As Others See Us – A US view of Australian Education

By Chester E. Finn Jr.

The United States isn't the only land where primary-secondary schooling was traditionally the responsibility of the states or provinces, while the national government played a minor, even peripheral role. Nor are we the only people now struggling to adapt that old decentralized arrangement to the realities of the 21st century, with its globalizing economy, rising mobility, instant communications, and ebbing affection for local idiosyncrasy—and agonizing over what mechanisms might best yield a measure of high-standard uniformity and accountability without shackling schools and educators to a deadening, politically vulnerable, bureaucratic sameness.

That something needs to change is clearer every day, as we observe the peculiar risks and odd incentives of a policy regimen in which states set their own standards and tests—and pay for the lion's share of education costs—even as they are held to account by Washington for their performance and told what to do with poorly performing schools. Yet we have neither the structures nor the trust to turn standards-setting over to Uncle Sam and little appetite for centralizing actual school operations.

Seeking a bit of perspective on such dilemmas, I recently spent a week talking with government officials, policy wonks, and educators in Australia. Its eight states and territories run the public schools, hire their teachers, and generally manage the delivery of primary-secondary education—averaging some 400,000 pupils each. With no "local" school systems, state bureaucracies and the elected state-level officials that oversee them have historically occupied the driver's seat, while the "commonwealth" government has no constitutional mandate in the K-12 realm and generally relies for influence on the strings it can tie to the less than 10 percent of the education budget that it contributes.

By chance, my visit coincided with "budget week," when Prime Minister John Howard's conservative "Coalition" government unveiled its latest policy plans, and challenger Kevin Rudd's Labor Party responded with its own proposals. It's election season in Oz and, after 11 years in opposition, the Rudd team is hungry to convince

voters that it offers a better future. Early polling indicates that it stands a fair chance of prevailing, due in no small part to simple weariness with the incumbents.

Yet the country is thriving on Howard's watch. Its booming economy and aggressive tax structure have yielded a whopping budget surplus (and zero national debt), so the budget game includes handing out new billions in ways calculated to woo key interest groups and segments of the electorate. In K-12 education, for example, the government offered money for teacher merit pay and mini-vouchers for students needing remediation (akin to the No Child Left Behind Act's "supplemental educational services"), while Labor proposed nifty new technical-vocational programs (and facilities) in high schools. Both sides say an education revolution is needed, and each has lately behaved in semi-revolutionary fashion, with the Coalition ignoring conservative dogma and reaching over the states directly to schools, teachers, and families, while Labor embraces some policies that make the teachers' unions queasy—notably its willingness to continue Australia's practice of aiding private and religious schools.

On one key issue, however, the parties are converging: Both now favor some sort of national academic standards, tests, and curriculum. (**"Australia Grapples With National Content Standards,"** March 14, 2007.) Exactly how and by whom this will be operationalized is not yet clear. As in America, nobody wants the federal education department to take direct charge of such sensitive matters.

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State education officials are proud of their track record and jealous of their autonomy. Still, they've been edging toward a more unified approach for nearly two decades, dating to 1989, as the "Charlottesville summit" was launching the United States in this direction. In that year's "Hobart Declaration," which included "Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling," Australia's state and national education ministers cautiously agreed to work together. Ten years later, the "Adelaide Declaration" committed them to devise a "national framework" for schooling. Two months ago, in "Federalist Paper 2," the states and territories pledged jointly to develop national standards, beginning with English, math, and science, that could undergird a "national testing and measurement program," then move on to a

“national curriculum.” They invited the federal government to work with them on this ambitious undertaking.

In February, meanwhile, the Labor Party came out for a “national curriculum,” beginning with math, science, English, and history, that would be “a clear and explicit agreement about the essentials all young Australians should know and what they should be able to do.” Its manifesto suggested that a new “national curriculum board” take charge of this.

While I was there in May, the Howard government proposed an “initiative” to “develop nationally consistent standards in key subject areas” at the secondary level (10 courses were named)—and to make future federal school aid contingent on the states’ meeting those standards, starting in 2009, as well as requiring them “to include a component of rigorous external assessment” of student performance in the final year of high school.

Both parties recognize that today’s education standards are uneven, that too many young Australians are being left behind, and that the demands of modern society argue for kids in Sydney, Perth, and Darwin to acquire similar skills and knowledge.

Adding complexity and savor to the political stew, *every* state government is currently in Labor hands, while Howard’s Coalition rules in Canberra, whence flows most of Australia’s private school aid. The private (and religious) sector now educates more than one-third of all youngsters—in some locales, at the high school level, it enrolls half of them—and accounts for *all* the growth in Australian K-12 pupil rolls over the past three decades. The Commonwealth subsidizes those schools, sometimes supplemented by the states. Amounts vary—a crude version of “weighted student funding” seeks to provide more for schools in low-income communities—and schools are free to charge tuition to “top up” what the government gives them. Melbourne’s Catholic schools, for example, receive from Canberra an average of 56 percent of the per-pupil funding of local public schools, and get another 16 percent from the state of Victoria. They supplement this with (relatively low) tuitions, some private philanthropy, and help from the church.

In return for government aid, Australian private schools employ state-licensed teachers and teach the core state curriculum—whether sensible or loopy—though they can augment it with religious education and other subjects. If and when a

national curriculum comes about, the private schools will doubtless teach and test their pupils accordingly. Nobody I met seemed to find this too heavy a price to pay for public dollars. Besides being fiscally viable and popular with parents, the private sector is generally invited inside the tents where policy issues that affect it, such as curriculum, testing, and teacher qualifications, get hashed out.

Though impressed by how much progress has been made Down Under on the school choice front, I was jarred by how little information is available on school performance. The education establishment has drawn a line at making comparisons among schools—or states—and Australia generally keeps its school-level results hidden from parents, journalists, and politicians to a degree that seems antediluvian and faintly undemocratic to an American. What's the point, one wonders, of a national curriculum if nobody knows which schools are teaching it effectively?

Today, despite two decades of discussing, convening, and proposing, Australia remains a considerable distance from such a curriculum and, like us, is riven by disagreement as to what exactly should be taught—and who ought to decide. The Pacific Ocean is no barrier to "culture wars" or progressivism-run-amuck. Indeed, I had time-warp (in addition to jet-lag) moments when I heard people arguing over "outcomes-based" education.

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The Labor Party hasn't said much about actual curricular content, though its position paper thoughtfully discusses the need to blend skills and knowledge. On the other hand, the new board to which it would entrust this responsibility is to consist of "educational experts" and state (and private school) representatives, and could easily be dominated by the postmodern tendencies of fashionable academics and several extant state curricula.

Prime Minister Howard, by contrast, terms himself an "avowed education traditionalist" who believes that "English lessons should teach grammar. ... [H]istory is History, not Society and the Environment or Time, Continuity, and Change. ... [G]eography is Geography, not Place and Space." He has also made clear that he

favors high-stakes external exams of the very kind that Australia's main teachers' union decries—and would push hard on a Labor government to forswear.

Working through this won't be any easier for Australia than for the United States. Though the over-40 generation is generally well-educated in a traditional sort of way, I met my share of charming featherheads among those under 30. Like America, Oz could do with a curricular makeover, higher standards, and universal accountability. But as on our own shores, some of its more perceptive education critics worry that any centralized standards will end up being drafted by the very experts whose handiwork caused the problems that national standards and curricula are meant to help solve.

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