

New school networks for Australia: Partnerships are a key to improving educational outcomes

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IF THERE is any one message that can be drawn from the vast body of research and commentary on school education in Australia, it is that tinkering around the edges of schooling will not solve the widening gaps in educational outcomes that limit opportunities for too many young people. While the current national discourses about teacher quality, funding and a national curriculum are important, these strategies will not succeed without a more collaborative approach.

This collaboration is needed on a number of fronts, most importantly the systemic one. The biggest barrier to overcoming entrenched educational inequity is our current federal system with its differentially governed and funded education systems and its division of schools into three competitive sectors. It is clear that these structures need to change. It is equally clear that they will not do so until the persistent focus on the private, positional benefits of education gives way to a new dialogue about our common responsibility for the wellbeing of children and young people. As Alan Reid from the University of South Australia notes in my new book, Australia needs "a policy approach that emphasises the public benefits of public education, rather than causes public schools to become more private."

This shift does seem to have begun. It can be seen in the growing agenda for joined-up action that brings together government and other sectors to address key social issues, in the growing awareness that school education is a central factor in addressing these issues and in the growing desire by other sectors such as business and philanthropy to support better educational outcomes for children and young people. The next step must be the creation of a range of new partnerships and networks:

- between all schools in a locality regardless of whether they are funded through the government, Catholic or independent school system,
- between the government, Catholic and independent school systems,
- between federal and state governments,
- between education bureaucracies and other areas of government,
- between schools, parents and local communities.

Numerous formal and informal networks and partnerships that are already operated by, with or for Australian schools. On the one hand, these represent a way for schools and other agencies to work together to meet specific local needs. As Carolyn Atkins from the Victorian Council of Community Service notes, "it is vital to draw together the full range of resources that affect the learning and development of children." On the other hand, their current delivery and funding by different government departments creates a landscape of overlapping and confusing services, some of which operate mainly on the goodwill of committed individuals and organisations. This situation cannot possibly bring about the improvement it is designed to achieve.

Similarly, improvement will not happen without the engagement of young people. While they are the target of every effort to lift educational outcomes, there is little will or strategy to involve them in the process. Better support, recognition and reward through the schooling system could see young people driving and leading the networks that widen their own opportunities and build social capital in their communities. As Eric Sidoti

from the Whitlam Institute has said, "reimagining education policy needs to be informed by young people's own views."

Schools cannot do it alone and collaboration can't be left to chance. Instead, Australia needs a mandate that enshrines our collective responsibility for the learning and wellbeing of all children and young people. Such a mandate would break down the barriers between school sectors and systems and harness new resources for the work of schools. It would also create a needed opportunity to rethink some of the premises that currently underpin school education in this country. In particular, a mandate for Australian schooling should:

- reflect our highest aspirations for children and young people and create an environment in which all parts of society can support them through its schools,
- ensure that children and young people are its real benefactors and that networks and partnerships do not degenerate into merely bureaucratic exercises,
- rethink educational success so that schools are measured by the degree to which they work with one another, other agencies and their communities,
- combine place-based solutions with high universal standards so that networks in disadvantaged communities do not simply reinforce or perpetuate inequity,
- build capacity for collaboration so that working together does not exhaust the already scarce resources of schools and community agencies,
- connect the top-down to the bottom-up through new relationships between state and federal governments that streamline service provision for children and young people while strengthening the local networks already operating across the country. •

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