

The Self-Transforming School

By Brian J. Caldwell and Jim M. Spinks

Abdingdon, Oxon:

Routledge, 2013

£25.99, 221 pages

ISBN 9780415660594



School autonomy is a high priority in education policy these days. Brian Caldwell, arguably one of the world's leading authorities on school autonomy, calls it a 'megatrend.' In Australia, federal and state governments are pushing for decentralised decision-making in public schools to varying extents depending on particular jurisdictions.

All schools, even those within a system, are different. The idea that the people working in schools are able to run them more effectively than someone in an office hundreds of kilometres away is not exactly a new revelation. The Karmel report in 1973 said:

Responsibility will be most effectively discharged where the people entrusted with making the decisions are also the people responsible for carrying them out, with an obligation to justify them, and in a position to profit from their experience.

Brian Caldwell and Jim Spinks have been developing and influencing policy in school governance in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada for several decades. Their latest book, *The Self-Transforming School*, is the fifth in a series by Caldwell and Spinks. Its release marks 25 years since their first book, *The Self-Managing School* (1988), which argued the case for allowing public schools a greater degree of freedom to use their resources, albeit within a centrally determined framework. Within a decade, the Victorian public school system had implemented many of their recommendations.

In *The Self-Transforming School*, Caldwell and Spinks go beyond the structural and procedural aspects of self-management to describe how

'unchaining' schools from many of the command-and-control dictates of government departments allows schools to be more innovative and responsive, and ultimately, to provide a higher quality of education. The authors define a 'self-transforming school' as a school that 'achieves, or is well on the way to achieving, significant, systematic, and sustained change that secures success for all of its students, regardless of the setting' (p. 4). All self-transforming schools are self-managing schools but not all self-managing schools achieve transformation. This is the key message in the book—and an extremely important one in the current policy climate.

There is a tendency to view school autonomy as either being snake oil or cure-all. The Australian Education Union argues that there is no relationship between school autonomy and school performance while others, such as federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne and education writer Kevin Donnelly, seem convinced that the evidence of a positive effect of autonomy on performance is conclusive.

As with almost all education policy, however, the reality is more complicated. Over the last decade in particular, improved data collection has allowed better analysis of the relationship between characteristics of schools and education systems and their performance on international assessments. These analyses show an uneven impact of school autonomy. Schools with high levels of capacity improve when given greater autonomy. Struggling schools will struggle even more without the support of a central authority. When the statistical association between autonomy and performance is assessed at a system level, the good results and bad results can average each other out, giving the appearance of no impact.

The same pattern is evident when countries are compared—greater school autonomy has positive effects in school systems in high-performing, developed countries but negative effects in low-performing, developing countries. In addition, as Caldwell and Spinks explain, the most recent studies show that autonomy is most strongly related to improved performance in systems with certain other characteristics, namely, accountability and parental choice.

These findings of heterogeneous effects of autonomy, depending on school capacity and other aspects of school governance, must be considered when evaluating the efficacy of policies to devolve more power to schools. For autonomy to have a positive impact, schools must have sufficient financial, intellectual and social capital.

Much of the debate over school autonomy and self-managing schools is misinformed. Although 'autonomy' is the current buzzword in schools policy, Caldwell and Spinks distinguish between autonomous schools and 'self-managing schools,' explaining that in a system of schools, such as the public system, schools are not completely autonomous. They still work within a centralised framework but have greater freedom to manage their resources.

Given that the strongest opposition to school autonomy has come from teachers unions, it is disappointing that *The Self-Transforming School* does not address the role of unions in the policy debate, and how they may be doing their members a disservice. Good teachers have much to gain from school governance arrangements that give them greater professional freedom.

It is difficult to believe that the concept of self-managing schools was then, and is now, controversial. Caldwell and Spinks describe self-managing schools as a 'common-sense approach' to school governance. Others seem to think that giving public schools some relatively modest powers, such as the ability to choose their teachers and control their own budgets, is part of a radical 'privatisation' agenda. These charges have been levelled at the modest but growing numbers of Independent Public Schools in Western Australia and Queensland. Independent Public Schools have also been inaccurately described as charter schools. They are not; charter schools are operated by private organisations, not government.

No modern education policy treatise would be complete without reference to the ubiquitous OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). While Caldwell and Spinks discuss the validity of using PISA performance to guide policy, and while they dismiss the theory that the success of strong PISA performers like Finland and the Asian states is attributable to

non-school factors, they sensibly suggest that England and Canada provide more suitable policy lessons for Australia. Canada shows that a highly dispersed population with several jurisdictions can function effectively without a federal department of education. The 'academies' model in the United Kingdom shows how leaping the ideological divide to create productive partnerships between self-managing public schools and private corporations can work to the benefit of students.

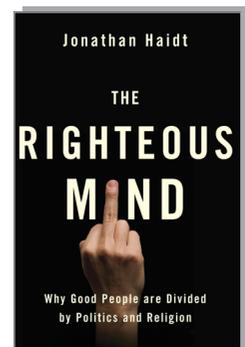
The Self-Transforming School covers a lot of ground, including contentious topics such as funding, curriculum and testing. It is characteristically restrained and politically neutral on all these issues. These features of Caldwell and Spinks' work have contributed to their longevity in the education policy field. Hopefully, they will continue to influence policymakers for many years to come.

Reviewed by Jennifer Buckingham



The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion

By Jonathan Haidt
Vintage (reprint edition),
2013
\$21.46, 528 pages
ISBN 9780307455772



Readers are asked to consider the following scenario described in the opening pages of Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind*.

A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it. No one gets hurt.

Is the behavior wrong? Is the man within his rights to do so? Haidt says if you are a liberal (in the American sense) or a classical liberal, you will probably