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Are autonomous schools the answer?

Australian policymakers are undoubtedly watching developments in Britain and the United States with interest. But how much can we learn from systems that are so different from our own, asks **Dahle Suggett**

15 July 2010



NEW WAYS of balancing freedom and flexibility with central control – the highwire act in public policy – are being tried out in schools in England and the United States and could stimulate new thinking in Australia. In Britain, the new Liberal–Conservative government has wasted no time in shaking up school governance and funding by announcing a dramatic expansion of the autonomous **Academy schools**. In the United States, the Obama administration is tying access to funds under the multi-billion-dollar **Race to the Top** initiative to the expansion of autonomous Charter schools, alongside other quality and equity measures. There is even movement in Britain to open the door to for-profit bodies to run schools, as in Sweden.

At first blush it seems ironic that the new British government has gone for “Blair-plus” and rushed to expand a flagship British Labour education policy, while in the United States the Republican enthusiasm for Charter schools is being extended by a Democratic

administration. But on both sides of the Atlantic these initiatives are dedicated to solving the same intractable problem – how to close the social gap in schooling outcomes by giving schools the freedom and flexibility to transform and attract new partners and more funds. Both countries are also engaged in the same furious and unresolved debates about the nature of public provision of schooling, how to ensure equity, what place there is for markets in education and the dangers of neo-liberalism in public policy more generally.

What should we take from this in Australia? Will any of the elements of these initiatives find their way into Australian education policies? And if so, should they? Although Australia doesn't have anything near the breadth of school performance challenges or equity disparities as England or the United States, improving our school performance, particularly in disadvantaged locations, is vital for social equity and economic growth and will remain a central aim of both sides of politics.

Nor is our fiscal challenge as dire as England's, as it grapples with plans for deep cuts in public expenditure. Yet, after a year of debate on the cost of high-quality health services for an ageing population, we are yet to face up to what this means for expenditure in the other major areas of service provision like education. The federal government has made additional funding to improve school performance, particularly in disadvantaged locations, a major part of its first-term program but now that the economic stimulus is winding down more funding of this order is unlikely. And the states, which fund the lion's share of public school education, also have little room to move in their increasingly tight budgets.

So, although different in magnitude, the twin challenges of boosting school performance, particularly in disadvantaged locations, and delivering fair and adequate school funding will need to be confronted by Australian policy makers who are no doubt be observing how the task is being pursued elsewhere.

Britain's Academies Bill, introduced in May, opens the door for thousands of primary and secondary schools to become Academies, and the queue is already reported to be long. Well-performing schools can apply and, as with the previous Labour policy, chronically "failing" schools can be shut down and re-opened as Academies. The Academies will receive their funding directly – a mechanism that operates like a voucher system – and also receive an additional 10 per cent that previously went to local authorities to support the schools. They will have more say over the pay and conditions of teachers and more control over curriculum, will be able to leverage additional funds and sponsorship, and must connect more closely with a local community. They will be required to follow an open admissions code for the majority of places, but will be able to select up to 10 percent of enrolments on aptitude or interest. And their performance will be externally monitored.

Linked to the Academies are the new state-funded autonomous Free Schools, modelled on the Swedish experience and geared to tackling disadvantage. These schools can be

established on application from groups of teachers, parents or community bodies and set up to operate in unconventional locations such as shops and businesses. Running these schools might be outsourced to for-profit businesses as already happens in Sweden. Again, the government reports the queue is already very long for the Free School option, with half the enquiries reportedly from teachers.

And what does the **evidence** say about the impact of the autonomous Academies? After just under a decade, the results from the Academy experiment are mixed but there are enough positives and standout successes, and enough popular support, to keep the initiatives well and truly alive. Positives include improved outcomes for students with weaker prior attainment and from less privileged backgrounds, but only at the lower year levels; better links with communities and local sponsors; access to additional resources; improved buildings; and strong school leadership. But the evidence also shows that there is no simple uniform “Academy effect”; rather, there is a complex range of variables interacting within each Academy – as in any school.

The enthusiasm for Academies is thanks in part to those exceptional cases that have all the hallmarks of high performance and success, like the seven Academies run by the **Harris Federation** in South London. Four have been judged by Her Majesty’s Inspectors as outstanding, with the fifth getting quite close, and demand for places is oversubscribed five-to-one.

It’s a similar story with the Charter schools across the Atlantic. They started in the early 1990s and by 2009 forty-one states had laws permitting their establishment in the public system. As well as setting up the incentives for more Charter Schools to be established, Arne Duncan, the US Secretary of Education, is also pressing for states to shut down the persistent underperformers and establish Charter schools in their place.

Charter schools are public schools that come into existence through a “charter” or contract with either a state agency or a local school board. The charter establishes the framework within which the school operates and provides public support for the school for a specified period of time. It gives the school autonomy over its operation and the capacity to garner more funds – for example from the vast number of US philanthropic foundations – and frees the school from regulations that other public schools must follow. In exchange for this flexibility, the schools are held accountable for achieving the goals set out in the charter, including improving student performance.

Studies are **divided** on the value of Charter schools. Those that have drawn on large samples of schools and controlled for the differences in student backgrounds have mostly found only small differences between conventionally managed public schools and Charter schools. But, as with Academies, there are the standouts that show excellent outcomes compared to traditional schools and keep the model very much alive in current policy. These schools take all the opportunities the model allows, admissions (often through ballot) are oversubscribed, teachers clamour for positions and additional community

resources flow because these schools are successful with students who previously did not have a chance of success. In these locations, the statistical effect of the model is distinctly positive.

The question for Australian policy-makers is whether these variations on public schooling offer insights into tackling disparities across our schools. Alongside the political and popular enthusiasm for these alternatives is the fear that they lock in an inequitable two-tiered publicly funded school system. The best teachers will be paid more and lured away from traditional schools, the new schools will have an unfair capacity to raise more funds, and the most able students will be accepted into the autonomous schools leaving the others catering for all comers.

Sounds familiar? That's because the same points are made about Australia's "non-government" Catholic and independent schools. These schools are generously funded by governments and more or less autonomous, unlike independent and denominational schools in most other countries. And that's why simply lifting ideas for the governance or funding of public schools from Britain or the United States is hazardous. Why risk inserting yet another tier in the schools landscape?

Turning this dilemma on its head, though, there might be opportunity to explore the radical idea of putting all schools on a more equivalent footing – in other words, getting the governance, accountability and funding balance right for all publicly funded schools. The federal government has just launched a major [review](#) of funding for schools – government and non-government – to run until the end of 2011. Among other things, it will consider funding models used overseas and their links to outcomes and quality. The Foundation for Young Australians has just released an excellent [report](#) on redrawing schools policy in Australia and taking account of the unique challenges presented by the Australian education policy landscape. The author, the University of Melbourne's Jack Keating, makes a well-nuanced case for rethinking and repositioning the rules and systems for *all* schools in *all* sectors.

As Keating [wrote](#) this week in the *Age*, any new funding model needs to have "a core objective of reducing the pressures for selectivity in schooling... It needs to be based upon a set of rules and measures that are applied consistently to all schools. It has to be structured across the federalist frame so that we don't have different levels of government funding for different school sectors, as is currently the case. It needs to be structured in a way that recognises that some schools have much more demanding tasks in educating their groups of students than some other schools. And it needs to encourage and reward those schools that open their doors to all students and do their best to provide education to their communities in the interests of what Australian education ministers have termed the 'common good.'"

The new policies in Britain and the United States and the opportunity we have to consider how all schools are resourced, and under what conditions, should stimulate a fresh look

at a continuum of governance and funding options to apply to both government and non-government schools.

The challenge is to enshrine equity within autonomy. Is it so outrageous a thought that government and non-government school communities in Australia could agree to having their schools become more like each other? •

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