

6 Education: Western Australia's Schools

Introduction

Of all the activities undertaken by the State government, aside from the provision of physical infrastructure, education is the most important. The proper education of the individual is the fundamental on which is built a good deal of the individual's and society's prosperity, and social stability. It is not, perhaps, going too far to say that, of all its functions, education is the one that government does least well.

This is not something which has been allowed to pass without debate. It has not, however, been a very productive debate.

Although many issues of concern to the community, to educators and to parents have been raised—not least by the IPA itself—the single issue that has come to dominate the debate has been that of educational standards. That might be thought appropriate; after all, that is the issue which should most concern us, and in other countries, most notably the USA, it has generated a great deal of constructive discussion, sometimes leading to useful reform.

The comparison with the USA, however, enables us to put our finger on the crucial flaw: in America there is a vast quantity of statistically sound *and accessible* research on standards; in Australia, there is, comparatively, almost none. One can say, on the basis of available Australian evidence, that a certain study revealed certain facts about educational standards at the national level in one particular year, or that other surveys have yielded limited information on certain standards in certain States. One simply cannot, however, say that, measured by given comparable standardised tests and across a broad spectrum of ages and skills, educational standards in Australia or in any Australian State are better or worse than ten or twenty

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years ago, better or worse in one State than another, better or worse in Australia than in Japan or Germany or the USA.⁸⁰

In some ways this situation is even worse, even less transparent, than it looks: because of a very heavy emphasis on internal assessment, accompanied by extensive use of scaling techniques, the conclusions which might otherwise be drawn from comparing one year's exit examinations with another's cannot be taken as statistically reliable. That eliminates one potentially useful alternative source of information.

There are at last signs that this situation is no longer a minority concern. Earlier last year, the Director-General of Education in New South Wales went on record as saying, '...computer banks of education systems across this country are crammed with data ... the great bulk of the data is, however, about inputs. We have very little information on educational results.... [The Australian education system] has traditionally exhibited a reluctance to develop indicators of student performance, to administer large-scale data-gathering programs and to report the findings publicly.'⁸¹ The last point is very apt: for while educators in some systems do in fact have some useful information on standards, it is rarely available in useful form to the public.

In Western Australia, also, the matter became the subject of public debate early last year when the Minister pushed for the wider implementation of her Ministry's benchmark testing programme. She was strongly criticised by teacher and principal unions and by educational academics; at the time of writing, the unions' opposition seems to have prevailed.

To some indeterminable extent, the avoidance of standards testing (and objective external examination in general) is the result of shifts in educational 'philosophy' over two decades or more. The promotion of 'concepts' over 'mechanical skills', the rise of self-esteem and self-fulfilment as dominant educational goals, the steady depreciation of competition as an acceptable school ethos—all these and other factors are concerned. Perhaps more important has been the virtual supremacy of the vested interest of teacher unions and educational bureaucracies in setting and deciding the educational

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81 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 1992.

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policy agenda. Teacher unions across Australia have indeed, as the public record shows, been the most vociferous opponents of standards testing. This is, of course, precisely what one would expect from the providers of a near-monopoly service.

Given that the providers conscientiously proscribe the collection of relevant data, the standards debate has had to be conducted largely on the basis of anecdotal evidence, with all the hazards that implies. The weight of anecdotal evidence, nevertheless, does suggest that over a fairly long period—say twenty-five years—standards in basic skills have fallen, with perhaps a slight rise over the last two or three years. That evidence is strongest from employers and from concerned university teachers. It sometimes surfaces in the press, but only rarely. Few university academics, for instance, seem concerned to draw to the public's attention the fact that remedial reading and writing courses are now almost routine at first-year undergraduate level. Many employers know that they now require year-12 recruits in order to hope for something like the same standards they once had from year-10 recruits.

The minimum (and perhaps overly generous) position is that there is precious little evidence that standards have *risen*: a proposition that the providers themselves cannot put forward for want of the same data. And given the resources poured into Australian education over the last thirty years, that is in itself a shocking circumstance.

Anecdotal evidence is not, however, the whole picture. Australian schools are not, fortunately, a perfect monopoly. Competition exists in the form of the non-government school sector. The growth of that sector is instructive in the extreme:

Table 6.1: Non-Government Pupils as Percentage of Enrolment

Year	1970	1975	1980	1985	1991
Australia					
Total	21.9	21.3	22.3	25.8	27.9
Secondary	24.8	24.1	26.4	28.8	31.8
Victoria					
Total	24.6	24.4	26.3	30.5	32.4
Secondary	26.1	27.1	29.9	32.7	35.3
Western Australia					
Total	19.3	18.2	18.4	21.8	24.5
Secondary	24.3	22.8	24.2	26.0	30.2

Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0, Schools Australia, various years.

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The figures show very clearly that over the years there has been a considerable growth in the number of parents willing to incur the double expense of sending their children to non-government schools; paying once through taxes and then again through fees. They show further that at the secondary level, where education is seen by parents as being a more serious matter, the trend is more pronounced. The Victorian figures are of additional interest in showing the trend in a State where, to an extent not evident in Western Australia, the debate over standards has been more profound and longlasting.

Parents, of course, send their children to the non-government sector for many reasons. Religious preference may be strong; social status may be a factor; and standards can be measured more widely than by skills attainment alone—they may include discipline, the school ethos, special education needs, sporting achievement, and all sorts of intangibles. It cannot, however, be denied that the duration and extent of the trend to the private sector argues the existence of a large body of parents concerned about standards and willing to pay by voting with their children's feet. That they do so almost entirely on the basis of anecdotal evidence is striking in itself, further reinforcing the argument for widespread consumer dissatisfaction.

That is a strong argument. But even that is not entirely beyond challenge; and even that is to some extent beside the point. The point has surely to be that the debate on standards helps obscure the basic requirement against which we measure the provision of education: that on a permanent basis it will deliver the best possible education at a given cost to every child who is part of it. The debate has to shift to the future.

Whatever its performance in the past, Western Australia's government education system is not well-equipped to deliver what can reasonably be expected of it. In making that judgement, no particular inference is to be drawn about individuals within the system. Anyone having any familiarity with Western Australian schools will know that they contain many skilled and committed teachers. The problem is institutional. To some extent it can be summed up in the difference between the *Education Circular*, full of elaborate bureaucratic rules and regulations, and the *Education News*, which so often contains many heartening stories of individual initiative.

The problem is, in fact, closely connected with the near monopoly status of government education. The interests of consumers—those 75 per cent of parents and children to whom the alternative is not

available—are for the most part subservient to the interests of the providers.

The analogy with economic monopoly is not complete. In particular, there are consumer pressures, although they come at second hand, filtered through the political process. For political reasons, the system (having at its apex the minister) has to be seen to respond. It does this, however, in a fundamentally (and fascinatingly) evasive manner. The response is couched almost entirely in terms of *inputs* rather than *outputs*.

This is most obvious in the case of the fiscal resources allocated to education. For much of the last twenty years, whenever ministers have wanted to be seen to be concerned about education they have simply increased education's share of the budget. The assumption promoted is quite simply that if we have spent more on education it must improve. It is only recently that this trend has been levelled off.

The use to which those resources are put is further evidence of what we might call the 'input mentality'.

One popular index of alleged improvement in the quality of education has been the reduction in class sizes (see Table 6.2). This has a good deal of plausibility, and is quite difficult to criticise publicly. There may indeed be circumstances in which decreasing class size does have a bearing on the educational outcome: teaching a class of 20 delinquent or intellectually-handicapped children may well be easier and more productive than teaching a class of 30 such. In ordinary circumstances, however, it is far from clear that the benefits of smaller classes are more than marginal at best.

Table 6.2: Pupil/Teacher Ratios (x:1)

Year	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991
Australia					
Government	23.1	17.9	16.4	14.9	15.2
Non-government	26.6	21.0	18.5	16.4	16.0
Total	23.8	18.5	16.8	15.3	15.4
Victoria					
Government	22.8	16.6	14.7	13.4	13.5
Non-government	26.7	20.9	17.8	15.7	15.6
Total	23.6	17.5	15.4	14.1	14.1
Western Australia					
Government	25.2	19.3	17.7	16.3	15.9
Non-government	25.9	19.9	17.8	16.4	15.7
Total	25.3	19.4	17.7	16.4	15.9

Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0, Schools Australia, various years.
Note that this ratio is not a measure of actual class sizes

One more recently fashionable index has been that of student retention rates: the dramatic improvement in retention rates over the last 5 years has been widely proclaimed as a measure of unalloyed success. This, again, has an inherent plausibility; somewhat more justified, perhaps. It still needs to be examined carefully: is it merely, in the presence of Austudy, an alternative to unemployment benefit? Do unwilling students merely lower the quality of education for the willing? Are certification procedures diluted to make allowances for the preponderantly non-academic stream now retained? Is the incremental value of one or two years' education worth the cost of every student? Are schools interfering with the fact that individuals learn with different degrees of success at different times of their lives—that some individuals may do well to leave school at, say, fifteen, and start their education again at, say, twenty-five?

Another obvious focus of input has been professional certification. Obviously the taxpayer has every reason to expect that teachers hired by the ministry can demonstrate some formal measure of competence. But the emphasis on certification is not without problems. Increasingly teachers have degrees whose major component is educational theory rather than competence in particular subjects. This reflects an entirely unproven assumption that teachers can be taught how to teach. In fact the system overlooks the existence of (and therefore wastes) a large body of people with useful skills, which they may well be able to impart to others, who are excluded from the system for want of a formal teaching qualification. To make matters worse, the promotional and managerial structure of the school system is very heavily weighted toward the acquisition of formal qualifications. This is doubly unfortunate as, whatever the relationship which might exist between educational qualifications and educational performance, there is no relationship whatsoever demonstrable between managerial ability and qualifications in education. Further, it seems perverse to take the theoretically most able teachers out of the classroom and put them into management.

Connected closely with this last factor is the emphasis on change for its own sake (or change for the sake of being seen to be doing something). This is particularly obvious in revisions to curriculum design, in implementation of new fashions in learning theory, and in the remodelling of formal management structures. Typical examples are the introduction of the unit model of curriculum, and the recasting of the old Department into the new Ministry: the benefits of both have been far from clear. There may well have been benefits; but

they will have been largely incidental to the process of responding to the pressures for change without actually changing the fundamentally bureaucratic, monopolistic nature of the system.

It would not do to be too pessimistic about the possibility of beneficial change in the system. There are one or two encouraging signs around that future change will be in more constructive directions. The reforms in New South Wales over the last five years, though initially controversial, are beginning to tell; and with the demise of the Schools Commission, accompanied by the rise of the 'clever country' rhetoric, there are tentative indications of a more commonsense approach (including a new emphasis on outcomes) at the national level. In Western Australia we think there is considerable room for improvement; much of this must be directed toward overcoming the monopoly-type characteristics already identified. At the same time, it needs to be recognised that those same monopoly characteristics impose limits to the degree and manageability of change—a point to which we will return later.

Standards and Certification

Very high on any reform agenda must be a renewed shift of attention to outcomes, to measured standards.

It needs to be observed at the outset that testing for standards and achievement must not become an end in itself. What our system needs is, broadly speaking, accountability. Voters and taxpayers in a democracy have an undeniable entitlement to know that governments are spending their money wisely. That applies to education as much as to health or any other function of government. In more particular ways, accountability is equally important. Parents are entitled to know how well their children are performing, and how well schools are serving their children. Employers need to know that the certification they accept as a qualification for employment is valid. Students, importantly, need the assurance that their certificate represents a genuine reward for their years of work.

We recommend the institution of State-wide standards testing, therefore, at years three, seven and ten. The results should be published in the form of State aggregates *and* school aggregates. Information about individual students should be given to parents. Arguments that parents cannot be trusted with this sort of information should be treated with the contempt that such self-interested paternalism deserves. Deciding on the form and content of the testing

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is, in the end, a matter for professionals. The Ministry's benchmark testing programme is widely agreed to be of high quality. It is, on the other hand, fairly complex and expensive to do properly. Our opinion, therefore, is that a simpler, cheaper and sufficiently reliable series of tests be sought elsewhere, either from a State such as NSW which already uses such tests, or from the ACER, which has a useful repertoire of its own. Certainly some effort should be made to anticipate national uniform testing, an issue now tentatively making its way on to the political agenda. And it is important that the notion of reliability includes a clear rejection of tests which are entirely norm- or criterion-referenced.

There are, of course, many arguments advanced by education professionals against such programmes. One common one is that testing skews teaching and curriculum in favour of the matter being tested. If what is being tested, on the other hand, is proper competence in the things that count, that is all to the good. The acceptance of well-designed tests as a routine part of school life will, in fact, serve to concentrate more teaching on the important subjects and less on the 'soft options'.

Certification is in some ways a less easy concept to put into good practice. There is—recalling our arguments about monopoly providers—a strong case for believing that it should not be the responsibility of the Ministry at all. Following those arguments, a system could quite easily be developed whereby entrants into tertiary education were examined by their chosen institution, while those going into other careers could seek certification under an examination offered by, for instance, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In both cases, the certifying body could give due weight to internal school assessment results; while in the latter case, the private assessing body could offer examinations suitable for the various ages at which students might leave school. There is no reason why other organisations—the Western Australian Farmers' Federation, the State public service, any of the retailers' or small business associations, for instance—should not go their own way; although in practice one would expect one single test of employability to come to dominate the field. There is no reason either, it should be said, why any organisation should not charge a cost-recovering fee for the service.

It is difficult to think of any fatal objections in principle to such a proposal. It is true that the present system makes it relatively easy for students to transfer their certification from one State to another; but in our opinion the proposed certificates would have greater credi-

bility with interstate universities and employers than the present one. The truly fatal objection is political: without a strong minister, the proposal would certainly be stifled by the educational establishment. That being the case, we can only recommend that the Ministry's certification procedures be recast as far as possible to mimic the more desirable outcome. That is, the TEE and the Achievement Certificates be remodelled with considerably greater emphasis on enabling students to meet the reasonable requirements of the end-users. This will inevitably, and rightly, involve decreasing the relative weighting of internal assessment procedures, and the establishment of objective benchmarks.

Whichever the outcome—and we repeat our strong preference for private certification—it is, again, very important for the better working of the whole system that the results be as public as possible. This is a matter which we will take up again in our recommendations on education structures.

A subsidiary aspect of the assessment and certification issue is that of student advancement.

Throughout Western Australia's schools, from years 1 to 12, students may advance almost automatically from one year to the next, completion of four terms being the basic test for advancement. Schools and teachers may, of course, advise repeating, particularly at higher levels; but they find it difficult to enforce that advice on the unwilling.

This is a process which warrants the most careful reconsideration. It is a very significant cause of difficulty in schools in one particular area: the transition from primary to secondary schooling, from year 7 to year 8. There are essential differences between primary and secondary schooling which make it very important that students not proceed from one to the other unless they have the basic competencies well mastered. The difficulty has been acknowledged in recent years, though not in a very public way, by the Ministry's obliging teachers to incorporate literacy considerations in the content and method of secondary subjects. This approach imposes impossible burdens on teachers. It is professionally degrading—and probably impossible—to have to improve basic competencies, except at the very margin, while teaching, say, accounting or physics. Conversely, the teaching of the individual subjects is itself severely hampered. It is far from unknown for teachers of a year 8 subject to discover, in pursuing their concern for a difficult student, that the student in

