

A need for autonomy, accountability and choice SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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The Rudd government scored just 43 out of 100 in the first Educational Transformations report card on progress in the "education revolution" released last week. Using 10 criteria generated in a five-year study of school reform around the world, as reported in *Why Not The Best Schools?**, only progress with the national curriculum received a good score (8 out of 10). The three lowest scores were for outdated ideology (2), school autonomy (2) and innovative governance (1).

This led us to conclude that Australia may end up with one of the most centralised, bureaucratically organised systems of education in the world. Most of what has been achieved to date has simply melded state and territory bureaucracies into a single framework of decision-making that may ultimately have no impact on how students learn. Five years from now ministers will continue to claim or deny credit for marginal changes in student achievement, with gaps between high and low-performing students as wide as ever.

In the final analysis, the international research evidence reveals that there are two key requirements to raise standards and ensure that all students achieve success. First, attract, prepare, select, support, reward and keep the best people in the profession. Second, provide schools with a relatively high degree of autonomy, especially in selecting and matching staff to educational priorities at the local level. The evidence is now indisputable that a balance of autonomy, accountability and choice must be achieved. The only reason for employing non-school-based personnel is to determine the framework of curriculum, standards and accountabilities and to provide unrelenting support for schools.

Only Victoria has had an upward trajectory in school autonomy over the past three decades. Since publication of *The Self-Managing School* in 1986, most other states have promised and then reneged on school autonomy, usually in the face of union opposition or when the bureaucracy prematurely backed off when a minority of schools had difficulty in implementation. There is inertia at all levels. A report describing how the nation could move forward on school autonomy was on Julia Gillard's desk the day she became Education Minister in late 2007 but she did not release it until October 2009. It is time that autonomy became the "default position" in school governance.

The most powerful statement I have read this year on teaching standards and governance was made by Noel Pearson in the Quarterly Essay when he asserted: "The problem is the ideology-producers in the academies, and the ideology-upholders in educational bureaucracies." He is careful to distinguish between "frontline educators and those responsible for generating and upholding reigning ideologies". His view that "frontline educators are highly sensitive to the needs of children, and if they can see how these needs can be better met, they will be attentive to them" accords with my own observations in working with hundreds of schools across the nation in recent years.

The report of the Institute of Public Affairs on the growth of bureaucracies while enrolments in government schools have declined and student achievement has flat-lined reinforces the case for dramatic reductions in the size of state and territory bureaucracies. The balance should be shifted to favour regionally based support services, of which there are world-class examples around the nation.

Australia has few of the innovative approaches to governance now non-negotiable in the United States. Henceforth, federal funds will not flow to US states unless they remove barriers to the formation of charter schools - no-fee, publicly funded, privately supported, independently operated, flexibly organised schools - that are so effective and popular with parents in disadvantaged settings. Only the Cape York Aboriginal Academy inspired by Noel Pearson to open in 2010 comes close.

Let's hope the Rudd government, through its national partnerships with states and territories, can lift its score and get a passing grade when we release our second report in late 2010.

Why Not The Best Schools? Brian Caldwell and Jessica Harris, ACER Press. Brian Caldwell is managing director of Educational Transformations and a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne.