

Victorian Bacculaureate a good idea. Now let's make it work

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Opinion



'The Minister's call for consideration of a Victorian Bacculaureate is timely given that only one government school currently offers the International Bacculaureate.'

Fresh ideas and strategies augur well for our students.

I HAVE listened to speeches from education ministers of different political persuasion from many countries over the years. Yesterday I heard two things in Victorian Education Minister Martin Dixon's speech at the University of Melbourne that I have never heard before.

He paid tribute to the work of his immediate predecessors. Indeed, he went back to the Kennett era and noted the granting of more autonomy to schools, then covered the Bracks and Brumby years as they went further to build the capacity of schools to deliver the outcomes the community expects. He outlined his agenda for the "third wave of reform" based on a view that to go further will require a high level of trust from principals and teachers and unrelenting support from the Education Department.

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Also unprecedented was the evidence he presented that Victoria, despite efforts, was not doing well against world standards in scientific literacy. The public is not used to this. Ministers invariably try to put a gloss on the latest international PISA or national NAPLAN results.

His vision and accompanying strategies to ensure that Victoria is a world-class "learning community" holds promise, but presents a considerable challenge building on three "non-negotiable" principles: choice, local decision-making and school-community integration.

His call for consideration of a Victorian Baccalaureate is timely given that only one government school currently offers the International Baccalaureate. In other countries the state, rather than the private sector, is the main provider of the IB. Why we have ceded this ground to the private sector escapes me. Victoria needs alternative pathways, especially in secondary schools, to ensure that the needs and aspirations of all students are addressed.

Dixon outlined a major change that is at first sight deceptive but may well reflect the biggest change ever to the relationship between an education department and its schools. Schools are to be given the highest amount of autonomy possible within a system of public education, while the primary purpose of the Education Department will be to support them.

The test of this will be whether schools are freed from the bureaucratic red tape that has been a constant distractor from the learning game and whether they will be supported to pursue a disciplined evidence-based approach to innovation to improve outcomes for all students in all settings. The minister and department have important regulatory functions, but henceforth they should support rather than direct, with less telling schools what they should do or what they are doing wrong. This may require a change to the DNA of those who work at the centre of the system as much as it requires a different culture to be nurtured in schools.

This does not mean schools should not be accountable. Victoria has some of the most impressive approaches in the nation for reporting on what schools achieve and this will continue. There are some schools that will require more support than others and the department may need to intervene to rescue a struggling school, but the starting position, by default, as the minister describes it, is the highest possible level of autonomy. This ensures a more even playing field for government schools compared to their counterparts in the Catholic and independent sectors.

Schools and the community will welcome a stronger focus on the arts and creativity, and the adoption of a broader range of approaches to assessing the performance of students. I believe the public now recognises the narrowness of the NAPLAN regime and the way it has constrained the curriculum. Paradoxically, our recent research has shown that a vibrant program in the arts at the upper primary level can achieve the equivalent of a gain of nearly a year in NAPLAN scores for students in disadvantaged settings.

In separate comments reported in *The Age* on Monday, Dixon said Victoria was not going to wait around for the Australian government to move on these matters. I think he is wise. No doubt agreements with the states and territories will be achieved, but these are likely to be lowest-common-denominator agreements. Recent announcements as far as school autonomy is concerned provide a graphic illustration. A national rollout will not be completed until 2018, by which time most systems of public education will still not reach what has been in place in Victoria since the early 1990s, and all this 45 years after the Karmel report commissioned by the Whitlam government recommended devolution in 1973!

It is difficult to identify anything that should not attract bipartisan political support. The challenge for government will be to implement its agenda, which has been a year in the

making. It should rightfully be held to account at every step along the way to achieve its commendable intentions.

Brian Caldwell is managing director of Educational Transformations and professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne where he served as dean of education from 1998 to 2004. He is co-author of *Transforming Education through the Arts*.

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