



America Has The Answer For Australia's Failing Schools

Publish Date:

February 2017

Australia must tackle the highly-centralised structures of public education if we are to stem the long-term decline of Australian students' performance compared to the rest of the world.

When it comes to public education, Australia has much to learn from the United States.

Last week, the US Senate voted to confirm President Donald Trump's controversial pick for Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos. Vice-President Mike Pence was called in to break a tie vote for the first time in history for a cabinet appointment.

[DeVos was a provocative nomination](#) principally because she has spent decades campaigning for school choice – promoting charter schools and voucher programs. While this has pitted her against the teaching unions, it is hardly a fringe position: 43 US states have adopted charter school laws, and more than 2.5 million students are enrolled in 6465 charter schools.

[Research shows](#) that school choice has increased parental satisfaction, and improved



achievement and school completion rates for the most disadvantaged Americans.

Injecting school choice into Australia's public education system could be one way to lift our results. Internationally, [the latest PISA rankings](#) show that Australian 15 year-old students' performance in science, mathematics, and reading is slipping – a declining trend since 2006. At home, [the 2016 NAPLAN report](#) showed test scores flat-lining.

The tired response is to call for more public funding. But throwing money at the problem has not worked. [According to the latest ABS data](#), commonwealth, state and territory government expenditure on primary and secondary education totalled \$43.3 billion in 2014-15, up from \$27.6 billion in 2005-06 – an increase of 56.9 per cent. Claims of “funding cuts” under the federal government are sullied by the fact that education [spending is continuing to increase](#) over the forward estimates.

Another common response is to call for improvements in teacher quality. But this attempts to treat the symptoms without curing the underlying disease. The real problem is structural; why doesn't the public education system incentivise improvements in teacher quality and student achievement in the first place?

In each state and territory, the public education system is highly centralised. This is true even for states with so-called “independent public schools” programs. In all jurisdictions, school teachers are employees of the government and subject to an industrialised salary structure. This means a lack of incentives for schools to attract and retain the best teachers. Removing poor teachers is extremely difficult, and schools are almost never shut down due to underperformance. Schools must follow a government mandated curriculum and abide by its prescriptive policies and procedures. Just like any other red tape, innovation is constrained.

Thinking structurally, we shouldn't be surprised that public education suffers from the same problems as any other government-run monopoly – high costs, an inflated bureaucracy, effectiveness issues, and lack of innovation. A way forward is to separate the functions of public funding and public management of schools. While there is no single decentralised model, charter schools have a long history of results in the US.

Charter schools are publicly funded schools of choice, run in competition with the centralised system. They are established and governed by local community boards in accordance with their charters rather than run by government departments.

Charters are publicly accountable to authorising bodies for academic performance and financial management. Charters have a high amount of autonomy, exempt from a range of government regulations. Because they are a distinct legal entity, individual charters negotiate teachers' employment conditions locally. Combined, these features allow charters to tailor educational programs and organisational structures to their own needs – unlocking the potential for innovation. Effective charter programs can be combined with other school choice alternatives like voucher programs, education tax credits, and more.



As a first step, Australian states and territories could introduce this model by allowing existing public schools to convert to charters. Universities with education faculties could act as the authorising bodies. But this will not happen without ambitious leadership. It would require champions of school choice in positions of power like DeVos. It will also take grit to stand firm against union opposition, because [recent research from education expert Dr Kevin Donnelly](#) finds that the AEU have always placed impediments to increased school choice and autonomy.

None of this is to say that charter schools are a panacea. But structural change is needed. The alternative is continuing down the path of a highly-centralised public education system.

[As DeVos warned](#) in her opening remarks to her Senate confirmation hearing, “it will not be Washington DC that unlocks our nation’s potential, nor a bigger bureaucracy, tougher mandates or a federal agency. The answer is local control and listening to parents, students and teachers.”

Original Link:

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/america-has-the-answer-for-australias-failing-schools-20170220-gugxf5.html>

Originally published in:

Sydney Morning Herald