

Education Agenda

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Latham Needs to Rediscover the Basics

Education is generally considered a plus for the ALP, and commentators during the recent election campaign reinforced the point that, while the Howard Government was strong on economic management, Latham's schools policy was a vote winner.

I beg to differ. Consider Labor's plan to take money from so-called 'elite schools'. Mark Latham argued that schools such as the Kings School were over-resourced and that parents sending their children to such schools should be further penalized for making the choice.

While one might think that Latham's commitment to the ladder of opportunity would mean supporting those parents who want the best for their children, his actions revealed that such talk was nothing but hollow rhetoric.

As suggested by the four archbishops, the ALP's schools policy was divisive and reminiscent of the bitter debates over State aid. Instead of accepting that parents have the right to choose where their children are educated, Latham's policy signalled a return to the politics of envy and the class war.

A second area where the ALP got it wrong was the way it aligned itself with the Australian Education Union (AEU). That the relationship is a close one is understandable: the AEU committed \$1.5 million to get rid of the Howard Government and campaigned in 28 marginal seats. Unfortunately for the ALP, the reality is that the education policies of the AEU are guaranteed to put off most parents. The union opposes competitive assessment, re-

fuses to hold teachers or schools accountable for performance and embraces a politically correct, dumbed down view of the curriculum.

Compare Latham's policy on schools with Prime Minister Howard's approach. Earlier this year the PM suggested that parents might be deserting government schools because they are too politically correct. After being attacked as reactionary and out of touch, the election proved the Prime Minister correct and in tune with the broader community. The reality is that the Coalition's education policy better reflects what parents want. That parents want flexibility and choice is also proven by the continued drift to non-government schools and the popularity, in NSW at least, of selective high schools.

Research carried out when writing *Why Our Schools are Failing* also proves that the Coalition's initiatives—such as performance pay for teachers, establishing Australian Technical Colleges and targeting funding at the local level—reflect overseas best practice.

If one examines those systems that outperform Australia in international tests, such as the Netherlands, Singapore and the Czech Republic, it is possible to identify the characteristics that promote success. Such systems:

- adopt a strong discipline-based approach to what is taught;
- hold schools accountable and have explicit rewards and sanctions for performance;
- have clear syllabuses linked to textbooks and teacher training;
- enforce greater time on task in the classroom; and
- have regular testing and recognize that not all students are the same.

In the Netherlands and Singapore, there are a range of certificates and types of schools based on the belief that students have different interests and abilities. This is unlike Australia where all students, with minor exceptions, are forced into the one educational strait-jacket.

If Australian schools are to be effective, then it is important that the education system breaks away from a top-heavy, bureaucratic model dominated by provider capture. It is no longer feasible that schools should be run simply for the benefit of bureaucrats and teacher unions.

Non-government schools in Australia, where principals have the power to hire and fire staff, demonstrate that success follows when teachers are employed who are committed to the culture of the school. It is also true that teachers perform better when they know that success will be rewarded.

Finally, we need to move on from the sterile debate about State aid to non-government schools. All schools have the right to exist and to be properly funded and parents should not be penalized because of the choices they make for their children.

In fact, on the basis of equity and social justice, overseas research related to vouchers should be considered because more parents would then be in a position to decide which school their children should attend.

Dr Kevin Donnelly is the author of Why Our Schools are Failing and, before the election, he worked for the Hon. Kevin Andrews, the federal Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations.

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