begins. These factors are primarily affected by parenting, social milieu, deprivation and stimulation, and the beginnings of informal cultural capital. This has relevance for the policy frameworks we adopt, and informs the 'Towards a New Configuration of Public Education' discussion below.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given disparities in social and cultural capital between different communities, the data collected and analysed by Keating and Lamb² reveal that poor students are likely to be clustered in schools that have poor educational outcomes, and there are consistent links across nations between the socio-economic status (SES) profiles of schools and the levels of their educational results.

Even more significant from a policy perspective, given Australia's position as regards equity of educational outcomes, are the findings from Victorian school data of high concentrations of low SES students in small government and Catholic secondary schools and corresponding concentrations of high SES students in large government and Catholic secondary schools. This suggests a major migratory pattern of students on the basis of scholastic achievement and expectations, for which SES is a proxy. It appears as if more academically successful and motivated students are migrating to schools that have stronger histories of academic success. Less successful and motivated students are found in residualised schools whose difficulties are compounded by the selection and exclusion practices of some schools in higher demand.

The strength of these approaches is that they draw on the potential for powerful, cooperative and collective ways of making progress

¹ Bentley, T., Kaye, A., MacLeod, P, O'Leary, D & Parker, S (2004) *A fair go: public value and diversity in education*, Demos, UK: work commissioned by Education Foundation Australia.

² Keating, J. & Lamb, S. (2004) *Public education and the Australian community*, University of Melbourne: work commissioned by Education Foundation Australia and formally presented by Jack Keating at a June symposium conducted by the Foundation.

Measures such as scholastic outcomes, student attendance at school, and retention rates all correlate with SES patterns. Correspondingly there exists a clear hierarchy of SES and associated student characteristics from independent, to Catholic and then government schools. The same hierarchies exist within systems. And a geographic analysis finds that the data mostly indicate that falling test scores are associated with distance of schools from the major cities. This conforms with patterns that apply across nations, regions and school sector jurisdictions.

Governments could approach elements of the non-government sector, including the Catholic education and other religious low fee sub sectors and schools to establish some common purposes and principles for public education

These patterns, and especially the impact of SES, have a cumulative effect. Poor early academic performance amongst students from lower SES backgrounds leads to early school leaving. Of those students who complete year 12, a lower percentage of students from low SES backgrounds receive a tertiary entrance (ENTER) score that allows them to qualify for university and some TAFE courses. Of the students who gain an ENTER score, students from lower SES backgrounds receive an average score that is lower than students from higher SES backgrounds.

Although patterns of outcomes of schooling cannot be laid solely at the school and system doors, given the social and economic forces that exist, they do raise questions about whether our school system is effectively structured to ameliorate the social, regional and other inequalities in place.

[School selectivity and] social geography noted above, act to increase concentrations of academic under-performance which are accentuated by an inappropriate policy response

A public system would ... recognise the importance of diversity, and acknowledge its critical role in the achievement of equity

new understandings from research

the problem of selectivity

Whilst universal provision at the neighbourhood level still largely holds true for primary education, it is somewhat weaker at the secondary level where, as a generalisation, more aspirant parents and students seek environments with high academic performance to maximise their chances in the intense positional competition at the upper levels of school.

The sustained drift of students from government to non-government schools over the last 30 years, underpinned by a public assumption that standards and quality in non-government schools are higher than in government schools, has seen:

- a growing concentration of higher SES students in the independent school sector;
- a corresponding increasing concentration of lower SES students in the government school sector;
- a weaker social spread of students within the Catholic sector; and
- high concentrations of low SES students in small government and Catholic secondary schools. Typically these schools have poor outcomes.

The gaps between high and low performing students in Australia are unacceptably large

These trends, when laid over the changing patterns of social geography noted above, act to increase concentrations of academic under-performance which are accentuated by an inappropriate policy response. More specifically, the existence of intense pressure on government schools to compete has manifested itself in external and internal pressures for selective practices in government secondary schools. These practices are designed to contribute to the perception that there are government schools that can compete in relation to year 12 assessments and university entrance on the one hand; and ensure enrolment growth and achieve a more satisfying and stable learning environment on the other.

Accordingly there is not only the drift from government to non-government schools, which has been exacerbated by increased levels of government funding to non-government schools. There is also a drift within the sectors, and within the government sector in particular, to schools that have higher and increasing enrolments and correspondingly better educational outcomes. These schools appear to provide students and parents a more stable learning environment and better access to universities and other desirable post year-12 pathways.

Selectivity in schooling, according to Keating and Lamb's research, results in a student mix which is more stable and homogeneous, so creating a better educational environment. Teachers can be more confident about what to expect from students and hence can maintain higher expectations and be more confident of instruction that will work. Conversely, teachers in more heterogeneous schools face greater challenges with less certainty from one year to another of the capacities, preparedness and behaviours of the students they teach. Under these circumstances their ability to plan for the longer term and to get the instructional formulae right is substantially less, and hence their opportunity to add value is reduced. It is no coincidence that there are high correlations between teacher satisfaction, teacher absenteeism, and students' performance.

The pressure for selectivity is, the research noted, greater in more unstable contexts, and recent changes in youth labour markets, youth cultures, families and communities have increased instability to a substantial degree. The consequence of the resulting selective practices is to concentrate students with weaker academic capacities, from lower SES households, and with less scholastic motivation, in schools that have lost or are losing their more capable and motivated group. And these schools typically have, as indicated by the Victorian data referenced above, small enrolments which frequently are an expression of 'middle class retreat', as well as unstable student populations. Schools facing these sorts of challenges typically are located in communities that have experienced economic shock, and hence often have relatively transient populations which further destabilises the learning environment.

As a system of schooling becomes more selective, residualisation becomes more intense. As this occurs, parents and students who are in favourable academic, financial and geographical positions are under greater pressure to exploit whatever selective mechanisms they can.

The existence of such selective practices, together with the regional trends charted above, emphasise the unhelpful nature of the traditional public/private debate. This debate is limited because selectivity and geographical/regional variations have as much of an impact on differences in educational outcomes within the school sectors as they have on differences between the sectors.

Accordingly the comparisons of the performances of government and non-government schools and the differences that exist between them are only one element of a more significant divide. On the one hand there are most independent schools, the majority of Catholic schools and a significant number of government schools that are seen to provide stable learning environments and access to valued careers. On the other there are some independent schools, a number of Catholic schools and a significant number of government schools that are not regarded as being able to do this, especially at the secondary level.

The combination of a broader student population in secondary education, weaker labour markets and associated issues with school to work transition, together with increased selectivity in schooling has, according to Keating and Lamb, focused substantial policy attention on 'failing schools' and associated issues of leadership and teacher development. As important as these issues are, this focus does not take sufficiently into account the issues of selection and social geography as outlined above, and the need for funding of schools and communities to redress economic and social disadvantage as is recognised in countries such as the UK and New Zealand.

“The experience of other comparable countries (such as Canada, the Netherlands, England, New Zealand, and Denmark) is quite different. Public education in these places includes provision by denominational schools and various types of government-dependent, privately managed schools”

towards a new configuration of public education

the case for change

At the heart of the problem facing Australian education is the definition of public education. The debate in Australia has for decades equated public education with state-run government schools that provide free and secular education and that are open to all.

This definition is essentially based not on public standards, or the quality, values or practices of such schools, but on funding and ownership. Private education refers to schools not owned and run by the state, which may have a religious affiliation, charge fees and are therefore selective.

The experience of other comparable countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, England, New Zealand, and Denmark is quite different. Public education in these places includes provision by denominational schools and various types of government-dependent, privately managed schools. Religious education in and of itself does not disqualify a school from being a provider of public education provided it conforms to the standards and expectations determined by public education authorities. Within the broad public expectation that public education providers deliver learning experiences the general populace expects for its youth, and equip young people to enter the various processes of a productive social and economic life, there is a great deal of scope in these countries for curriculum and instructional variation and the inclusion of religious education.

While there is no suggestion that these countries have found all the answers to the question of how you ensure high levels of excellence for all their young people in school – though some such as Canada are clearly doing a better job than Australia – they do provide us with examples of some of the essential ingredients that could go into a new configuration of public education in this country.

Characteristic of a reconfigured public system would be its foundation of public values: public education should support the public good. Such a public system would be based upon the democratic principles of access and equality of opportunity for all, and the fostering of excellence. It would also recognise the importance of diversity, and acknowledge its role in the achievement of equity. Indeed, a modern public education system cannot achieve opportunity for all unless diversity is recognised and accounted for. Public education in such a system can, therefore, include provision by various types of government-dependent, privately-managed schools, including denominational schools. Religious education should not disqualify a school from being a provider of public education.

A public education system has collective qualities. They include the delivery of a curriculum that supports the shared values of the society and its economy, and principles of access and equality of opportunity that underpin the democratic foundations of the society. They also include the qualities of secure environments and assured standards of educational provision. So a public education system needs to have a public curriculum, reasonable access to schools for all students, and accountability for duty of care and quality of delivery. It does not require government ownership of schools.

In Australia we achieve some of these conditions. Most schools teach the public curriculum and provide secure environments. Most are free or almost free, and almost all students can gain access to a school. However, access and choice of access is not equally distributed, and the quality of the education delivered to students is not equal.

“(Other countries) provide us with examples of some of the essential ingredients that could go into a new configuration of public education in this country”

The issues faced by Australian schools cut across the debate about education sectors. A large proportion of non-government schools charge low fees and share very similar philosophies about the purpose and principles of schooling with the government school sector. Many of these schools seek to cater for the full range of students, and face the same difficulties as faced by many government schools in doing this effectively. The effects of social geography and selectivity impinge on these schools just as they do on government schools. These shared challenges mean that the option of having these schools form part of a broadly inclusive and fully government funded public education system is attractive. Such public systems have been long established in most western European countries and the incorporation of the Catholic school sector and elements of the non-Catholic non-government sector within a fully funded public school system took place in New Zealand in the 1970s.

However, the 1970s were a long time ago and Australia has a unique set of arrangements for public funding of schooling. The European and New Zealand approaches are not politically or strategically viable in the foreseeable future. They also are unlikely to be affordable, especially in the short term.

An approach will need to be fashioned that accommodates the realities of mixes of government and fee based funding of non-government schools within Australia's federalist arrangements, but which does promote broader patterns of access and quality in schooling, and cooperation across the sectors to benefit all young Australians.

The first step would be to identify and reach agreement on the common ground that does exist. There is wide acceptance and delivery of a public curriculum across Australian schools. Over half of non-government schools have low fees, and many have forms of fee relief for students from low income homes. Many non-government schools and especially some of the religious sub-systems have expressed concerns about the issues raised in this paper and want to make a contribution towards improving the educational options and quality of the disadvantaged student cohort.

Where the educational needs of groups of students – and disadvantaged students in particular – are not being met within a locality or region, there is an argument for new institutional structures to be created including the possibility of partnerships and other roles for outside providers. Such providers could bring the appropriate commitment and expertise and would obviously operate within the common "public values" framework.

So by recognising the common ground and by starting with regions and localities there are opportunities to move towards new sets of arrangements that would reconfigure public education in Australia by expanding the range of options and quality of schooling, especially for the lower income sections of the community.

Characteristic of a reconfigured public system would be its foundation of public values: public education should support the public good. Such a public system would be based upon the democratic principles of access and equality of opportunity for all, and the fostering of excellence

towards a new configuration of public education

some proposals

The case for change that we have advanced is based upon an analysis of changes that have occurred in Australian society and Australian schooling over the past three decades. Essentially we are arguing that although these changes have been incremental they also have been monumental.

While the basic public values upon which education has been built have not substantially altered, the school structures and cultures that were forged in another era are no longer appropriate for such radically changed circumstances. As a consequence, without change these public values are threatened. Therefore, we are advancing a number of proposals for changes in the way school education is funded and governed in Australia. These proposals are not definitive or exhaustive, but are designed to stimulate a public discussion on how school education can advance into the new century and continue with its historical mission of serving the public, as well as the private good.

As a first step state governments could approach elements of the non-government sector, including the Catholic education and other religious low fee sub-sectors and schools to establish some common purposes and principles for public education. As indicated earlier, these principles are mostly agreed upon already in the form of a high quality public curriculum, the democratic principles of access and equality of opportunity for all and broadly defined social and economic goals. There also are common objectives to do with enabling young Australians to achieve excellence, and in particular achieving better educational outcomes for those sections of the community that currently have poor outcomes.

Consequent on an agreement on purposes and principles, State governments could revise their funding arrangements for participating schools. It is not feasible in the immediate future for all of the low fee non-government schools in Australia to become fully publicly funded. Some of these schools would not accept the conditions of full funding, the costs for governments would be very high, and the public reaction to such a large increase in non-government school funding would be divisive and undermine the objective of a more integrated and strong publicly funded schooling in Australia. However, by looking towards regions and localities the thorny issue of the fees barriers that are erected by publicly funded non-government schools in Australia can be more realistically tackled.

It is mainly in the low income regions and localities that students face limited educational options and potential ghettoisation into schools with poor educational outcomes. It is these regions and localities that have high rates of early school leaving and poor transition rates to tertiary education and employment. To complement the work of improving educational outcomes in the existing government schools, governments could work with non-government schools that are willing to reach common agreement on purposes and principles, providing increased funding for these schools. This funding could be largely directed to non-government schools to maintain fee regimes that are not very different from the voluntary fees set by the government schools. Upon this basis the participating non-government schools would agree to have more open enrolment regimes and to work with the government schools to maximise the educational opportunities and the quality of education across these regions and localities.

“An approach will need to be fashioned... which does promote broader patterns of access and quality in schooling, and cooperation across the sectors to benefit all young Australians”

State governments could also support cooperative initiatives outside such priority regions through their resourcing policies. There are many examples of other localities where there are high degrees of co-operation between schools from different sectors and even partial integration of school programs, such as the common delivery of senior secondary programs. Regional towns where schools lack a critical mass for senior secondary programs and greenfield sites offer obvious opportunities. As well there are numerous individual non-government schools that are eager to work with other schools to better serve their communities upon the basis of shared public value.

Parallel to these regional and local initiatives State governments have the capacity to have a close look at their regulatory structures. State governments provide, purchase and regulate schooling in Australia. All three of these instruments should be used to advance a new configuration of public education. Regulatory frameworks and support systems for curriculum and qualifications, school registration, teacher registration, and accountability should be common to government and non-government schools wherever possible. As well, State governments should regard their payments to non-government schools not as grants but as negotiated purchases of educational provision, which at least in part are directed towards the broadly agreed objectives of public education.

Consistent with these approaches State governments could include non-government schools in funded initiatives such as literacy programs and transition support programs, beginning with schools and sub-sectors that have agreed upon common purposes and principles and are participating in regional initiatives. These elements of the non-government sector could also be included in the research and planning that lead to such initiatives. There also is the option of building common services for all publicly funded schools. Through these means State governments would begin to reposition themselves as the main funding agencies and regulators of a broader publicly funded education system that included a range of providers. The majority of providers would be government schools, but the public system would include a large number of non-government schools with shared missions and principles, and in many cases and especially in the lower income regions with very similar fees and enrolment regimes to those of the government schools.

The strength of these approaches is that they draw on the potential for powerful, cooperative and collective ways of making progress in this most fundamental area of social policy. We believe the approach is feasible. It is financially affordable for State governments, and it avoids the major difficulties of federal—state relations in school funding in Australia. It builds upon common grounds of social and educational purpose and philosophy which have already been established or could quickly be agreed within large elements of government and non-government schooling. It gives priority to the areas of greatest concern – those regions, those localities and those families and students who currently gain the poorest returns from schooling in Australia. It avails itself of diversity and opportunity: providing possibilities to those communities and those schools that are least encumbered with the baggage of sectoral rivalry, and which already share public values.

The first challenge for governments and those who support the objectives of public education is to understand what is happening in school education in Australia. While overall outcomes of education are improving, schooling is becoming more selective both between and within school sectors, and patterns of regionally concentrated educational failure are becoming more intense. Governments and the government school sectors cannot address these trends alone. Nor do they have to.



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