

Turning the spotlight on the socio-economic mix in schools.

If systems rigorously monitored the social mix of each school's student population to detect the early warning signs of residualisation it might be possible to initiate actions designed to prevent 'at risk' schools declining the point where it becomes very difficult to resurrect them and restore the conditions that usually are necessary for such schools to become high quality education providers.

Researchers have demonstrated that not only is the student social mix in government schools becoming narrower with greater numbers of poorer students attending government and Catholic schools than attend private schools; this problem this creates is being compounded by greater numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds becoming concentrated in particular schools.

When schools are on the pathway to residualisation, quality staff – leaders and teachers - are no longer attracted to the school, highly motivated students transfer to other schools, student numbers decline and the capacity of the school to meet student needs dissipates over time. Not surprisingly, these schools are usually located in the poorest areas and as academic success is tied so closely to socio-economic background, their achievement standards are generally deplorable.

Whereas schools with a representative social mix in their student cohort generally perform at or above expectations. This is best illustrated by those small local government schools in a rural town that come close to topping the state in Year 12 results. How is this possible? The factor that has produced this result is not the size of the school; it is that the school has a broad social mix which contains the sons and daughters of the local pastoralists, shopkeepers, labourers and professionals in the town. In contrast, schools in towns in which the children of well-educated and well-to-do parents go away to school, generally perform poorly. Which illustrates that residualisation is not a problem restricted to urban areas, it can also occur in provincial cities and rural towns.

Governments have been spending more and more money to try and improve the outcomes of significantly underperforming schools – which usually translates into those schools with high proportions of students from the poorest backgrounds. However, local and overseas experience reveals that despite decades of local, regional and systemic effort and increasing access to 'special needs' funding and other additional resources, once schools have become ghettoised even with additional resourcing they generally are unable to lift themselves from the pool of schools that constantly perform well below expected standards into the pool that is meeting or exceeding performance expectations.

This outcome is not surprising as the more that these schools become residualised, the more difficult the task of turning them around becomes. Characteristics of these schools include high levels of absenteeism; low staff and student morale; high incidences of bullying, misbehaviour and class

disruption; ineffective leadership; high leadership and staff turnover, and high proportions of inexperienced or disaffected teachers who of necessity are operating in 'survival mode'. These schools exude a strong air of defeatism and pessimism. They are extremely difficult places to work in. And once declining achievement settles into an annual pattern of very poor performance, teachers and students no longer expect success, and this expectation is invariably met.

Another response to residualisation/chronic underperformance has been the closure, demolishing, rebuilding and rebranding of schools so that the locality is presented with a brand new school, staffed by enthusiastic teachers operating under new leadership and governance arrangements.

For example, in the UK a significant number of publicly-funded independent Academies replaced underperforming schools operating in deprived areas. Academies were established 'to make a complete break with cultures of low aspiration and achievement' evident in the local government school. More recently the UK government has supported local groups who are dissatisfied with their school to establish a Free School. Twenty-four Free Schools opened in September 2011. In the US publically-funded independent Charter schools have been set up in areas where there are high levels of deprivation so parents are provided with an alternative to the failing local school. These 'schools of choice' in the UK and US are not subject to some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools with the expectation being that such schools will perform better than public schools because of their greater autonomy and accountability.

The previous government in Victoria also embarked on an ambitious program of school regeneration - closure, demolishing, rebuilding and rebranding - as a strategy for school renewal in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage where underperformance was endemic.

However, demolishing and rebuilding schools and encouraging and funding parents and community groups to establish new schools to operate in competition with existing poorly performing schools is a very expensive and ultimately unsustainable solution to chronic school under-performance. Whilst such solutions appear to be having a very positive effect, another strategy would be to explore what actions might be taken to reduce the likelihood that particular schools will become residualised.

As academic success is tied so closely to socio-economic background, reform policies should include actions that explicitly focus on monitoring and where necessary supporting interventions designed to improve the student mix of a school. The objective of such actions would be to shift the focus from managing decline and closure to preventing schools from becoming 'ghettoised'.

We know that when a school's students are drawn from the full range of socio-economic backgrounds in an area rather than from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, students' expectations, and levels of motivation, engagement, effort will be higher as will their success in learning.

To help avoid residualisation, schools that are experiencing declining enrolments and are losing their better students should be provided with systemic assistance to help them to rebalance their student mix. That is, interventions such as enhanced equity funding and other resources should be supplemented by strategies explicitly designed to improve the student mix. Without increasing the proportion of students from more socially advantaged backgrounds in these schools, their longer-term viability will be severely jeopardised. As their 'better' students diminish residualising schools tend to replace academic learning opportunities with applied learning opportunities, which in turn attracts more students suited to applied learning and drives them further along the pathway to residualisation.

How might a social mix policy operate? Some initial thoughts on what the elements of social mix policy might be are listed below.

- Maintaining a representative socio-economic mix within the student profile and improving the socio-economic mix of residualised schools would become a goal for the system and designated schools
- Some minimum/aspirational socio economic mix proportion targets for the system and designated schools would be identified based on research evidence and local circumstances
- Some incentive and reward funding for schools would be targeted to funding strategies explicitly designed to change designated schools' socioeconomic mix
- Strategies explicitly designed to attract more middle and upper socio-economic background students would be developed , implemented and monitored
- Monitoring and reporting on the 'student mix' would be a means for determining the effectiveness of strategies – although publishing such data locally until the mix was 'reasonable' would not be advised as this could deter prospective students/families.

Some initial thoughts on possible strategies to accompany the social mix policy are that systems would underwrite schools to explore the value of:

- providing curriculum offerings that would be attractive to students/families with higher education or white collar job aspirations.
 - e.g. Applied practical studies that lead to pathways in blue-collar industries would need to be supplemented with applied and other studies that provide pathways into higher education and/or white collar jobs – design, IT, accounting, economics, arts administration, architecture, hotel management, advertising, project management)
 - e.g. Program specialisations (e.g. sporting specialisation, artistic specialisation, business specialisation and IT/multi-media specialisation)
- offering a scholarship program
- providing off-campus enriching experiences
 - e.g. an adult mentoring program, an overseas exchange or visit program and/or an 'outward bound' or leadership development program

- system initiated and supported partnerships between particular residualised schools and industry and tertiary education providers that convey special privileges on students in the partnership schools
- specially funded tutoring and holiday/summer school programs
- system initiated and supported partnerships between residualised schools and (govt, Catholic and 'private') schools with students from middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds in which special activities and programs are designed and delivered to 'blended' student population groups
- 'support your local school' public forums and advertising campaigns that make explicit reference to the goal of making schools more representative of the households in the community and take the high moral ground on the benefits of social and cultural diversity, inclusiveness and community mix being represented in the school student mix.

Footnote:

I am not suggesting that poor schools cannot be successful schools; many schools in poor areas value add significantly and perform well above expected and state standards. However, I am concerned that often too little is done too late to help those schools that are in deep decline and have ended up catering for a disproportionate number of young people who have had little success in school and now have little attachment to school. That is why I am suggesting that systems need to monitor and respond to early signs of student social mix imbalance and combine their improve strategies with strategies that explicitly address the student social mix problem.

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