

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

80 The reader in search of detailed information should consult in the first place G. Partington, *What Do Our Children Know?*, AIPP, 1988, and the *National Report on Schooling 1989*, Australian Educational Council, Canberra, 1991, particularly pages 16–18.

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

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question left primary school with a measured reading age of, say, seven.

While the process of largely automatic advancement needs general consideration, then, we recommend as a matter of urgency that it be stopped at the year 7/8 point. No child should advance into secondary schooling without appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy. This can be expected to cause some planning difficulties at the primary level; these are unfortunate consequences, but should only last for a year or two while primary schools learn to detect and correct the problems at the appropriate level.

Curriculum

Following the emphasis on outcomes backwards into the system naturally raises important questions of educational content. This is an area—like virtually all others in this chapter—fraught with often factitious controversy. Perhaps the easiest and most convincing way of cutting through the controversy is quite simply to do what we have said—to follow the emphasis on outcomes backwards and structure curriculum accordingly.

Education should in a liberal democracy have one obvious and overriding outcome: to help each individual as far as possible in the pursuit of what we might call, for want of a better word, happiness. ('Help' implies an often forgotten limitation, but an important one, in that educational institutions in this matter of necessity act together with the individual's own capacities, and with other institutions, most notably the family. One of our most notable mistakes in recent years is to assume that schools are dispensers of panaceas.) This is in itself an endlessly debatable aim, but commonsense leads us to two more or less divisible goals: first, that the individual should emerge from school able to earn a living (including the ability to study further to earn a living)—thus looking after the material side of happiness—and, second and no less importantly, that the individual should know quite a lot about civil society and something of the complex web of rights and responsibilities binding society and individual. The second point has an important historical dimension and will not be achieved without exposure to our intellectual heritage in letters and sciences.

Education in these personal, social and cultural values is enormously important, not least because it has gone badly awry over the last 15 or 20 years. It should be a major focus for the attention of any

government. We will not deal with it here, for reasons of complexity and length. Here it is worth making two or three important points briefly. Students need to know something useful about the liberal democracy in which they live, and about the economic order which sustains it. That necessarily involves learning something about the liberal, western, Christian traditions which have brought us to this point. They need to know that government is not a machine which provides, at no cost, rights and entitlements; they need to know about their responsibilities to society and to other individuals. This will require some major changes in the 'social studies' currently taught in most schools, whose agenda is set by a new class substantially hostile not only to the traditions of western liberalism but also to the broad social coherences which bind the community as a whole.

As far as employability is concerned, the curriculum will be largely generated by the assessment of outcomes. (It should be noted here that a multiplicity of private assessment procedures will not unnecessarily complicate matters, as there will be very wide agreement as to desirable skills.) The aim is not to produce students who can, without further training, go straight into boilermaking or computer programming or cabinetmaking or nursing or (for that matter) ancient history or geology. The overall aim is rather to produce students who can undertake further learning, vocational or academic, on the job or in the classroom, with the best possible chance of success. (It is important to note that there is no contradiction between employability and education in civic values; rather, the reverse: many of the same qualities are required for both.)

Some of the major reports on vocational learning in Australia have to some extent given a misleading impression of what most employers need and, too, what most potential employees need. The basic requirement is not a particular vocational skill, but the skill of learning. Most employees are not, after all, going to spend their lives in one narrow craft, as their parents or grandparents might have done. They will be part of an economy whose most necessary attributes will be change and flexibility.

The implication of this is clear: what is most important, at even the least skilled level, is the ability to absorb and use information. This is why strongly developed literacy and numeracy skills are so important, and why those skills need to be reasserted as the core of any curriculum.

Having said that, enough is implied about the nature of the change to curriculum envisaged. (It might be worth noting, however,

that schools should not be too hypnotised by the prospect of a future dominated by technology. Some slight technological skills are worth acquiring early. Basic keyboarding skills are valuable; familiarity with computing logic is intellectually useful; some skill in word-processing will do no harm. But it is instructive to remember that all those visionary reports on the white-hot technological future are written by middle-aged consultants who taught themselves computing and wordprocessing in a few stumbling months. And while it is not entirely true that Japanese students, for instance, are forbidden to use calculators for mathematics, it is nevertheless true that excessive reliance on technology during learning is not always helpful to the formation of deeply-held conceptual skills.)

We thus envisage a well-designed core curriculum along the lines adopted by a number of recent studies.⁸²

There are one or two minor matters which need policy decisions in the curriculum area.

The first relates to curriculum structure. It needs to be said that the 'unit curriculum' structure does not seem to have worked well. There is no publicly-available assessment of its usefulness; but teachers on the whole seem to believe it to have been a failure. The principal problem seems to be that students lose sight of the continuously incremental nature of any learning. Barring any good arguments to the contrary, it should be heavily revised or, preferably, scrapped.

The second concerns the way in which school curricula are loaded up with extraneous material. Australia, perhaps more than most democracies, is much given to the major-government-report syndrome. Hardly a week goes by without the appearance of some bureaucratic or parliamentary report on some major social or economic problem. Such reports almost inevitably involve pious and well-meant recommendations that education is a vital part of solving any given problem. Schools tend increasingly to be loaded up with all sorts of issues, and teachers to be expected to cope. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs. All good democrats share the nineteenth-century optimism for the healing powers of education in improving society's lot. Somewhere along the line, however, we have got it wrong. What counts is the ability conferred by a good general education to think clearly, to inform oneself, to weigh issues, to put aside uninformed prejudice. That is not at all the same as being taught specific attitudes on specific social or economic issues. The

82 See now *Educating Australians*, IPA, Melbourne, 1992, especially Chapter 2.

problem is compounded when those attitudes are increasingly those of 'political correctness', reflecting minority and often undemocratic attitudes on such issues as 'social justice' and the environment. This is not only an imposition on teachers: it is an extremely unflattering reflection on their professionalism, in that it requires them to act as propagandists for a narrow range of political messages prescribed by someone else.

Teacher Recruitment

The community as a whole, and parents in particular, should be entitled to know that their schools are staffed by the best possible teachers: competent in their area, intellectually able, professional, committed and psychologically right for the job. We have no way of knowing whether or not this is the case. There are reasons, however, for believing that it is not.

The high turnover in teachers of all ages, for instance, is worrying; although, without research, it is not possible to isolate those who leave the Ministry because they are unsuited for teaching, from those who leave precisely because they are good teachers driven to leave by professional frustration.

One particularly disheartening, and less ambiguous, sign is the standard of new entrants to teaching. We should be able to expect that our teachers are not significantly less able than, for instance, our lawyers or architects or engineers. That clearly is not so: the education faculties' intake is, in fact, consistently at the bottom end of the overall university intake range. That is, of course, only a cut-off point, and some students will be substantially above it. The fact remains, however, that prospective teachers being inducted into universities in Western Australia are on the whole at the lowest end of the range of entrants into tertiary education.

This is a situation open to immediate remedy, at least in theory. There is nothing to stop the Ministry directly (by hiring policy) or indirectly (through the State government's legislative power) specifying a higher cut-off point. That might be resisted on the grounds that education faculties might be quite suddenly without an economic number of students; but that is a problem only to those who believe that administrative convenience is a higher priority than educational standards. It might also be resisted on the grounds that the supply of teachers will drop. Practically speaking that is not much of a problem in the present environment: outside mathematics

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and physics, teachers are in oversupply. It might also induce the Ministry to think a little harder about how to retain good teachers. But it would at best be a partial and short-term solution; more satisfying solutions need to be sought.

Teacher recruitment is, in fact, a haphazard and wasteful process. There is, on the whole, less rigour in the process than, say, in selecting for an officer—even a private—in the army, let alone in becoming a junior business executive or an equivalent-ranking public servant. Think of a basic standard recruitment. The employer establishes the need for a new employee, lays down job specifications, advertises, screens written applications, conducts initial interviews, short-lists, conducts final interviews, and—only then—appoints. This is not mindless routine: it is a way (which can be elaborated considerably) of ensuring as far as possible that the successful applicant will be the best offering, that the match between job and employee is as close as possible, and that the firm's resources are wasted as little as possible. Well done, it has a high success rate. It is odd, therefore, that virtually none of this happens in the recruitment of public sector teachers (and it is odder still, surely, that no-one thinks it odd).

This situation must be changed: the waste and mismatching should not be tolerated.

In the present regime, where the Ministry effectively has complete control over recruitment, a filter needs to be imposed at the transition point between the university and the Ministry's ranks, to impose some rudimentary standards of competence and aptitude. A further improvement would be the imposition of a finer filter at the transition from Ministry to school. That involves some changes to school autonomy that will be discussed below.

It must be said, however, that in addition to standard recruiting methods, better assessment procedures are available. In the US there have been extremely promising returns from the use of the Haberman techniques of screening teacher intake, which apparently offer high rates of predictability for teacher success.⁸³ It is important that these be evaluated in an Australian context by properly-conducted pilot programmes.

This raises in turn the question of what sort of intake we should be looking at in order to get the best teachers into the profession.

83 See, in particular, IPA Current Issues, *Educating the Educators*, IPA Education Policy Unit, 1991, pages 2–8.

There are in fact many individuals outside the standard stream who would make good teachers; secondary teachers in particular. There are many science or commerce or arts graduates who would willingly change vocation if there were a relatively cheap means of entry into teaching. This pool of potential teachers has several advantages over the conventional intake: not least of these are maturity, and familiarity with a profession and culture other than teaching. (The last factor is by no means unimportant.) Again, US experience with 'interning' as a means of training shows the way; and again we need to test this as soon as practicable.⁸⁴

This once again raises questions as to the sorts of degrees undertaken by the conventional stream of teacher graduates. Increasingly, teachers start their professional life with degrees in education; with degrees at least half of whose content is educational theory and psychology. This is of doubtful value. At secondary level in particular what matters most is depth of competence in a chosen subject area. To the extent that university faculties of education offer anything of academic rigour, it is of most value to those who wish to teach education in universities. Its value to ordinary teachers is at best unproven. We would, on the whole, be better off with the past system of degree-plus-teaching diploma, if not with the interning model, indeed.

Teacher Performance

Taking on good teachers is, of course, only one half of the problem: keeping them is the other. Although this has been a problem for some years now, it is only in the last year that the Ministry has taken substantive steps to tackle it. Two administrative decisions taken late in 1991 will be useful.

The first was to acknowledge length of service as an acceptable alternative to full certification. A teacher with a three-year degree and 15 years' experience, for instance, will now fall into the same category, for purposes of pay and promotion, as one with a four-year degree. That is useful in itself; it is perhaps more significant as an acknowledgement (much overdue) that the acquisition of degrees is not in itself the only, or even the most useful, measure of a teacher's ability. In terms of the arguments already put here, it certainly will

⁸⁴ See, again, *Educating Australians*, *op. cit.*, pages 23–24.

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open up the way to more imaginative and productive approaches to the retention and reward of good teachers.

The second was the introduction (on a small scale) of categories of 'key teachers' and 'advanced skills teachers', recognised by salary increments; again, a worthwhile development, although, again, more for the initiatives that it makes possible than for its own sake. For the first time, committed teachers have an alternative to the promotion ladder in terms of reward and recognition.

The way in which these two measures were implemented is in some ways more interesting than the measures themselves. It is worth observing, to begin, that the Ministry's hand was to a considerable extent forced by developments in other States and at the national level. More significant is the fact that the announcement in the *Education Circular* took the form of an agreement between the Union and the Ministry. The parallel with private enterprise is instructive: even in a heavily unionised industry, where observance of awards might be a governing principle, these matters would largely be a matter of managerial initiative. The Ministry should surely have been able to take the initiative itself. Or should it? In a better system the initiative would rest at the school level. That suggestion is reinforced when one reads, in subsequent issues of the *Circular*, the details of the application and implementation procedures, which are immensely bureaucratic.

We need to find better ways of rewarding competence and commitment. There have, of course, been numerous programmes overseas involving such concepts as merit pay and, more crudely, payment by results. Their success is difficult to assess. On the whole they seem to work best with that relatively small group of secondary teachers who concentrate on areas of academic excellence. They suffer, too, from the defect of administrative complexity: indeed the bureaucratic obstacles are probably insuperable. Better solutions lie in devolving this sort of responsibility to the school level. There is already in existence a form of teacher assessment in schools. It can be relatively easily refined. Principals could then be given marginal supplements to encourage the retention by reward of their better teachers.

In looking at better management of careers for teachers it will also be necessary to look at the archaic distinctions still perpetuated in the Ministry. The distinction, for instance, between permanent and temporary teachers is quite irrelevant to merit. It should be abolished. Instead, all teachers need to be hired on a medium-term (say, five

year) contract basis. Problems such as the staffing of country schools or 'difficult' schools can then be dealt with by appropriate contract design. Again, however, this is not necessarily, or at least entirely, a matter for the Ministry: as much as possible of the contractual arrangements should be devolved to the level of school and principal. The Ministry need have no more than the role of a central expediting agency.

In the context of this section, the recommendations of our chapter on Industrial Relations are, of course, crucial.

Administration and Devolution

In the preceding paragraphs we have identified some of the problems associated with rewarding and promoting teachers. Those problems become acute when we look at the top end of the promotion scale. From the point of view of teachers, there is a ladder of promotion from trainee teacher, to probationer, to permanent teacher, to teacher in charge of a small subject department within a school, to deputy principal, to principal. But there is a mirror image of that ladder, from the point of view of administration (or 'command structure'), starting with the chief executive and working down to the school level. When we superimpose one structure on the other, we begin to understand the problem better. It focuses on the level of principal.

We can put it this way: is a school principal meant to be a good teacher or a good administrator?

Those even slightly familiar with our schools will realise that the answer is fairly simple: in running schools—schools which may have say 1500 pupils, 110 teaching staff, administrative and services staff, and a budget to match—we need capacities which are more managerial than educational. Some teachers have those capacities, either by intuition or by acquisition, formal or informal. Others do not. As before, it is relatively easy, in terms of managerial recruitment techniques, to identify the right individuals. It is important that the appointment of principals be rationalised, therefore, along appropriate managerial lines. It goes without saying that an important part of the managerial specifications will be a good understanding of education, of teaching, and of the educational mission. And it is as likely as not that the pool of senior teachers will include enough managerial talent to fill the positions. What is important is to break down the system of promotion by joining the queue.

Reform and Recovery

This is of particular importance if the process of devolution is to continue. Devolution has been fashionable in State education systems for some time now. In Western Australia it has been put into practice in various ways, with doubtful success. Most principals and senior teachers view the results as being largely the transfer of administrative costs to schools without commensurate financial freedom. This is, given the bureaucratic rationale (discussed in greater detail below), largely to be expected. It may well be, in fact, that within the prevailing bureaucratic ethos in the Ministry we have reached the limits of devolutionary change.

A more exhaustive examination of the system may contradict this; at least, a new administration may be able to push the process further. It would certainly be valuable to experiment in this direction in some of the ways already indicated: leaving recruitment and promotion, for instance, to the school, giving schools block grants within which they could genuinely determine spending priorities, giving schools the ability to go outside the system for the provision of services, and so on.

A necessary part of such a move toward genuine devolution, toward greater independence, would be the total and permanent abolition of school zoning. (New South Wales is showing the way here.) It is in the end more or less unrealistic to expect principals to manage better, teachers to teach better, and schools to work better, if they cannot show their improvement by genuinely succeeding. One important measure of success—largely denied by the present arrangements—would be to attract pupils. Zoning, formal or informal, stops that.

Schools: An Alternative Future

At this point it is worth stopping to reconsider what has so far been proposed. To summarise, we have recommended

- focusing education policy on outputs rather than inputs; introducing routine standards testing at years 3, 7 and 10;
- redesigning certification to match the needs of consumers as far as possible;
- halting automatic student advancement, particularly from primary to secondary schooling;
- adopting a sensible core curriculum;
- raising standards of entry to teacher training;

better recruitment procedures and alternative methods of training;

- school-based rewards for teacher competence;
- employment by contract negotiated at school level;
- greater emphasis on management skills for principals; and
- significant devolution of management to schools.

(It may also be worth pointing out what we have *not* recommended: that is, any of the customary range of solutions which involve further emphasis and expenditure on the usual range of inputs.)

That is a comprehensive agenda for reform. In the context of education practice in comparable nations it is not, item by item, radical. It is certainly broader than most agendas, and, if seriously implemented, would stand a reasonable chance of raising our educational practices to somewhere near international best standards. It would be of immediate benefit to students, families and (not least) teachers; the longer-term benefits to the economy and to society would be considerable.

It suffers, however, from two disadvantages. First, it is fragmented, even though all the fragments would tend to form a coherent whole. Second, it relies for its implementation on the existing bureaucracy. Bureaucrats are intelligent professional people, who maximise their own utility just as much as the rest of us. They also—particularly in areas like health, education and welfare—tend to have their own agendas. It is very difficult to effect reforms which diminish bureaucratic control over the delivery of services. It is very difficult to persuade bureaucrats that their own values are not absolute. Perhaps most importantly, in the real circumstances of the Western Australian Ministry, we may have reached the limit of the schools system to absorb large quantities of policy changes administered in a bureaucratic fashion. The amount of unwillingness and cynicism now prevailing at school level is not to be underestimated. Moreover, the nature of the reforms we have suggested is antipathetic to the bureaucratic ethos. After all, if X has always to answer to Y, one step up, and Y to Z, another step up, X will naturally be unwilling to take responsibility for some quasi-autonomous decision which can be overruled by Y, who may be nervous, in turn, about Z's reaction. Similarly, Z will be unwilling to delegate significant power or autonomy to Y, and Y in turn to X.

It may be that what we are looking for is a single large reform which would of itself bring into play all the separate small reforms

we have advocated. It seems likely that just such a major reform is available.

We could construct such a reformed system by thinking back in terms of the monopoly model early in this chapter. What we would attempt to do would be to construct an alternative which was driven not by supply but by demand. After all, what we have proposed so far is, when we stop to think about it, a model put together of elements designed to achieve the sorts of desirable outcomes that a demand-based model would automatically generate. It is a case of trying to mimic the workings of a market. There is in fact such a model to hand, although the inspiration for its design is largely empirical. We refer to the reform suggested in the landmark study by John Chubb and Terry Moe in their book, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, published by The Brookings Institution in Washington three years ago. (It may be relevant to observe that the Brookings Institution would be regarded in America as being to the left of centre in political terms, or at least more sympathetic to the sensible Democratic end of the political spectrum.)

Chubb and Moe had a luxury afforded no writer on Australian educational policy: very large quantities of very good data, across time, on the performance of American students, teachers and schools. They searched the data to attempt to isolate the determining factors in student achievement; not in itself a startlingly new exercise.

Many of their findings are predictable. Student aptitude and family background are already well-known factors. The problem for policymakers, of course, is that knowing this is much the same as knowing nothing, since realistically aptitude and background are beyond our influence.

Similarly, Chubb and Moe looked for significant factors in the relationship between schools and achievement. Their findings are much what one would expect from research, particularly over the last decade or so, in the area of 'effective schools'. '[E]ffective schools have the kind of organizational characteristics that the mainstream literature would lead one to expect: strong leadership, clear and ambitious goals, strong academic programs, teacher professionalism, shared influence, and staff harmony, among other things....'⁸⁵

This is not only 'mainstream'; it is also what common sense would propose.

85 Chubb and Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, pages 186–7.

Many of the individual items in the effective schools checklist are already promoted on one or more of the various reform agendas currently promoted in the US—even, to a much more limited extent, in Australia. Chubb and Moe, while allowing for improvements at the margin, insist, however, that the operation of the conventional policy implementation mechanisms will not deliver satisfying and durable improvements. In terms of our own scepticism about the bureaucratic nature of schools management, this is an argument easy to accept. The strength of the Chubb and Moe argument is that they offer a convincing analysis of the institutional problems, and then back it up with their findings from the data. It enables them to assert with more than usual conviction that ‘...the most important prerequisite for the emergence of effective school characteristics is school autonomy, especially from external bureaucratic influence.’⁸⁶

Two cautionary observations are in order at this point. The first is that the preceding paragraphs are a very brief summary of a long book, a book dense with statistical detail and with reasoned argument. The second is that the arguments are not entirely applicable to Australian conditions: in some ways American education is (perhaps surprisingly) *more* bureaucratic than Australian, at least insofar as local government there plays a role in education not paralleled in Australia; and local politics, particularly at the district board level, adds a degree of institutional complexity not usually present in Australia. On balance, these factors only *modify* the applicability of the authors’ conclusions: the gross similarities between the two systems are such that their findings remain valid for our circumstances.

The same fairly moderate qualifications apply to the policy solutions put forward by Moe and Chubb. They recommend, in brief, a system whereby all public schools acquire *real* autonomy through the funding arrangements; a system under which funding is attached to the student, and schools compete through diverse excellence for students. The details are applicable only to the American context, but the principles can be directly applied to Australia.

Rather than repeat the Brookings Institution’s recommended system here, and then modify it for local circumstances, we offer a short description of the elements which would have to be considered in applying a similar proposal to the circumstances of Western Australia.

Four basic elements are necessary:

86 *Ibid.*, page 23.

