

Want world class schools? It's time to agitate!

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Agitation Hill in Castlemaine was the site of a major uprising in 1853 following the decision of Governor La Trobe in 1851 to introduce a monthly licence fee on the goldfields of Victoria. Others were the Monster Meeting at Forest Creek, the Red Ribbon Rebellion around Bendigo and the dramatic events at Eureka in Ballarat in 1854. These agitations and the language of radical dissent they invoked were key events in the story of democracy and responsible government in Australia.

It is time for the community to adopt the language of radical dissent; agitate for significant, systematic and sustained change; and above all, become more fully engaged in the governance of public education. This is necessary if Australia is to have world-class schools in which all students in all settings secure success. It is necessary but not sufficient for this engagement to occur at the level of peak organisations of teachers, parents, businesses and governments. It must occur in dramatically different ways at the local level. In this Agitation Hill Lecture I describe:

- How fragmented agitation at the local level led to delays in long overdue reforms, particularly in respect to rebuilding schools, securing a proper place for the arts in the national curriculum, and engaging business and industry in the support of schools
- The need for greater professional and parent resistance in relation to public reporting of school performance and the accompanying potential for the distortion of priorities in learning and teaching
- How to redress the current imbalance of powers at different levels of government and the need for professional and parent empowerment

Expressed bluntly, Australia may be entering an era of unprecedented centralisation in the control of public education to the detriment of schools, students and the well-being of the nation.

Schools suffer if agitation is fragmented

In recent years I have joined others in agitating for change in three areas. First, along with teachers and parents, I drew attention to the run-down condition of state schools and the obsolete design of most schools in both public and private sectors. The former was palpably obvious to local communities whose pleas for action were either ignored or resulted in placements on priority lists that would leave one or more generations of students to complete their schooling in deplorable conditions. In relation to my personal advocacy in 2006 on behalf of state schools, the response by every state minister for education was denial; they were content to report that expenditure on their watch was at record levels.

It has taken the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) to trigger the commendable initiative of the Rudd Government to commit \$14.7 billion to address the problem. In the longer term, however, this is wholly inadequate compared to the effort of the Blair and Brown Governments in the UK. We need to triple this expenditure over 10 years in a combined effort of state, territory and commonwealth governments. The prognosis is not good if recent reports are correct. I refer here to the disturbing lack of transparency of how states are handling federal funds, including the allegation that the Victorian Government is siphoning off up to 20 percent of the money that should be directed to schools (Houston & Reilly, 2009).

Secondly, in 2008 I joined arts educators and the arts community in agitating for the inclusion of the arts in a national curriculum. The long overdue national curriculum taking shape at the time was seriously unbalanced if priorities in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People were to be addressed in their entirety, especially in respect to how the arts can contribute to creativity and provide a balanced education for all Australians. The good news is that ministers at all levels of government have now agreed to their inclusion but we must wait another 12 months to determine the shape of an arts curriculum and until 2012 before it is implemented. Moreover, as I shall suggest later in this lecture, the whole effort may be de-railed because of a misguided policy that will inevitably distort the curriculum.

Thirdly, I have advocated over the last five years, and have continued to endorse, the efforts of peak organisations of business and industry who have expressed their wish to support the work of schools. One area of engagement related to the distressing condition of schools described above. There was powerful evidence that a combination of public and private capital was needed. This was the call for public private partnerships. It drew heavy fire from those who believed that public schools should be built, owned, operated and funded exclusively by government. The response was ideological rather than educational and economic. There was never an intention for the curriculum to be controlled

by the private non-educational sector. The good news is that governments in most states have accepted the merits of public private partnerships, especially for the construction of new schools. This does not mean that they should be taken up under all circumstances but they should proceed if the economics are right and if it means that more students can learn in facilities that are required in the 21st century.

Another example of public private partnerships has been cash or in-kind support for the ongoing work of schools. For years proposals along these lines have drawn the response that they open the door to control of the curriculum by fast food chains and the like. The headlines have been predictable every time the possibilities have been raised. This has not proved to be the case in England where more than 95 percent of 3,100 secondary schools have a partnership with a business that supports the school's chosen area of specialisation.

For example, each of the nearly 500 schools with a specialisation in the arts has a partnership within the arts industry (broadly defined). It is almost certain that implementation of a national arts curriculum in Australia will require similar arrangements. The good news is that the federal government's response to the Australia 2020 Summit includes sponsorship of a Business-School Connections Roundtable, with all secondary schools benefiting from partnerships with the nation's top 100 companies. There is bipartisan support for this because Julie Bishop, Julia Gillard's predecessor in the federal education portfolio, had already progressed a similar proposal.

These three issues have been in the public arena for many years but agitation has been fragmented and modest at best, and schools have suffered for the delay in response at state and national levels.

Agitation is urgent on one issue

A current issue where agitation has so far had little effect concerns the public reporting of school performance in national tests, student attendance and financial support. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has approved a program of online reporting to parents that will provide this information for every school, with the performance of each school compared to that of 'like schools', that is, schools with similar student intakes as far as family characteristics and socio-economic background are concerned will be compared in a manner that allows the publication of 'league tables'.

It is understandable that national tests have been introduced in Australia given lack of transparency in performance among the states and territories. A report of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (Masters et al. 2008) concluded that 'like school' comparisons were the best of a range of approaches but its recommendations were heavily qualified as far as potential misuse is concerned.

Ministers have given an assurance that there will be no 'league tables' of school performance. However, within days of results for Tasmanian schools being released, the Hobart-based daily newspaper *The Mercury* constructed and published its own 'league tables'. New South Wales has passed a law banning such publication but there is every indication that this law will be repealed to ensure that the state receives federal funds. A glance at the proposed template for the 'like schools' comparisons or the newspaper's publication of Tasmania's 'league tables' leads one to wonder about their value to parents even if they were valid. The former is jargon ridden; the latter does not even pretend to address the 'like schools' criterion.

While we have moved some distance from Deputy Prime Minister Gillard's call to follow the approach in New York under the leadership of Chancellor Joel Klein (Gillard brought Klein to Australia to spruik its merits) it is hard to sustain a case for what will be rolled out across the nation. It is noteworthy that Finland, the top performing nation in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), has no national system of tests and no public reporting of local tests that enable school-by-school comparison. Finland has a broad national curriculum but it has resisted approaches to testing of a kind that is now entrenched in Britain and the United States. There is of course a comprehensive program of testing within schools in Finland. In some instances schools use tests that are developed by the National Board of Education. There are substantial amounts of data on

the progress and achievement of students and teachers have high levels of expertise in interpreting them. The public and the professional would never countenance what is occurring in Australia.

League tables have been published for many years sometimes with 'value added' or 'contextualised value added' adjustments that neither the public nor the profession can make sense of. Such approaches ignore the evidence that the differences within schools (between classrooms) are greater than the differences between schools, even if the comparisons were to be between 'like schools'. Furthermore, the priority is to personalise learning and the most important data of all are related to how students are achieving in relation to their personal learning plans and against standards.

Sir Ken Robinson, the eminent international expert on innovation and creativity, has described the 'strip mining' of the curriculum under these conditions:

Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardised testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education (Robinson, 2009, p. 249).

Education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions (Robinson, 2009, p. 238).

Our leaders are doing themselves and this nation no favours by demonising those who reject the public release of

information that compares schools. There are, to be sure, some who are not comfortable with accountability or fear exposure of poor performance, but the reality is that there are few advocates in the profession. Consider the views of Gordon Stanley, former head of the Board of Studies in NSW and now director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment:

We [Australia] could well end up with a similar situation to the UK, where you get a whole industry created around improving performance on the tests rather than necessarily improving students' learning skills.

This has led to a lot of teaching to the test and schools focusing on kids who are close to achieving the targets on the view that they are going to be the easiest to improve.

There is a feeling that teachers' professional skills in assessment haven't been developed as much as you'd like because they've been so focused on the external tests. (Stanley, 2009)

Brian Croke, head of the Catholic Education Commission in NSW, has concluded that league tables 'of some sort are inevitable once data for all schools is publicly available in a common format', but in reference to England, he observed that 'they are now scaling down their national testing regime'. (Croke, 2009)

There is evidence that these fears may be playing out in Victoria, with the Secretary of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) sending a memo to schools in April in advance of the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy) being interpreted by teachers as exerting pressure to spend time practising with their students so that Victoria would 'look good' (see report by Tomazin 2009). I have met several large groups of school leaders in recent weeks and have frequently heard comments that this is the way things are being played out.

Unless there is agitation on an epic scale, such as refusal by teachers to administer the tests or by parents to have their children sit for them, it seems that league tables of limited validity that mean little to parents are a fait accompli.

Why wait to suffer the experience of England with distorted priorities in pedagogy and strip mining in the curriculum of the arts, creativity and innovation? One approach is to advocate a 'sunset' on the practice and follow the lead of Finland, as we propose in *Why not the Best Schools* (Caldwell & Harris, 2008). In the longer term, it may be desirable and possible to reduce if not cease a national testing program in Australia. Teachers are already gaining skill in interpreting a range of data and, if a uniformly high quality of teaching is achieved, there may be no need for such a program.

Parents and the profession will be standing on the high ground if the language of radical dissent is adopted on this issue.

Power to the public and profession

There is much about the Rudd Government's 'education revolution' that I admire, as would have been clear from my earlier remarks. However, it is time to redress an imbalance in power between the state and the people. Most revolutions have been the outcome of popular resistance, as in the events at Agitation Hill in the 19th century. The challenge is this: 'How can popular resistance in public education be given voice at this time if good intentions are to be realised rather than subverted?

Balancing autonomy, choice and accountability

There is a need for more powerful public engagement in the governance of public schools. Only one state (Victoria) has empowered the councils of public schools with significant autonomy. Other states have consistently resisted, despite international evidence (summarised by Caldwell & Harris, 2008, Chapter 2) that the best performing systems have a balance of autonomy, choice and accountability.

I have worked with government and non-government schools in recent years and have observed at first hand the benefits of councils or boards in schools with a relatively high degree of autonomy. They have been an important factor in balancing past, present and future to secure long-term sustainability.

The argument that such boards cannot be created for small schools or schools in disadvantaged settings will only prevail as long as there is resistance to creating federations of schools in the public sector. The good news is that these are starting to emerge, notably in Tasmania in the birth to adult Bridgewater and Southern Highlands Learning Federation, but we lag far behind England where they have been an important factor in the transformation of schools. Gordon Brown has promised to extend them. What is currently the exception (federations) will become the norm: 'So we will bring forward proposals in our [forthcoming] White Paper for a radical extension of the role of federations, chains and executive heads in our school system' (Brown, 2009).

The issue here in this part of Victoria is the scope for creating federations of schools with a governing body of powerful parents and leaders in the community who can pool knowledge, address problems of common concern and share resources, adopting where necessary the language of radical dissent to oppose mindless mantras and build support for their efforts to create world-class schools.

A change of heart in England

There has been a change of heart in England as far as local empowerment is concerned. Peter Hyman wrote about the relationship between policymakers and professionals in *1 out of 10: From Downing Street Vision to Classroom Reality* (Hyman, 2005). Hyman was speechwriter and policy advisor to Tony Blair for 10 years before leaving Number 10 and taking up an appointment as a classroom assistant at Islington Green School. The book is remarkable for its insights

into the leadership style of the Prime Minister and headteacher (Trevor Averre-Beeson), referred to throughout as simply Tony and Trevor.

Hyman is very clear in his belief, now that he has worked in both worlds, that policymakers and professionals hold rather different beliefs about what ought to be done and how. He suggests that policymakers ought to have greater confidence in professionals and be less prescriptive. 'For lasting change to occur in public services, politicians need to show more humility and bring on board the professionals' (Hyman, 2005, p. 390). Moreover, he wrote: 'Government must take the need to let go more seriously, and to empower the frontline. It must produce a climate where frontline public servants do not become risk-averse. This means less dictating, less putting up pots of money to be bid for – ambitious targets yes, accountability yes, but also back creativity and imagination' (Hyman, 2005, p. 385).

Four years later, Gordon Brown, who has spoken thoughtfully about education since becoming Prime Minister, rejected both top-down centralised approaches and unfettered market reforms in unveiling a new policy of empowerment for parents and the profession:

Instead, our approach must be to look at great schools and great heads [principals] to lead the next stage of reform, with parents given new powers and government, both local and national, exercising not a directive role, but a strategic role . . . overcoming the temptation to control too much.

So most critically of all in our approach to extending opportunity in education, we want to maximise parent power and improve services for parents that involve them in their children's education in the years ahead. (Brown, 2009)

Brown also signalled change in reporting to parents that reflected priorities for personalising learning:

So, for parents to influence the education of their children, they need rich, varied and easily accessible information on the progress, behaviour and attendance of their children. Many of our schools and best leaders are already using the latest technology to do this, but it should be a right for all parents. So, from 2010, all secondary schools, and from 2012, all primary schools, will report online to parents, something that has been made possible because of our investment in universal home internet access for all families. (Brown, 2009)

The challenge for Brown or his successor is whether they can accomplish this without the debilitating regime of league tables that has distorted priorities in learning and teaching.

Agitation in Los Angeles

Agitation on a scale far beyond what Gordon Brown has in mind is underway in Los Angeles in what is designated the 'Parent Revolution'. As described in a recent report (Blume, 2009): 'The plan is for parents to form chapters all over town and improve schools, one by one, using the growing leverage of the charter school movement' [a charter school is a publicly-funded, no-fee, independently-operated school]. If more than half of parents in a particular school sign up, the organisers guarantee 'an excellent campus within three years'. The aim is to pressure the public school authority (Los Angeles Unified School District) (LAUSD) to improve schools and meet the expectations of 'overworked and isolated parents'. LAUSD has its own parent outreach program in which parents will be surveyed in future school evaluations. It is acknowledged in California that not all schools need a revolution.

Parent opinion is already sought in all government schools in Victoria and an analysis is contained in the annual report of each school. Victoria also provides a comparison of school performance on key indicators on a 'like schools' basis but there are currently no public reports that enable league tables to be constructed as has been done in Tasmania. However, as noted above, online reports will be available to parents for all government and non-government schools as part of the COAG agreement.

Building social capital

Drawing on our research in six countries, Jessica Harris and I demonstrated in our recent book *Why not the Best Schools* that outstanding schools draw on four kinds of capital to

secure and sustain their success, namely, intellectual, social, spiritual and financial. We highlighted the importance of social capital which we described as the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks involving the school and all individuals, agencies, organisations and institutions that have the potential to support and be supported by the school.

The good news is that the ideological barriers have been smashed in some settings, with partnerships of schools and school systems through such enterprises as the Australian Business and Community Network (ABCN). A standout example is the Schools First initiative, a partnership of The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the National Australia Bank (NAB). Awards totalling \$5 million per year for three years are available for public and private schools that model good practice in school-community partnerships. Eighty (80) workshops are underway across the country to provide guidance on how to achieve success. The effort is underpinned by a solid evidence base assembled by ACER (2008).

There is also the recently-created Family-School & Community Partnership Bureau, a cooperative effort of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australia Parents Council (APC), funded by the Commonwealth's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). DEEWR has produced a guide to good practice (DEEWR, n.d.) based on solid research, with case studies of a range of successful practices. Nowhere in the guide is there advocacy of agitation of the kind that is canvassed in this paper, although one of the blogs on its official website (see www.familyschool.org.au/?p=660) reports 'heated disagreement' about the public reporting of school performance with a link to the research of ACER (Masters et al. 2008) cited above.

Beyond 'new federalism'

Many aspects of the 'education revolution' are being addressed through COAG, with a high level of cooperation between commonwealth, states and territories in what was described in the months leading up to the 2007 election as 'new federalism'. In the longer term, however, as canvassed at the Australia 2020 Summit, some hard questions need to be asked about the current balance of powers between different levels of government. In many nations, the administration of state schools is the responsibility of local government with the two levels of governance in education being national and state. In top-performing Finland, for example, which has about the same population as Victoria, the national government works through the National Board of Education, and schools are administered by 348 cities and municipal authorities (details at www.kunnat.net/k_etusivu.asp?path=1;161;279). The author of a recent paper for the Centre for Independent Studies on local government in Australia asks: 'Why can't we trust local communities to make their own choices when it comes to policing their neighbourhoods or running their schools?' (Hartwich, 2009).

It is unlikely that Australia will move in this direction as far as the governance of public education is concerned and there is little point in taking a position, although working through some scenarios may be worthwhile. The way forward seems to be to redress the current imbalance that favours the state over parent and professional empowerment and agitate for more power, which is the direction which has been foreshadowed in England and threatened in California.

Conclusion

Regrettably, Australia is a late starter in these matters. Unconscionable delays in rebuilding schools, balancing the curriculum and securing the support of the whole community would not have occurred if public support had been mobilised at the local level and made effective through the empowerment of key stakeholders in school governance. It may require the language of radical dissent and agitation on a grand scale if we are to achieve a new alignment that is the pre-requisite for a world-class school system.

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<http://www.educationaltransformations.com.au/files/Agitation%20Hill%20Lecture%20Publication.pdf>

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