



A new  
federalism in  
**Australian  
education:**

A PROPOSAL FOR A NATIONAL REFORM AGENDA

**AT A GLANCE**

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**Acknowledgements**

This proposal has been prepared by Professor Jack Keating, Education Foundation Thought Leader. It has been made possible through the close collaboration of Education Foundation and The R. E. Ross Trust.

We are particularly grateful for the support provided by Austin Paterson, Rebekah Lautman and Ros Black.

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**This paper presents an argument and a proposed strategy for structural reforms in Australian schooling. It notes that while many aspects of Australian schooling are strong, some measures do not consistently indicate optimum performance, and there are signs that overall performance is weakening in comparison to the performances of the school systems in other economically advanced countries. In particular, combinations of trends in social geography and selectivity in schooling are leading to high concentrations of students with high levels of educational need. This has negative implications for the common national goal of higher levels of education and skills across the Australian community and Australia's tradition of equality of opportunity in education or what the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) terms the 'common good'.**

The paper argues that Australian schooling has an unusual set of characteristics that have been fashioned through the intersection of federalism and the separation of government and non-government schooling. These characteristics have created rigidities that are influencing the patterns of access to, participation in and outcomes of schooling in Australia. Moreover, these rigidities place considerable limitation upon the scope of school education policy options at both the state and national levels. Reform strategies are currently concentrated upon school, leadership and teacher developmental strategies. These strategies are important. However, as mostly recurrent investments, they will not be fully effective in the absence of an accompanying set of structural reforms.

School education policy in Australia has recently become more central to the policy ambitions of government. It has been nominated by the Commonwealth Government as a key policy focus and there have been a range of national initiatives through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The paper argues that the current efforts of government, while important, will have a limited impact in the absence of structural reforms, especially for schools and students that currently have the weakest patterns of outcomes.

The paper therefore proposes a set of reforms that are designed to loosen rigidities that are linked to the federalist characteristics of Australian schooling. Some of these reforms could be enacted in the short term and build upon the current developments that have been initiated by state/territory and Commonwealth governments, separately and collectively. Others that relate to the key issues of financing, governance and accountability require longer term projects and need to be built upon sets of national initiatives targeted at some key stages of and needs in schooling in Australia.

## **A. Introduction**

## **The purposes of schooling and the common good**

Schooling has always served a variety of purposes, including those that might be termed public and those that are more private. The two purposes are not incompatible. Schools also have been formed into systems that have a variety of manifestations' and these systems and the diversity across and within them are expressions of the sets of purposes. The rights of the child to a quality education, the capacity for children to maximise their life chances, the education of a responsible and contributing citizenry and the foundations for a cohesive and moral society are all ideas that are expressed across school systems. In a proper and harmonious balance they can contribute greatly to the common good of a society and its individual members.

However, there has been contestation over the principle of choice and the idea of the common good as a purpose of schooling. Parental choice and the common good in schooling are enduring claims. A healthy school system needs to find ways of reconciling them.

## **The state, the family and civil society**

Schooling also has diverse origins having been formed through families, the churches and more recently through the state. Over the last century or more schooling has become heavily funded and regulated by the state, across virtually all societies. Despite this it is recognised that the agency of the family maintains a considerable sovereignty over the schooling of their children, and through their choice other agencies including the churches continue to have a role in schooling and school systems.

The relationship between the state, the family and civil society is an unwritten contract that recognises the state's responsibility to fund and regulate schooling, including its responsibility to ensure the access of all to a quality education. It also recognises that through the decisions of parents other agencies have a role across school systems.

The characteristics of these relationships vary across nations and there will always be sets of tensions within them. However, the tensions in Australia are especially strong, and there is a lack of a settlement over the relationships between the authority of government and its responsibilities to fund schools and the autonomy from government of schools and sets of schools that receive public funds.

We argue in the paper that this lack of a settlement, which is perhaps unique in its degree across developed countries, has been exacerbated by the federalist arrangements that differentiate the funding of government and non-government schools between state and territory and Commonwealth governments, respectively. We also argue that the conditions for the sets of responsibilities, authority and autonomy of government and schools are changing in Australia. The expectations of the community towards schooling are changing and the relative strength of the different sectors of schooling also are changing. This means that the question of the responsibility of government towards different schools and school sectors and the relative autonomy of sectors and individual schools will need to be addressed at some time in the future.

## **B. Contexts**

## Performance

Australia has performed strongly in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies over the past decade. However, its performances have fallen across the three studies and when compared with the results for other countries that have generalist systems of secondary education the results are not so strong.

There are similar patterns in regards to equity, with the PISA study indicating medium levels of equity in outcomes, but relatively weak levels when compared with other countries with generalist secondary education. State based tests of student populations have shown the consistent impact of students' socio-economic backgrounds upon school level outcomes.

The policy frames of most governments locate teacher quality as the main variable that influences the educational outcomes of students. While this position has intuitive appeal and research backing it begs the question of the influence of mediating factors that shape the conditions for teaching in Australian schools. These factors include:

- > The characteristics of early child education and patterns of transition from school that bracket the school system: Australia has low levels of investment in pre school education and inconsistent patterns of participation. The weak start in education that many students experience is mirrored in patterns of early school leaving, which are high in Australia, especially in comparison to the strong PISA results.
- > There is evidence that the community expectations of schooling have increased and possibly have changed. As the private rates of return for education have increased the positional role of schooling and especially secondary schooling has intensified. This growing demand side pressure inevitably has led to different types of recruitment behaviours or supply side responses from schools.
- > Patterns of wealth distribution across Australia have become more unequal in recent decades. Despite Australia's high levels of economic growth until the end of 2008 the levels of child poverty have been high and a large number of families, including a growing number of single parent families face difficulties in meeting the costs of schooling.
- > The institutional structure of schooling means that the challenges that schools face in meeting the educational needs of students are not evenly distributed across schools. As well the resources that schools have, including the resource of experienced and effective teachers, are not evenly distributed.

The paper argues that there are three structural features of Australian schooling that are unusual and possibly unique amongst developed countries.

- > The first is that the concept of public education is bound by the institution of state administered school systems. This has been expressed in centralised and closed cultures of governance, reluctance on the part of state governments to look towards elements of the non-government sector as part of the school system, and more recently in bunkered mentalities amongst the government school policy community.
- > The second feature of the separation of the institutional separation of government and non-government schooling is the other side of the first. While all other OECD countries have non-government schools and most provide public funds for these schools no other country has established highly segregated funding and governance systems between the two sectors.
- > The third feature is the differences in the roles of the state and territory and the Commonwealth governments. The mix of roles is far from optimal, with patterns of intersecting and overlapping funding, fractured policy discourses and inconsistent patterns of interventions and initiatives.

Together these three structural characteristics have contributed towards some significant weaknesses in the governance of Australian schooling, including:

- > Separate and inconsistent funding and governance arrangements for schooling;
- > Highly marketised culture and the associated patterns of market success and failure between and within systems; and
- > Lack of policy coherence and consistency.

We argue that the intersection of the historical separation of government and non-government schooling and Australian federalism has been a decisive factor in shaping the characteristics of Australian schooling today. This intersection has contributed to several aspects of the Australian school system:

- > The weak levels of investment in early childhood education and uneven patterns of participation in pre school education;
- > Intense challenges for some schools and some areas of the country in the middle years of schooling;
- > Weak patterns of year 12 completion and continuing problems in post school transition for a significant number of students;
- > Highly inconsistent and opaque patterns of funding and governance across the sectors;
- > A simplistic juxtapositioning of public and private schooling that contributes towards:
  - A low community status for government schools;
  - A consistent pattern of enrolment drift from government to the non-government sector;
  - A consequential skewing of the social mix of enrolments across the sectors;
  - Limitations on the policy scope of state governments because of the perceived need to compete with the non-government schools for middle class and more scholastic students;
- > The politicisation of the funding of schooling, including the habit of funding decisions, especially for the non-government sector, being based upon pre-election policy deals.

## C. The frame for schooling

We argue that the heart of these problems and the solutions to them lie in the institution of federalism. We also argue that the three sets of structural characteristics that are identified in the paper - the centralised characteristics of state systems, the public-private school division, and the respective roles of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments – are interrelated. This set of characteristics has proven to be remarkably immutable despite their negative impacts. They are politically and administratively locked in. This impasse is linked to federalism and its associated administrative arrangements.

In recent years there have been numerous proposals for the reform of Australian federalism and the level of joint policy making through ministerial councils and other forms of inter-government cooperation has increased. Education is a prime candidate for reforms of and through the federalist processes. This option has been relatively absent in the considerable literature on Australian education policy.

## **D. Why federalism**

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Over the past four decades there have been some muted attempts to reform the governance arrangements for school education in Australia. These initiatives have died in the face of potential resistance from elements of the education policy community. In the context of a renewed interest in federalist reforms there is another and perhaps last opportunity for major reform.

The goal of these reforms would be to move schooling in Australia towards a more coherent set of structural arrangements that will better facilitate the wider school system to achieve a high quality education for all. The strategy would be to use federalism as a means of helping to break down structural rigidities rather than buttressing them. Such a strategy would need to be based upon clarity about:

- > the purposes of schooling;
- > the minimum and common regulatory conditions for schooling;
- > what government should pay for, efficient distribution and effective use of these funds, the conditions for using public funds; and
- > the appropriate roles of each level of government.

There has already been progress towards some of these objectives and others have been proposed in the past. One means of advancing them together is through a set of national projects that are directed at the key pressure points in Australian schooling: strengthening early childhood education, addressing middle years disengagement, and strengthening upper secondary pathways.

These projects need to be based upon some settlement over some key sets of principles and institutions:

- > The right of parents to choose a school for their children, but a recognition of the social consequence of choice and the fact that choice is not evenly distributed across the community;
- > The distributed ownership of publicly funded schooling, but a responsibility towards the public good in the acceptance and use of public funds;
- > A public funding system that goes beyond the limited principle of the entitlement of individual students by also serving broader social objectives;
- > The recognition that school system governance entails direction, regulation, purchase and contracts, and leadership and the need to weave these elements together in a coherent and mutually supportive manner.

## E. Some objectives

To address the current and prospective weaknesses in Australian schooling two broad sets of initiatives are proposed:

**Structural initiatives:**

- > *A reframed set of national goals and purposes for Australian schooling.*  
To a considerable extent this has already been advanced through the Melbourne Declaration.
- > *A national curriculum framework and a national approach towards senior secondary programs and provision.*  
*This also has been partially advanced through the COAG agreement to investigate a national curriculum.*
- > *Movement towards a common regulatory framework.*  
There has been some advance towards this across some states. However, more needs to be done and the initiatives need to be consistent across the states and territories.
- > *Reform of funding arrangements.*  
There have been some minor advances with expectations of accountability. However, this remains a major project and one that must inform the Commonwealth review of funding.
- > *A national quality agency.*  
To complement the movement towards common regulatory frameworks and a proposed set of national initiatives a national quality agency that reports to state and Commonwealth ministers could be established.

**Three sets of national projects:**

- > *Early childhood.*  
A national initiative as a partnership between state and Commonwealth Governments should be targeted at most needy communities in order to develop optimal models for the design and delivery of early childhood services.
- > *Middle years reengagement.*  
A national initiative could target regions across the country with high levels of early school leaving.
- > *Upper secondary pathways.*  
A national project should have the challenge to build programs and pathways and to provide the incentives for providers to cooperate in their delivery.

Each of these projects would have the common features of cross sectoral approaches, being community or locally based, being developmental and being targeted towards areas, schools and students with the greatest educational needs.

## F. Some proposals

**These sets of proposals have been advanced as a whole strategy. It is not possible to radically reform the structure and culture of Australian schooling overnight nor to have a radical realignment in the roles of the two levels of government. As we have argued the structural characteristics of Australian schooling and the structural characteristics of the roles of the two levels of government have become inter dependent. However, just as these characteristics have evolved into these forms they will continue to evolve into the future. The question is whether there is to be any effort to guide this evolution based upon a set of ideals for the future of Australian schooling.**

We argue that the proposals, and especially the national projects, have the capacity to deliver benefits in the short term. Furthermore they can be delivered at relatively low costs because of their developmental and targeted characteristics. However, of greater importance is their potential longer term impact as a set of strategies to overcome the corrosive relationships between government and non-government schooling and the restrictions that federalism places upon educational policy in Australia.

Just as federalism is central to the problems that we have identified it also is the key to the solutions. A vision for schooling lies at the heart of the Australian federation. This is because schooling has increasingly become a national enterprise and is seen as central to the economic and social future of the nation. It is also because the structural characteristics and, as a consequence, much of the policy parameters, are related to the overlay of federalism upon schooling in Australia. Given the particular historical moment in Australian federalism, this is the time to address these structural characteristics and their weaknesses.

## **G. A new federalism**



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