

Choosing and Reforming Schools

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BEFORE the late 1970s, the proportion of Australian children enrolled in government and non-government schools varied very little from decade to decade. Most Catholic families sent their children to Catholic schools, even though it was only in 1963 that these first received government grants, from the Menzies Coalition Government. A few wealthy Protestant families sent their children to independent schools but, unlike Catholics, Protestant families were mostly happy with government schools. These were then based on what the American historian Robert Bellah called a 'civil religion': Christian morality without theology.

The 1963 grants for non-government schools had little immediate effect on enrolments. In 1977, 2,356,190 (78.9 per cent) of Australian school students were in government schools, 501,857 in Catholic schools, 51,613 in Anglican schools, and 77,013 in other non-government schools, making 630,483 non-government school students in all. This distribution was little different from that earlier in the century. From the late 1970s onwards, the percentage of students in government schools fell year by year. By 2003, government schools retained only 66 per cent of all school students. Between 1993 and 2003 the total number of students in government schools throughout Australia increased by only 1.2 per cent, whereas those in non-government schools rose by 22.3 per cent. In several States in recent years, numbers in government schools actually fell.

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR CHANGING ENROLMENTS

Some proffered explanations for this significant drop in government school enrolments have little foundation. First, some parents choose schools for what critics term 'snobbish' motives. There is some circularity here, however, since there is little evidence for increased snobbery in Australia other than the increased patronage of non-government schools the snobbery is supposed to explain.

Second, advocates of State schools often claim that non-government schools are likely to prosper in periods of economic expansion, because the fat cats are getting fatter, but during periods of comparative hardship some argued that parents were more concerned than ever about their children's employment prospects and were therefore more willing to pay school fees. Since 1979, the rate of expansion of non-government schools has usually been only slightly greater during prosperous periods.

Third, there have been some significant changes in religious belief in Australia during the last 30 years. There have been notable increases in adherents to Islam, and to a lesser extent to Hinduism and Buddhism. Among the mainstream Christian churches of Australia, however, a decline in church congregations has accompanied increasing attendances in schools loosely or more tightly connected to the churches. The Anglican and Uniting churches are most prominent in combining religious decline with expansion in schools

nominally adherent to them, but the Catholic Church is not far behind. Several evangelical and fundamentalist churches have increased both their congregations and their school rolls, but 'New Christian' schools remain relatively small in total enrolments.

The overwhelming majority of parents who have transferred their children out of government schools into non-government schools did not do so out of religious fervour. The movement against government schools would be far greater if it were easier to open new non-government schools of a non-religious character. By and large, non-profit independent schools support the exclusion from grants of entrepreneurial schools that would compete with them rather than with State schools.

Fourth, overall, there has been and remains very little difference in student-teacher ratios and class sizes between government and non-government sectors. In 2003, there were 154,872 full-time-equivalent teachers in government schools and 74,704 in non-government schools. In primary schools, this worked out at a student-teacher ratio of 16.6 in government schools and a slightly inferior 17.1 in non-government schools. In secondary schools, the result was the other way around: 12.5 in government schools and 12.1 in non-government schools. Catholic and New Christian schools have, on average, slightly worse student-teacher ratios than government and other non-government schools. All Australian school systems enjoy some of the most favourable class sizes in the world.

Although the overall difference in student–teacher ratios is negligible, the gap in class sizes is increased because of greater non-contact time for teachers in non-government schools and their larger number of Principals, Deputy Principals and senior teachers who do little teaching. Public perceptions about class sizes are often very different from reality, because non-government schools play up their advantages and positive features, whereas, as part of the politics of resentment, government schools exaggerate their difficulties and shortcomings.

Fifth, most non-government schools have much wider powers to select or expel students, and select and dismiss teachers and other staff, than do government schools. The gap between the systems in respect of employment contracts has not, however, widened much in recent years and may even have narrowed. It has become more difficult for a non-government school to dismiss even teachers who openly flout basic principles of conduct and tenets of belief it was founded to defend and which parents support.

School-based grant schemes give schools a powerful incentive to present themselves to governments as more ‘needy’ than they are. The larger the number of financial categories, the greater the encouragement to some non-government schools to allocate staffing and capital expenditure in ways that maximize grants and subsidies. Governments naturally find it easier to deal with a few large groups of schools, usually but not always of the same religious denomination, rather than with a profusion of individual schools. Some schools welcomed what seemed to be the relief from burdensome accounting chores provided by bureaucracies skilled at interpreting or influencing central government thinking, but they also lost some of their former flexibility. The comparative independence of non-government schools remains an important attraction for many parents, but it is no greater than before the rolls began their dramatic expansion.

REAL CAUSES FOR PARENTAL REJECTION OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

The lack of movement against government schools between 1963 and 1979 suggests that changes in funding are not in themselves a clincher in family decisions about school choice. Better funding of non-government schools obviously makes them more available to a larger number of families than they would otherwise be, but the relative burden on family incomes resulting from the cost of school fees and related expenses incurred in attending non-government schools has changed very little. Usually, something given away

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free has to be seriously flawed if people reject it in favour of an apparent equivalent that is very expensive.

A growing gap between educational standards in the two systems has clearly been the main reason for changes in parental choice of schools. On comparative educational standards, teacher unions breathe contradiction. On the one hand they assert that, once family and other external influences are taken into account, non-government schools do not provide a better education than government schools. On the other hand, they claim that attendance at independent schools confers unfair advantages, ir-

respective of family circumstances. Ever since the reworking of their evidence by James S. Coleman and his American research team, no serious scholar has maintained that schools make little or no difference to educational achievement, once family background is factored in. It does seem to be true, however, that in Australia before the 1960s, government schools overall performed at least as well as their non-government rivals, all socio-cultural factors being considered. At that time, there was greater educational transparency, especially in the literacy and numeracy testing carried out by the State education departments and in matriculation and other externally conducted examinations. From the 1970s onwards, educationists ensured a severe reduction in relevant information about educational standards in Australia, although there has been some reversal over the last decade, mainly because of initiatives of the Howard Coalition Government, together with both ALP and Liberal initiatives in several States.

Many parents are acutely aware of the large increase in the percentage of university places in prestigious faculties, such as medicine and law, secured by non-government schools. Although statistically significant, the overall change in the proportion of university places secured by government and non-government students is not so marked, since entrance standards have declined and numbers admitted greatly increased. In fact, many universities have vigorously publicized their affirmative action policies, whereby the weaker the academic performance of a school, the lower the entrance marks required by its students.

A second major consideration for many families deserting government schools is classroom disorder. It is in the hope of a safe and tranquil atmosphere for their children in work and play that families are most willing to pay fees. This is one of many issues on which teacher unions blow hot and cold. Often they deny that there has been any escalation of violence in government schools, but they also com-

plain of greater strain and stress than in the past. Early retirements and breakdowns among teachers are far more frequent than half a century ago—that is, at a time of teacher shortages and large classes.

During the 1980s, the radical Left captured teacher education and the curriculum committees of nearly every State. One key aim, substantially achieved, was to undermine traditional patriotic loyalties and traditional morality. Patriotism was undermined by portrayals of post-1788 Australia as unjust, racist and genocidal at home, and engaged abroad in wars on behalf of foreign imperialism. Mining and economic development were lampooned as degradation of the environment. Knowledge of modern Australia's roots in Western civilization was reduced and distorted. Traditional families were denounced as an illegitimate tool of social control: a conspiracy by men to suppress women, by the rich to subjugate the poor, and the white to exploit the black.

A relatively small number of moral saboteurs could exert immense influence, because large numbers of people began to regard moral values as merely personal and relative. As the former 'civil religion' faded, the values of the government schools were reduced to the lowest common factors of tolerance, consideration of others and non-violence. Although these are important virtues and form essential conditions for the rule of law, they can only be secured in the schools through properly enforced rules of conduct, and through what may broadly be termed the moral curriculum.

One ought not to exaggerate the differences between the systems: in most Australian States the same institutions train both government and non-government teachers and propagate current Political Correctness on a large range of issues with some success. In general, however, parental interest and pressure is keener in non-government fee-paying schools, and this helps to curtail, although not totally to stifle, radical antinomianism in them.

TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP REFORM?

Within pluralist and open societies there are inevitably far-reaching contests about educational priorities, since educational values are inherently contestable. It is on the basis of this essential contestability that the fundamental case for choice in education, especially parental or family choice, is founded. Well-informed and highly experienced persons rationally and defensibly adopt different, indeed incompatible, priorities in education. In this, education resembles politics.

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Many Australians are deeply dissatisfied with the current situation in our government schools. One possible solution is to try to create a uniform system markedly better than the present one by top-down legislation or regulations. This may not be impossible, and should be part of an overall policy, but it is very difficult to accomplish. The first reason is because diversities and incompatibilities of belief make moral vacuity an almost inevitable consequence of attempted uniformity. The second is that many government schoolteachers will sabotage attempted reforms with impunity. Just imagine the grimacing and adverse body language of many government schoolteachers as the flag of Australia is raised at school assembly. Curriculum committees will remain under the control of the very people whose influence has been so malignant in the past. Difficult as it would be, indeed an explora-

tion of new ground, we should aim at bottom-up reform that makes possible a diverse school system that reflects the diversity of the Australian people. This would be a multiculturalism that liberals could take to their hearts. How much better it would be if the parents and teachers of each school could determine whether or not they wished to fly and salute the Australian flag.

Voucher systems have the potential to expand educational choice without much increase in the costs of schooling. Some versions may be related to family income and others not. In the best schemes, the value of vouchers is likely to be higher for children with physical or other learning handicaps, and for rural and isolated children, because of the economies of scale that work in favour of urban centres. Critical to the success of voucher schemes is that they should be based on the needs of families, not of schools. Several experiments are likely to be needed before the best solution is found, but it is hard to think that any voucher system could combine high cost and poor outcomes to the extent we have at present.

Under any system, there seems bound to be wider choice for families in cities than in the countryside, and some groups will not be large enough to finance their own schools. However, many thousands of Australian families should have wider effective choice than at present and this expansion of choice would enhance the quality of education as a whole. Many government schoolteachers would, with suitable financial arrangements, be able to lease premises to open new schools. Some schools would collapse, as do some restaurants, shops and other enterprises, but that is part of the price of improvement.

Geoffrey Partington's books include The Australian Nation: Its British and Irish Roots, The Idea of an Historical Education, Teacher Education in England and Wales, and Teacher Education in New Zealand.

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References supporting the claims made in this article may be obtained from the IPA upon application.

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