

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN THE SELF-TRANSFORMING SCHOOL

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In this presentation I draw on leadership and governance themes in my recently-published book with Jim Spinks entitled *The Self-Transforming School* (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013). The book spans fifty years, looking back to our first book in 1988 entitled *The Self-Managing School* (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988), which advocated evidence-based innovative approaches that are now accepted as preferred practice, before offering a prognosis for leadership in the future, to 2038.

We provide evidence to support the view that all schools in all settings can secure success for all students in an era where society and the economy are changing constantly and dramatically. We describe a school that has achieved or is on the way to achieving this outcome as a 'self-transforming school'. I acknowledge that (1) schools are often at different stages of self-transformation and (2) self-transformation requires a high level of professionalism.

It may be helpful to declare at the outset that in looking to the future it is not possible to specify particular developments that will occur at particular points in time, either globally or locally. It is possible, however, to describe the features of broad trends, as we did in *Leading the Self-Managing School* (Caldwell and Spinks, 1992: 7-8). We used the concept of 'mega-trend', coined by John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene (Naisbitt 1982; Naisbitt and Arburdene 1990) in the 1980s, to describe the broad trends in school education that were emerging in many countries in the 1990s. We included the following for schools and most of these have come to pass:

1. There will be a powerful but sharply focused role for central authorities, especially in respect to formulating goals, setting priorities, and building frameworks for accountability.
2. National and global considerations will become increasingly important, especially in respect to curriculum and an education system that is responsive to national needs within a global economy.
3. Within centrally determined frameworks, government [public] schools will become largely self-managing, and distinctions between government and non-government [private] schools will narrow.
4. There will be unparalleled concern for the provision of a quality education for each individual.
5. There will be a dispersion of the educative function, with telecommunications and computer technology ensuring that much learning that currently occurs in schools or in institutions of higher education will occur at home and in the workplace.
6. The basics of education will be expanded to include problem-solving, creativity and a capacity for life-long learning and re-learning.
7. There will be an expanded role for the arts and spirituality, defined broadly in each instance; there will be a high level of 'connectedness' in the curriculum.
8. Women will claim their place among the ranks of leaders in education, including those at the most senior levels.
9. The parent and community role in education will be claimed or reclaimed.

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10. There will be unparalleled concern for service by those who are required or have the opportunity to support the work of schools.

Definitions and related concepts

A *self-managing school* is one to which there has been decentralised a significant amount of authority and responsibility to make decisions on the allocation of resources within a centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities. Resources are defined broadly to include staff, services and infrastructure, each of which will typically entail the allocation of funds to reflect local priorities. A self-managing school has a high level of, but not complete autonomy, given the centrally-determined framework.

Whereas a capacity for self-management is chiefly concerned with process, self-transformation is intended to shift the focus to outcomes. A *self-transforming school* achieves or is well on its way to achieving significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all of its students regardless of the setting.

The self-transforming school includes but goes beyond the concept of the *self-improving school*. David Hargreaves has written a series of 'think pieces' for the National College for School Leadership in England organised around the idea of a 'self-improving school system' (SISS). He described how school improvement has 'come to be defined in terms of the processes of intervention in schools that are deemed, by whatever measure, to be underperforming' (Hargreaves, 2010: 4). He argued that a SISS, once established:

reduces the need for extensive, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality, the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context, with out-of-school courses not tailored to individual professional needs, and external, last-ditch interventions to remedy schools in difficulties, all of which are very costly and often only partially successful. (Hargreaves, 2010: 23)

Hargreaves considers a capacity for self-management to be a pre-requisite for self-improvement. However, limiting the approach to improvement does not address the need for transformation when one considers what is occurring in many nations. Improvement occurs within current approaches to schooling; transformation seeks success for all in what are certain to be dramatically different approaches to schooling in the years ahead.

In the statement cited above, Hargreaves captured some important features of what may be defined as a *command-and-control* approach ('extensive, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality, the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context'). A related practice is when schools are provided with inducements to accept funds to implement programs determined at a system level in what is basically a *carrot-and-stick* approach. Carrot-and-stick is also an apt descriptor of practice when a higher level of government with more resources provides funds to a lower level of government with fewer resources and requires acceptance by the latter of strict terms and conditions that are not necessarily those that would have been accepted if there was no such dependence.

Denis Higgins, former Director of Education in the Catholic Education Office Sandhurst (Australia) shifted the focus from self-management to *self-leadership* in a powerful reflection on his career in Catholic education:

No system should talk of 'self-managed' schools. The notion is to have 'self-led' schools, and the system can do its schools its greatest favours by encouraging and enabling local schools/settings to take responsibility for all of

the big decisions, and to help out by providing the resources and support for that to happen. (Higgins 2011: 32)

Higgins went on to observe that ‘schools become dependent on the system, and this is a weakness. Schools can become independent of the system and this is also a weakness’.

An explanatory model

In *The Self-Transforming School* we describe a model which explains how schools are being constrained in their efforts to be self-transforming schools, even to the point of flat-lining or regressing as far as student achievement is concerned.

The starting point in the development of an explanatory model was the identification of three dimensions, each of which provides a continuum on which schools, systems or whole nations may differ. One is the extent of school *autonomy*. While there are sound reasons for not using the concept of autonomy, it is employed here because of its wide use. It refers to the extent to which a school has the authority and responsibility to make decisions within a centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities. Schools may have relatively low or relatively high levels of autonomy.

The second dimension is the extent of *control* over schools, which may be relatively tight or relatively loose. While there is a relationship between autonomy and control, it is possible for an authority to exercise relatively tight control over schools on important matters while they may have a high level of autonomy on others. The third dimension is the *outlook* of the school or system, which may be relatively closed or relatively open, referring to the extent to which it is open to outside ideas and influences.

There are eight ways of classifying schools or system of schools on these dimensions, as illustrated in Table 1, and these are designated as types. Before explaining these it is important to note that they are broad classifications and there may be different ways of classifying a school or system of schools for different functions. Expressed another way, they may have the characteristics of more than one type.

Table 1: Schools and systems of schools classified by type according to autonomy, control and outlook

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	H
Control	H	H	L	L	H	H	L	L
Outlook	C	O	C	O	C	O	C	O

Type 1: Low autonomy, high control, closed outlook In Type 1, schools have minimal authority and responsibility to make decisions in important matters and the system or other authority exerts tight control over their operations. The school is generally impervious to developments in its external environment. Type 1 may be a preferred approach if a sense of coherence and order is required to raise standards, especially

if leaders have high levels of expertise. This is a classic command-and-control approach but ultimately unsustainable in a time of complexity and change.

Type 2: Low autonomy, high control, open outlook For Type 2, schools have minimal authority and responsibility to make decisions in important matters and the system or other authority exerts strong control over their operations. The school is open to new ideas from its external environment. Type 2 is a preferred approach if a sense of order and coherence is required to raise standards and leaders have a capacity to draw ideas from within and outside in times of complexity and change. While still command-and-control, Type 2 is likely to be more sustainable than Type 1.

Type 3: Low autonomy, low control, closed outlook Type 3 is likely to be a fragmented school or system of schools, making slow progress in building a sense of order and coherence. It does not seek ideas from outside. Things do not augur well for such a school or system.

Type 4: Low autonomy, low control, open outlook Prospects for the school or system are likely to be better under Type 4 than for Type 3 because, while leaders are open to new ideas, they continue to exert minimal control over staff and schools that have limited capacity to make decisions that may improve their lot.

Type 5: High autonomy, high control, closed outlook Type 5 involves a higher level of autonomy than Type 4, and a relatively high level of control may be appropriate where there is a need for a stronger sense of coherence and order. There is an opportunity for schools to make decisions that reflect their particular mix of needs and priorities. However, a closed outlook suggests that leaders are shielding themselves from learning about a better way to do things.

Type 6: High autonomy, high control, open outlook Type 6 may be more effective and sustainable than Type 5 if leaders are open to ideas from outside. The danger is maintaining elements of command-and-control for longer than necessary.

Type 7: High autonomy, low control, closed outlook Type 6 provides an opportunity to move from self-management to self-transformation as the chains of an excessive command-and-control approach are cast aside and schools have the capacity to take charge of their operations. The approach will be constrained to the extent that schools are shielded from ideas from outside.

Type 8: High autonomy, low control, open outlook Type 8 maximises the opportunity for self-transformation if schools have the capacity to take charge. Schools are open to developments from outside.

It is important to stress that these classifications are silent as far as capacities and outcomes are concerned. Whether schools are effective depends on their capacities and the kinds of support they receive.

A major source of concern is the extent to which a command-and-control approach is unnecessarily constraining the efforts of self-managing schools, or has been maintained if not strengthened beyond what is necessary to achieve coherence in a system that is focusing its efforts on improvement. An inappropriate 'chaining' of self-managing schools is illustrated in Table 2.

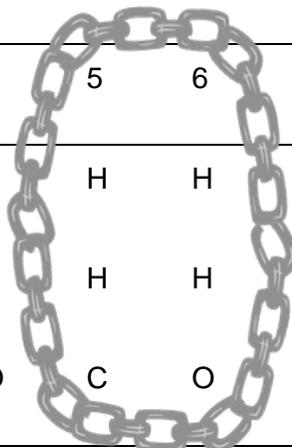
The appropriate response under these circumstances is to break the chain, as illustrated in Table 3. It is important to stress that the chain does not entirely disappear for it is necessary to ensure transparency and accountability where funds are concerned. This 'unchaining' provides a window of opportunity, as it were, for many schools to move from self-management to self-transformation.

Houle and Cobb (2011) declared that 2010-2020 should be the decade of transformation in education. In describing the realities of exponential developments in

technology and how these may apply to schools, they used imagery that is consistent with the model in stating that ‘we need to break out of the box entirely’ (Houle and Cobb, 2011: 71).

Table 2: Chaining the self-managing school

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	H
Control	H	H	L	L	H	H	L	L
Outlook	C	O	C	O	C	O	C	O

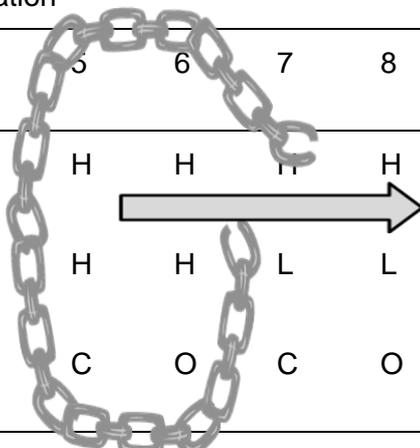


Gonski and the role of the Federal Government

I attended the launch of the report of the Review of Funding for Schooling, generally known as the Gonski Report, and my first reaction after a close reading during the lock-up and days following was 'let's get on with it'. At its heart lay the proposal for a shift to needs-based funding of schools. I know that such an approach can be designed and implemented. Victoria has had one for nearly two decades. I chaired the initial working group that recommended the formula for government schools. There is constant review and regular update to meet the changing circumstances of schools.

Table 3: From self-management to self-transformation

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Autonomy	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	H
Control	H	H	L	L	H	H	L	L
Outlook	C	O	C	O	C	O	C	O



With the assurance that no school would lose funds and, with two levels of government involved, along with organisations representing the interests of non-government schools, the challenge is how to commit funds over the next quadrennium and beyond when federal debt is high and the fiscal outlook in some states is uncertain if not shaky. Whether or not the additional funding would help lift Australia to the top tier of nations as far as outcomes are concerned depends on how the money is spent. It is likely that the endless debates about the roles of the two levels of government in school education will continue.

There is a way forward that will help resolve the issue and free up hundreds of millions of dollars each year to support the transformation of schools. Interestingly, the Gonski Report provided a clue to strategies that may lead to one of the most constructive if not momentous changes in the funding of schools in recent times.

Recommendation 24 of the Gonski Report raised the possibility that agreement on needs-based funding might enable the integration of short term often unsustainable small grants handed out by the federal government each year, many with tiresome paperwork and debatable impact.

In my view this re-direction is desirable and eminently feasible. Funds should be delivered directly to schools wherever possible. If this is accomplished why then will we need a federal minister for schools and a large federal bureaucracy to continue a command-and-control approach, implemented through a classic power-coercive model of change?

Why not follow the lead of a comparable country like Canada where there is no federal apparatus in education; indeed its constitution forbids it except for the education of indigenous / First Nation students, children of armed services personnel, and those in prisons? It works. Canada outperforms Australia on all international tests of student achievement, with two of its provinces (Alberta and Ontario) coming in just behind Finland in student outcomes. National policies, priorities and areas of cooperation are determined by a Council of Ministers that has worked well for decades. Fiscal equalisation across the country and needs-based funding in the provinces and territories ensure the workability of the scheme. I am familiar with the approach having worked in Canada for 13 years during which time I researched the pioneering approach to needs-based funding in Edmonton, Alberta.

Australia can follow the lead of Canada but it may take several terms of a federal government to get there. Some arrangements can continue, for example, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). They are generally working well and there appears to be bi-partisan support across the nation. A third body along the lines of a School Funding Agency should be established to monitor and update the needs-based funding mechanism. A copy of my open letter to the incoming prime minister published in *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* on August 16 is attached.

Despite the rhetoric of a higher level of autonomy for schools, for which there is bi-partisan agreement, it is my view that progressively, for many years, and for governments of different persuasion, there has been what amounts to a command-and-control approach from successive federal governments and this has served to chain the self-managing school. This is not a party-political view.

Leadership for the self-transforming school for the next 25 years

What are the implication and possibilities for leadership in the self-transforming school in the years ahead?

1. Leadership in learning The logic of self-management has settled in recent times, with the primary intention agreed to be the improvement of outcomes for students. Each school contains a unique mix of student needs, interests, aptitudes, ambitions and passions and is situated in a unique community. A deep capacity for local decision-making is necessary to ensure there is an optimal match of resources to strategies that will ensure the best possible outcomes for students, with resources defined broadly to include curriculum, pedagogy, professional expertise, community support, technology and money. There are commonalities among schools across a nation, and common values and common approaches may call for common frameworks, but these do not detract from or over-ride the uniqueness of each school.

Writing in *Education Nation: Six Leading Edges of Innovation in our Schools*, Milton Chen (2010) described six 'leading edges' that are giving shape to the transformation of learning: thinking, curriculum, technology, time / place, co-teaching and youth. For

the last of these, for example, Chen described how today's students 'are marching through our schools, carrying a transformational change in their pockets in the form of powerful handheld devices. Yet this generation, 95 percent of the stakeholders in education and the ones who stand the most to lose from a poor education, are often left out of the conversation about how to change it' (Chen, 2010: 213).

Figure 2 illustrates the continuum of possibilities for each of the leading edges. How far a school or classroom or learning experience has moved along the continuum for each of the leading edges may be mapped, as illustrated in the three lines that connect each continuum. The dotted line at the left illustrates the traditional classroom in the traditional school. There is only one way knowledge is transmitted (either / or), the curriculum is traditional and largely discipline-based, few students and probably few teachers are empowered with current technology, formal learning occurs in the classroom and is delivered by the teacher alone, and students are largely passive recipients in the process, with teachers doing all the work.

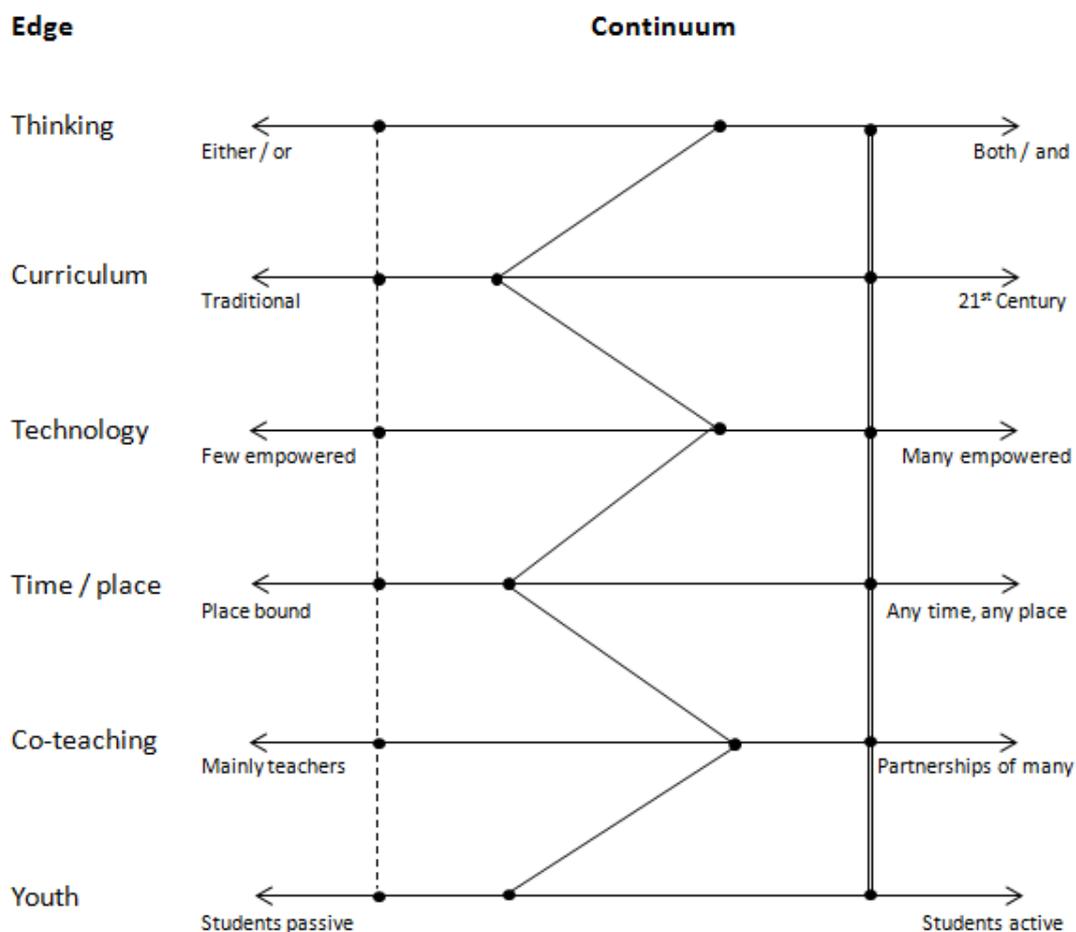


Figure 2: Mapping the leading edges of innovation (devised by the authors using classifications proposed by Chen, 2010)

The solid line which moves backwards and forwards across the various continua illustrates a school that has moved some way to developing a 'both / and' way of managing knowledge, but does so in a fairly traditional classroom but about half the students have access to up-to-date technology. Most but not all of the formal learning occurs at the school site. The teacher is not the sole source of knowledge; those who work in other settings are brought in as experts on some occasions, either face-to-face or online. Students are gaining their voice; they are not passive but teachers still

do much of the work. This classroom has made a modest start to the transformation of learning.

Where does direct instruction fit on the leading edges described by Chen? It is helpful to draw on John Hattie's description of direct instruction:

In a nutshell: The teacher decides the learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to the students, demonstrates them by modelling, evaluates if they understand what they have been told by checking for understanding, and re-telling them what they have been told by tying it all together with closure. (Hattie, 2009: 206)

Hattie described a misleading view of direct instruction:

Every year I present lectures to teacher education students and find they are already indoctrinated with the mantra 'constructivism good, direct instruction bad'. When I show them the results of these meta-analyses, they are stunned, and they often become angry at having been given an agreed set of truths and commandments against direct instruction.

Too often, what the critics mean by direct instruction is didactic teacher-led talking from the front; this should *not* be confused with the very successful 'direct instruction method' . . . (Hattie, 2009: 204-205)

An example of evidence provided by Hattie that arose in his meta-analyses is the following:

In only one approach, the Direct Instruction (DI) model, were participating students near or at national norms in math and language and close to national norms in reading. Students in . . . the other 8 approaches – discovery learning, language experience, developmentally appropriate practices and open education – often performed worse than the control group. This poor performance came in spite of tens of thousands of additional dollars provided for each classroom each year. (Hattie, 2009: 206)

It takes only a moment of reflection to realise that a richer form of direct instruction can be part of most of the leading edges of innovation described by Chen, including anywhere, anytime learning.

2. Leadership in innovation As in virtually every other field of endeavour, innovation should pervade a school and a system of schools. It seems that some systems actively discourage innovation on this scale, insisting that schools maintain their focus on the basics, securing good results in high-stakes tests. It is argued that it is 'the system' that should identify the best innovations and take action to ensure that all schools adopt them. Strategies for dissemination that have often proved successful in the past are maintained in an effort to achieve a cascading effect. However, this is not the way things work in the twenty-first century, with advances in technology and outstanding formal and informal networking by schools ensuring that worthwhile innovations are adopted or adapted, often more effectively and much faster than if centrally driven. These schools don't wait around for direction from the top. An outstanding example is the adoption of the tablet computer, with some schools providing them to all students from the earliest years while the system was barely getting a field trial under way. Innovations that at first sight should be rolled out to all schools through a system-wide initiative, because it is efficient to do so, often fail because they don't meet the needs of schools.

3. Leadership in ethos Innovation is just one of many functions that demand a change in ethos in schools and school systems. At the system level, the culture should be characterised by service to schools, and every aspect of cultural change should be addressed in ensuring that this is the case, including how appointments

are made, performance is evaluated, and day-to-day interactions with those who work in schools are conducted. The self-transforming school is outward facing and this calls for an ethos that values the support of the wider community.

4. Leadership in policy Policymaking is a critical function in the drive to create the self-transforming school. Regardless of the distribution of authority, responsibility and accountability, policymakers at all levels should be concerned with the alignment of education, economy and society and the same principles of formal and informal networking apply. An important purpose in policy is to help schools become less dependent on 'the system'. Expressed another way, public policy should build capacity for schools to be self-transforming.

The knowledge

The title of this final section is inspired by the remarkable intellectual capital required of taxi drivers in London. They must learn 320 routes and the location of 25,000 streets and 20,000 landmarks before they are licensed. It may take up to three years for 'the knowledge' to be acquired. No analogy is intended, although the imagery may be transferred to the school setting to the extent that there may be 320 or more routes or pathways for students in a school if their needs, interests, aptitudes, ambitions and passions are to be addressed. The 'streets' and 'landmarks' are changing constantly for schools. Not only must initial teacher education be rigorous, extending to four years or more, but professional learning must be deep and continuous. Expecting all teachers and school leaders to have mastery of John Hattie's 138 factors that influence learning appear appears modest in comparison to 'The Knowledge' (Hattie, 2009; 2012).

The core of professional knowledge for leaders includes the following:

- Constructing a narrative for self-management and the journey to self-transformation.
- Understanding trends and megatrends in society and economy and how these shape developments in schools; strategically navigating so that the school is always well-positioned to meet current expectations and future needs. (Caldwell and Loader, 2010)
- Understanding change theory and choosing appropriate strategies for change and approaches to measurement; minimising dysfunctional approaches in each instance.
- Being innovative; understanding the relationship between innovation, reform and change; searching out and sensibly adopting or adapting best practice and next practice
- Understanding and applying developments in the six leading edges of practice that transform learning (Chen, 2010); maintaining a focus on direct instruction; understanding what is fundamental change and what is simply an adaptation of traditional approaches, driven by technology, including virtual learning and blended learning; anticipating the shift from national to global curriculum.

Taken together, these are concerned with understanding past, present and future, making the connections, and leading the design and delivery of strategies to achieve the mission of the school.

Finally, in respect to knowledge and leadership, I highlight the findings of a recently-published book that suggests what needs to be done if Australia is to be in the top tier of nations. It has been the most powerful book I have read so far this year: Amanda Ripley's *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way* (Ripley, 2013). She shadowed international exchange students from the United

States who attended school for a time in Finland, Poland and South Korea. A review of the book in *The Economist* had this to say:

Their wide-eyed observations make for compelling reading. In each country, the Americans are startled by how hard their new peers work and how seriously they take their studies. Maths classes tend to be more sophisticated, with lessons that show the often fascinating ways that geometry, trigonometry and calculus work together in the real world. Students forego calculators, having learned how to manipulate numbers in their heads. Classrooms tend to be under-stated, free of the high-tech gadgetry of their schools back home. And teachers in every subject exhibit the authority of professionals held in high regard. (*The Economist*, 2013: 69)

The account of teaching and the preparation of teachers in Finland convinced me that the transformation of initial teacher education should be among our top priorities in Australia

An important feature of schools in Finland is that no student is allowed to fall behind by more than a few hours. This is how Ripley described it:

All kids had to learn. To make this possible, Finland's education system funnelled money towards kids who needed help. As soon as young kids showed signs of slipping, teachers descended upon them like a pit crew before they fell further behind. About a third of kids got special help during their first nine years of school. (Ripley, 2013: 139)

Concluding challenge

Transformation often carries the connotation of dramatic change that occurs at great speed. Is this necessarily the case for the transformation of schools? Is this what lies ahead for the self-managing school that seeks to become the self-transforming school? Does this set a far too demanding expectation for schools and those who lead them?

The answers to these questions may be framed by a famous statement by Peter Drucker in the often-quoted opening lines of *Post-Capitalist Society* (Drucker, 1993):

Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation . . . Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its world view; its basic values; its social and political structures; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world . . . We are currently living through such a transformation. (Drucker, 1993: 1)

Schools should surely be considered among the 'key institutions' that Drucker referred to. If his statement applies to schools then we would expect that over the course of fifty years that schools have been or will be transformed. An important question is the starting point and end point of this period. A strong case can be made that we are roughly at the mid-point of this transformation that may have begun in the mid- to late-1980s (roughly about the time *The Self-Managing School* was published) and will continue for another 25 years (the time frame of *The Self-Transforming School*).

In Drucker's mind the transformation of schools may have barely started in 1993, when *Post-Capitalist Society* was published, as suggested in the following statement presented here as a concluding challenge:

As knowledge becomes the resource of post-capitalist society, the social position of the school as 'producer' and 'distributive channel' of knowledge, and its monopoly, are both bound to be challenged. And some of the competitors are bound to succeed . . . Indeed, no other institution faces

challenges as radical as those that will transform the school. (Drucker, 1993: 209)

A concise description of what is desirable is contained in the following account – essentially a vision – offered by Houle and Cobb (2011) in *Shift Ed: A Call to Action for Transforming K-12 Education*.

A transformed school will not look like that brick building set apart from the society it is intended to serve. A transformed school will be an integrated part of the community and its students will be active participants and contributors to the community. In short, *a transformed school will look more like life*. (Houle and Cobb, 2011: 72)

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ATTACHMENT

A letter to the incoming prime minister published with editorial changes in *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* on 16 August 2013

Dear Prime Minister

I recommend that your government vacate the area of school education and that you refrain from appointing a Minister for School Education. While this may not be possible in the current term of your recently-elected government, it should be a priority for your next term, or the first term of another government should you not be successful at the next election.

This does not mean that the federal government should withdraw funding to support schools; rather, it calls for a new approach to governance in the field and new structures and processes to ensure that resources are allocated on a needs basis and more effectively than under current arrangements.

I attended the launch of the report of the Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski Report) in early 2012, and my first reaction after a close reading during the lock-up and days following was 'let's get on with it'.

What has occurred over the last 12 months is politically unedifying, educationally indefensible and without counterpart in any comparable country. Implementation of Gonski should have been relatively straightforward.

Implementation has been tied up with a variety of requirements for all jurisdictions to sign up to in order to get federal funding. The federal government was then forced to conduct state by state and territory by territory negotiations, as well as with organisations representing the non-government sector. Different deals were done over months. Readers of media releases were shocked at the power-coercive language and the command-and-control strategy emanating from the federal government. States and territories which, after all, have constitutional responsibility for schools, were aghast at the threat to their authority and their plans to give schools more autonomy.

It is likely that the endless debates about the roles of the two levels of government in school education will continue unless you take the lead on the matter.

There is a way forward that will help resolve the issue and free up hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Interestingly, the Gonski Report provided a clue to strategies that may lead to one of the most constructive if not momentous changes in the funding of schools in recent times. Recommendation 24 of the report raised the possibility that funds should be rolled up in a new funding mechanism and delivered directly to state and territory governments as well as systems of Catholic and independent schools. Funds should be delivered directly to schools wherever possible. If this is accomplished why then will we need a federal minister for schools and a large federal bureaucracy to continue a command-and-control approach, implemented through a classic power-coercive model of change?

Why not follow the lead of a comparable country like Canada where there is no federal apparatus in education; indeed its constitution forbids it except for the education of indigenous / First Nation students, children of armed services personnel, and those in prisons? It works. Canada outperforms Australia on all international tests of student achievement, with two of its provinces (Alberta and Ontario) coming in just behind Finland in student outcomes. National policies, priorities and areas of cooperation are determined by a Council of Ministers that has worked well for decades.

Australia can follow the lead of Canada but it may take several terms of a federal government to get there. For example, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) are generally working well and there is bi-partisan support across the nation. A third body along the lines of a School Funding Agency (SFA) should be established to decide on, monitor and update the needs-based funding mechanism.

There are several options for establishing an SFA. A starting point would be to shift ownership for it, as well as for ACARA and AITSL, to the states and territories. Each may have a board of directors whose composition requires careful consideration. Directors might include representatives of the states and territories as well as non-government school authorities. The federal government should, of course, continue to contribute funds in support of school education.

These recommendations in no way deny the important role of the federal government in providing funds to support schools. It has done so since the 1960s and especially since the landmark Karmel Report of 1973. But much of what has occurred over the last decade or so has proved dysfunctional. There has certainly been no overall improvement in student achievement, as measured in national or international tests; indeed, the evidence is that we have slipped and the gap between low- and high-performing students is as wide as ever.

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