

# **SCHOOL AUTONOMY AND NATIONAL CURRICULUM: TENSIONS, DILEMMAS, SOLUTIONS**

**Brian J. Caldwell<sup>1</sup>**

## **Theme 1: National Curriculum and the Education Revolution**

1. The design and delivery of a national curriculum is long overdue.
2. Its chief benefits are in a single national framework for a country of less than 25 million people. Each of the characteristics of a world-class system-wide curriculum could be achieved within state frameworks but they have not been achieved. These benefits include a common framework for all schools, common standards that respond to the needs of all students in all settings, associated approaches to assessment and reporting providing these are educationally sound, and responsive to the needs of society and economy.
3. A national curriculum that addresses the matters in #2 does not necessarily constrain the capacity of states and schools to respond to the needs of students and society, including personalising the learning experience.
4. There will not be an 'education revolution' unless there is significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings in a manner that is responsive to the needs of society and the economy. This is true transformation and this must be the intent of an 'education revolution'.
5. After more than three years of the rhetoric of an 'education revolution' a failing grade must be awarded for progress thus far (Educational Transformations has awarded a mark of 46 out of 100 in its latest report), although this does not preclude ultimate success over a decade, for that is the length of time that the best of international experience tells us is required.

## **Theme 2: Shifting the Balance**

6. Among many strategies that are required to secure a passing grade in the short term is the need to shift the centralisation – decentralisation balance toward school autonomy. This does not remove the need for appropriate central direction and support.
7. Addressing this imbalance calls for an understanding of the connectivity between curriculum and other strategies in the 'education revolution'. For example, implementation of a national curriculum will be impaired to the extent that the design of a school's facilities does not allow the delivery of that curriculum including, especially, an appropriate pedagogy.
8. Central to the notion of a transformation is that there is a level playing field on which all students in all settings secure success. The playing field has been even more sharply tilted toward some schools since the 'education revolution' was announced, especially in favour of the private sector. A noteworthy example is the design and delivery of Building the Education Revolution in which private schools have been able to act quickly as a result of their relative autonomy and the fact that many if not most have long-term master plans in which the next priorities were clearly identified. In contrast, public schools in

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian J. Caldwell is Managing Director and Principal Consultant, Educational Transformations, and Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne where he was Dean of Education from 1998 to 2004. He is an Associate Director of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). This paper was presented at the iNet Australia Conference on the theme 'Leading Learning', Melbourne, 4 May 2010.

- many states had to build to one of a small number of templates, with evidence to suggest that there was neither 'value for money' and 'value for learning' in many instances. It was astonishing to read the reported comments of the Minister for Education in Victoria that principals of public schools may have too much autonomy on this issue when they are already operating at a disadvantage compared to their private school counterparts, who also have the kind of management support that is needed for school success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It may be that many state bureaucracies should be restructured to get the majority of bureaucrats in schools!
9. An arguably more significant disadvantage for public schools, but also a constraint on private schools, is their capacity to provide the rich range of curriculum and pedagogy if Australia is to be a creative and innovative nation. Despite assurances to the country, expert evidence from other places suggests that the national curriculum, national testing and national reporting can be harmful more than helpful. The argued cases of Professor Robin Alexander and Sir Ken Robinson are particularly powerful, highlighting a narrowing of curriculum and unnecessary levels of stress on students and staff as a result of high stakes testing.
  10. It is tiresome to read from time to time that drawing attention to the concerns set out in #9 implies opposition to higher levels of testing and transparency. In fact, there is a powerful case for more testing and more transparency, but not on the path we are following at this time. The case of Finland should be stressed again and again: no national curriculum, no national testing, no 'my school' websites, but more testing by more expert teachers in classrooms, with more personalised learning, much smaller gaps between high- and low-performing students, and higher levels of school autonomy. However, without resorting to exemplars in international experience, some of the world's best examples of reporting student assessments along with surveys of stakeholder opinion and action by schools in response to the evidence can be found in Australia, without the kind of testing and transparency regime that is being imposed across the nation. Queensland has examples of outstanding practice in this regard.

### **Theme 3: Need for a New 'Default Setting'**

11. An even more significant disadvantage for public schools arises from their relative incapacity to select their own staff, including the mix of staff. A national curriculum cannot be delivered to expectations unless each and every school has the intellectual capital that is required. Private schools have a dramatic advantage in this respect. Some systems of public education argue that their principals already have a capacity to select staff, but this is countered in the quite different views among principals. Also, some systems argue that there cannot be autonomy for schools in remote or difficult-to-staff schools. This may be true but that is a weak case for compelling all schools to work in a 'one-size-suits-all' approach that maintains the current balance of centralisation and decentralisation. As Educational Transformations argued in its report to the Australian Government in the Principal Autonomy Research Project, there should be a new 'default setting' that shifts the balance toward autonomy but deals with exceptions in ways that make sense.
12. The themes in #11 can only be addressed in their entirety if there are high levels of knowledge and skill in the profession and this almost certainly calls for changes in pre-service and ongoing teacher education. This has been achieved in nations like Finland, Korea and Singapore where related programs in universities attract top-ranking students who acquire the knowledge and skills to deliver expectations.

13. National agreements currently call for governments to deliver more autonomy to schools as a condition of federal funding but progress is slow and too dependent on limited trials in expectation of 'scale-up' of successful approaches. This flies in the face of consistent international evidence of a balance in autonomy, accountability and choice that differs from the current balance in Australia. It's time to pick up the pace and 'get on with it'.
14. Even if initiatives along the lines implied in #13 were announced tomorrow Australia will fall short of the diversity of experiences in autonomy that may be found in other nations. We are adopting some of the approaches to reform that have been implemented in England and New York, with consequences likely to be along the lines in #9, but ignoring some of their best approaches. For example, all three major political parties in England have included in their manifestos for the May 6 election a decrease in centralisation and greater autonomy for schools. Labour proposes an extension of federations and chains of schools. The Conservatives call for greater powers to parents along the lines proving popular in Sweden. Charter schools (publicly-funded privately operated schools) in New York are over-subscribed, with high levels of parent demand in disadvantaged settings.
15. The possibilities of federations or chains of schools which may have 'executive principals' and top-flight management support appear at first sight to be immediately feasible in Australia. These will have high levels of autonomy, including capacity for the exercise and support of professional judgements that will ensure the delivery of a richer and more creative and innovative curriculum than is likely to emerge if Australia stays on its current course.

#### **Theme 4: Innovation, Creativity and Passion**

16. Nothing in the foregoing precludes a critically important role for state, regional and district levels of government or governance in providing support for schools, but these must be viewed as enablers rather than regulators. All of these things can be accomplished within a national framework that provides the necessary sense of direction.
17. It is a paradox that Australia is moving to a more constraining, less creative and less innovative approach in education at the same time that world leaders in these fields are building their strengths, as evidenced in reports of *The Economist* and Boston Consulting Group. In world rankings by the former in 2009, Australia barely makes it into the top 20 innovative nations for the period 2004 to 2008. While all nations above us have a national curriculum, none have national tests or the equivalent of 'my school' websites except for England (as part of the UK; Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales do not have these). Most provide a higher level of school autonomy.
18. Nothing in the foregoing questions or challenges the importance of literacy and numeracy and raising levels of achievement in these areas. Most of those above Australia in the innovation rankings are ahead of us.
19. If there is one quality that is missing in our current approaches and public discourse it is 'passion'. As challenged in a recent edition of the Educational Transformation edition of its Strategic Commentary on Policy in Education (SCOPE): 'Where is the innovation? Where is the passion?' Ken Robinson argues the case in his recent best-seller *The Element*. He wants all students to be 'in their element' in schools. There are two features -- aptitude and passion -- and two conditions -- attitude and opportunity. We will not achieve a transformational outcome unless we shift the balance in centralisation -- decentralisation to make this possible.

20. What if? It has surely crossed the mind of school leaders that the recent agreement on health funding may have a counterpart in the funding of schools. What if there is a national student resource package that is the educational equivalent of case-mix funding? There may be more than meets the eye in Julia Gillard's recent announcement of the review of federal funding for schools. Immediate reaction was that it might be the next round of the seemingly endless efforts to get the right balance of support for public and private schools. What if this is connected to the first possibility? Then there is the second Cisco report on *The Learning Society* that proposes not more or better arrangements under existing models of schooling but different arrangements for a different model? And there is more. There is the emerging international recognition that the networking of schools is the next phase of school improvement. This was the theme of the current issue of the *International Journal of School Effectiveness and Improvement*. What if these are all connected up to produce a dramatically different approach to the funding of schools? Finally, and connected to each of the above, the Productivity Commission has been asked to look at the workforce in education, including teachers, and its chair Gary Banks has already pointed to the waste of money in highly bureaucratic systems and reductions in class sizes that have little impact on student achievement. Any combination of these possibilities is likely to lead to higher levels of autonomy for schools.