

A vision from the past

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April 28, 2008

NOW that the dust has settled, what can schools expect from the Australia 2020 Summit? I did not apply to attend but was pleased to receive an invitation, given my interest in the transformation of schools.

I had previously questioned whether Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his deputy, Julia Gillard, understood the significance of an "education revolution", which got off to a modest start with the promise of computer access for all secondary students. Smart schools began this switch more than a decade ago.

I was placed in the productivity stream that was given the task of forming "big ideas" on education, skills, training, science and innovation. I have been concerned for some time that there are weak linkages between education, economy and society, and the productivity stream provided an opportunity to make proposals to achieve an alignment.

So how did the process and the outcomes stack up against expectations for an education revolution? On the positive side, the "big ideas" are both coherent and comprehensive. It was a rare opportunity for people from education, business and a range of community-based organisations to share their ideas.

On the negative side, I cannot identify a single significant idea that has not been canvassed in the past decade, including those put forward by the prime minister, premiers and ministers.

Ms Gillard's proposal for partnerships between the top 100 companies and secondary schools is a re-statement of a more expansive proposal by her predecessor, Julie Bishop. Queensland Premier Anna Bligh's call for a national curriculum has already been embraced. The same proposal by Ms Bishop had been rejected by most of her state counterparts.

Mr Rudd's proposal for one-stop early learning support is consistent with the long-standing call for a "full-service" approach.

There was endorsement of the existing consensus on attracting the best people to the profession, and a renewed call to improve science and maths education by connecting scientists to teachers.

Mr Rudd joined our discussions at the moment I was highlighting Finland's success in ensuring that every child who falls behind is given immediate expert support to catch up quickly. It is a strategy that should be adopted here to ensure that the gap between high and low-performing students is as narrow as it is in Finland.

I was impressed with the Prime Minister's immediate grasp of the issues and his understanding of the magnitude of Finland's transformation. As a diplomat in Sweden in the early 1980s, he had visited Finland and observed the former parlous state of its schools. He was well aware of the commitment that country later made to early learning and to building the intellectual capital of the profession.

By far the boldest idea on education was presented in Melbourne, away from the summit, by Victoria's education minister, Bronwyn Pike, who revealed her intention to explore a partnership of government and Catholic schools, accurately described by The Age as "a potentially radical reorganisation of education in Australia".

The possibility has an interesting provenance, having been proposed by the Education Foundation (2005) and the Menzies Research Centre (2002).

It is time for consensus on these and other ideas that surfaced at and around the summit. There is every possibility of a real revolution when synergy is achieved. However, we will be in for a shock if we cannot make progress in the next five years; we can't wait for 2020.

We can be sure that other countries that do a better job of integrating education, economy and society will have gone far further, far sooner.

LINKS

<http://www.australia2020.gov.au/report/index/cfm>

THREE SUMMITEERS GIVE THEIR VIEW

Angelo Gavrielatos federal president, Australian Education Union

"Any exercise aimed at broadening participation and community engagement in public policy formation is by definition very positive and worthwhile. In that respect the summit gets a tick. The one idea that came into focus emerged in the economy stream, which called for a dramatic investment of additional funding into education. If that can be fulfilled, there will be without a doubt an improvement in educational outcomes in this nation."

Professor Geoff Masters chief executive officer, Australian Council for Educational Research

"For me, the most significant theme was the need to reform the Australian federation. Running through all discussions was a recognition that unnecessary differences and duplication across the states are now impeding national progress. The summit sub-stream discussing early childhood and school education identified the need for more seamless, national approaches to our most pressing educational challenges. Among the new ideas that I liked was the suggestion that a person be able to reduce their HECS debt through community service."

Professor Elizabeth Harman, vice-chancellor Victoria University

"The summit had value on many levels. The messages for education in the productivity section are a licence for the Deputy PM, federal and state governments to shape an education system that works better for everyone. I was part of the group that discussed the post-school system of universities, TAFEs and private colleges. There was a shared view that the system is not joined up. It needs to let people 'dip in and out'. Too many people are missing out altogether. And importantly, employers and educators do not work well together. The big message for me was that work will go on and has been made easier by the networking we were all able to do."

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This story was found at:
<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/04/26/1208743265909.html>