

WHY THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION IS NOT TRANSFORMING OUR SCHOOLS

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The Rudd Government's 'education revolution' is heading for failure because it has not adopted key strategies that international experience tells us are important for success. Most of what has been achieved to date has simply added new layers of bureaucracy to old, with initiatives that may ultimately have little or no impact on how students learn. Australia may end up with one of the most centralised and bureaucratically organised systems of education in the world, with ministers left flailing for explanations as to why performance had flat lined and expectations had not been fulfilled.

My reasons for drawing this conclusion are based on an assessment of progress in addressing 10 strategies that emerged from a five-year study of successful school reform around the world reported in *Why not the Best Schools* (Caldwell & Harris, 2008). It involved 73 seminars and workshops with more than 4,000 school and school system leaders in 11 countries, culminating in highly focused studies in Australia, China, England, Finland, Wales and the United States.

In 2009 I rated progress on each of 10 strategies on a scale from 1 to 10, with the total of 43 out of 100 suggesting that the Rudd Government needed to lift its game and focus on the essentials (Caldwell, 2009). Since then we have seen the launch of the My School website and the release of a draft national curriculum in four subjects.

My purpose today is to update the score card in the light of these developments. I have drawn the conclusion that there is unlikely to be an education revolution led by government in the foreseeable future. There is a transformation under way but it is being led by schools.

Updating the score card

In *Why not the Best Schools* we proposed a 10-point 10-year strategy for achieving the transformation of the nation's schools, with transformation defined as significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings.

1. A national curriculum is designed that is broad enough and sufficiently adaptable to ensure the professional judgement of a highly-skilled profession will prevail at the school level
2. Initial teacher education is transformed to ensure all teachers have a master's degree and remain at the forefront of knowledge and skill through continuous professional development
3. New structural arrangements are designed to ensure diversity of programs in the post-compulsory years in an effective constantly-changing alignment of education, economy and society
4. National testing of all students is minimised as the highest levels of knowledge and skill are developed by teachers and those who support them
5. The wider community including business is seriously engaged in design and delivery with public and private funds deployed through networks of foundations and trusts

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6. Transparent needs-based mechanisms are designed to ensure the efficient deployment of public and private funds
7. Innovative approaches to governance are introduced along the lines of publicly-funded no-fee charter schools to ensure that public schools maintain their appeal to parents
8. School ownership ceases to be a factor in determining the amount of public funds that are disbursed to schools
9. Higher levels of school autonomy in the public sector are achieved within a framework of accountability and choice
10. Most schools in the public sector are rebuilt or redesigned to make them suitable for learning and teaching in the 21st century

National curriculum

An impressive start has been made in only one of the 10 strategies, namely, the creation of a long overdue national curriculum. Australia is one of just three nations in the Asia Pacific region that does not already have one. The good news is that the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is led by two of the world's leading experts in the field, with its chair Barry McGaw being former head of the education division of OECD and its chief executive Peter Hill an international expert in curriculum and assessment. The draft curriculums announced earlier this week have been assailed from many quarters and no doubt there'll be some refinements in the months ahead. Nothing that I have seen suggests it should be stopped in its tracks. My concern is that the curriculum may be too tightly prescribed and that we will fail to heed the lessons of high performing nations that allow a high degree of professional discretion in schools and classrooms.

My chief concern is that the ACARA Board is mainly comprised of representatives of existing state and territory organisations. A new entity has been created (Education Services Australia) (reporting to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs) (MCEEDYA) to support the national agenda, meaning that an expanded national bureaucracy is being added to the nine already in existence (commonwealth, states, territories) without any indication that the latter will be diminished. Australian Bureau of Statistics data tell us that there has been a growth in educational bureaucracies over the last 15 years (Novak, 2009). My unchanged rating of progress is 8 out of 10.

Modernising infrastructure

I suggest that the jury is still out on 4 of the 10 strategies.

The Rudd Government deserves praise for its school re-building program after years of neglect by state and territory governments. The chief shortcoming is that the initiative is short-term when best practice in other countries suggests that the program should be planned and rolled out over at least a decade, as New Labour has done with great success in England. Our haste has resulted in a focus on multi-purpose halls and libraries for primary schools which will, of course, be welcomed in most communities, but the top priority should be modernisation of learning spaces in all schools. I drive past too many schools where new classrooms look too much like the old classrooms – factory-style reflecting mass-production technology – that will be obsolete within a very short time and probably run-down in condition. Some observers claim there has been a mismanagement of the initiative with inflated prices. It will be interesting to read the forthcoming report of the Commonwealth Auditor-General on the matter. This may be another aspect of the stimulus that was hastily

rolled out by commonwealth and state authorities that were ill-equipped to manage so much so quickly.

Public schools around the country have had to conform to government templates in the design of new facilities. Many if not most private schools have had no such constraints with the next stage of their master plans ready to roll when funding became available. There has not been a level playing field. I have revised my score down from 7 out of 10 to 6 out of 10.

Community engagement

There is modest engagement with the wider community, especially business and industry. Many in the sector still believe that public schools should be built, owned, operated and funded exclusively by government. We are far behind England where more than 95 percent of about 3,100 secondary schools have a partnership with the private or non-profit sector.

The most impressive shift in professional and public opinion may well have occurred in 2009 with the Schools First initiative of the National Australia Bank (NAB) in partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). As described in its literature, the scheme is intended to reflect the maxim that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. 'We believe that Schools First builds on the increasing recognition that the task of raising young people who are resilient, enquiring, adaptable and well-adjusted, rests on the shoulders of the entire community. Schools First brought teachers, students, parents and community members together to share this responsibility' (see www.schoolsfirst.edu for details of the program).

The program was implemented for the first time in 2009. Applications were received from 1,552 or 15 percent of all schools in Australia, which was far beyond expectations for initial interest, but indicative of what was happening, but generally 'below the radar' as far as professional and public awareness is concerned. Eighty local community workshops were organised to explain the initiative. NAB allocated \$5,050,000 for awards: 20 of \$25,000 for Seed Funding, 60 of \$50,000 for Impact, 8 State and Territory Awards of \$100,000, and 1 National Award of \$750,000. The program continues in 2010 and 2011.

The winner of the National Award in 2009 was Canberra College, a public school in the Department of Education and Training in the ACT, which partnered with the Child Youth and Women's Health Program of the Australian Capital Territory Department of Health, to conduct its CCCares program to support young pregnant women and young mothers continue their schooling. Canberra College is taking the lead in setting up a national network of schools providing similar services. To use the popular jargon, Canberra College 'ticks all the boxes' in its sturdy values base; its vision, which was shaped nearly a decade ago; the relatively high degree of autonomy the school was granted or seized; and the partnership which locks in long-term expert support.

My score remains at 6 out of 10 although governments are scrambling aboard very quickly.

Needs-based funding

There is no change in the score for needs-based funding at 6 out of 10. A coherent national strategy has yet to be established. Victoria is setting the pace with its well-

developed needs-based formula funding of government schools through the Student Resource Package.

Intellectual capital

We are in a fragile state for one strategy. While there has been movement in some of the leading universities, notably the University of Melbourne, we are reluctant to act boldly on evidence that the most important factor in shaping student achievement is the quality of teaching. It is inexplicable that we have not followed the lead of Finland that requires all beginning teachers to have a master's degree to which only 10 percent of applicants are admitted. Graduates are expert in their disciplines, expert in pedagogy and expert in testing, diagnosis and support that ensures that no student ever falls behind. Observers consider this to be the most important factor in explaining why Finland is the top-performing nation on international tests and why the gap between high and low performing students is so narrow.

Despite its critics, initiatives such as Teach for Australia, which is intended to attract outstanding graduates to the profession, are commendable. However, Teach for Australia will never be more than a niche program, especially as only a minority are likely to make long-term commitments if experience in Teach for America is a guide.

The creation of the well-resourced Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (succeeding under-resourced Teaching Australia) since our first report card holds promise for building the intellectual capital of the profession. The AITSL Board is chaired by Tony Mackay who also serves as Deputy Chair of ACARA. I score progress on intellectual capital as 5 out of 10 rather than 4 out of 10. This score will be raised significantly if AITSL can move quickly in implementing its agenda and provide a framework for the transformation of teacher education.

National testing

I have raised the score for national testing through NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) and associated transparency (My School) from 4 out of 10 to 6 out of 10. My reason is that the much-feared 'league tables' have not eventuated. I am heartened that ACARA is seeking legal advice in relation to a private company that is advertising an 854 report with league tables of all primary and secondary schools at a price of \$97.

I am seeing at first hand examples of skilful use by schools of NAPLAN results and other data. In my Agitation Hill Lecture in Castlemaine on May 29 last year I raised the possibility of a teacher and parent boycott of national tests if transparent reporting of NAPLAN led to 'league tables'. I believe the Australian Education Union took a principled stand in threatening the same. However, due to skilful construction of the website and some responsible newspaper editorial policy, I see no reason for a boycott at this time.

It is astonishing that Australia is one of a handful of nations around the world that subjects its Grade 3 students to compulsory nation-wide, machine-scored, error-prone tests despite the fact that a large majority of parents have high levels of trust in their local primary schools. The places we are using as benchmarks have proved to be false models. The New York City 'report cards' that have held Julia Gillard in thrall have been discredited. Top-performing Finland has no mandatory system of national tests although schools can voluntarily draw on a battery of nationally-developed tests. The answer is to phase out our compulsory tests and follow Finland's lead as we

build the capacity of the profession to test well. I propose a 'sunset' on compulsory national testing even if My School is enhanced as promised.

Program diversity

To use the language of a revolution, we have barely loaded our rifles for 4 of the 10 strategies. Top performing nations are leaving us behind in each instance.

We are still wedded to a 'one size fits all approach' to secondary schooling where there is little diversity. We abandoned technical schools whereas Finland has kept them at the senior secondary level. We copy England's worst features such as national testing that allows 'league tables' but ignore one of its best that has ensured that almost all secondary schools offer at least one of 12 specialisations at the same time they address the national curriculum. The score remains at 3 out of 10.

Obsolete ideology

We persist with an obsolete ideology in a highly discriminatory approach to the funding of schools. It has been cast as a public v private issue when who owns and operates the school should not be a factor. In the Netherlands it is illegal to discriminate in this fashion. The score remains at 2 out of 10.

School autonomy

While public schools in Victoria are well-placed, the nation as a whole lags badly in providing public schools with a high level of autonomy (nationally the score remains at 2 out of 10). A high level of autonomy was found to be a key factor in OECD studies that explain high performance. Expressed simply, why should schools and their principals be held accountable if they have little or no capacity to select their staff? Principals may have legal redress if their career prospects are determined on the basis of narrowly conceived national tests and they have little or no power to influence the most important factor, namely, who teaches in their schools. The strategy does not call for complete autonomy. There should be a national framework, with state and territory governments serving primarily as agencies of support for schools.

Innovative governance

Finally, there has been little imagination in designing innovative approaches to governance in our systems of public schools (the lowest score of 1 out of 10 remains). Barack Obama and his administration are placing a high priority on the creation of charter schools -- publicly funded no fee privately-operated schools -- that are proving popular and effective in disadvantaged communities. Julia Gillard has backed the wrong horse in choosing school report cards over charter schools among Joel Klein's reforms in New York City.

It is noteworthy that the best example of innovative governance for Australian schools is a school that serves Indigenous students. The headline on an opinion piece in *The Australian* on 21 October 2009 read 'Our Obama beats theirs' (Albrechtsen, 2009). Janet Albrechtsen was writing shortly after Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and was commenting on what she saw as his limited achievements to date. Her major purpose was to draw attention to one of Australia's most charismatic Aboriginal leaders Noel Pearson who heads the Cape York Partnership program serving Indigenous people in far north Queensland.

Albrechtsen's central theme was the way Pearson's oratory delivers results. For example, he was the driving force behind the four-year Cape York Welfare Reform Trial which links school attendance to welfare payments. There has been a remarkable increase in attendance from 37 per cent to 62 per cent.

One of the most powerful statements on education in Australia in 2009 was made by Pearson in a major article published in *Quarterly Essay* (Pearson, 2009). He was scathing in his assessment of the reasons for shortcomings in teaching standards and governance: 'The problem is the ideology-producers in the academies, and the ideology-upholders in educational bureaucracies'. He was careful to distinguish between 'frontline educators and those responsible for generating and upholding reigning ideologies'. He believed that 'frontline educators are highly sensitive to the needs of children, and if they can see how these needs can be better met, they will be attentive to them'.

Only the Cape York Aboriginal Academy inspired by Noel Pearson that opened this year comes close to a publicly-funded charter in Australia, with extended hours, a focus on literacy and numeracy, taught in English but honouring Indigenous culture.

It will be ironic, but also profoundly inspiring, if a leader of Australia's Aboriginal people was to lead the way in a genuine 'education revolution' that helps secure success for all students in all settings across the nation.

Summary

Assessment	Strategy	November 2009	March 2010
'A promising start' (8-10)	National curriculum	8	8
'Jury is Out' (6-7)	Modernising infrastructure	7	6
	Community engagement	6	6
	Needs-based funding	6	6
	National testing	4	6
'A fragile state' (4-5)	Intellectual capital	4	5
'Missing in action' (1-3)	Program diversity	3	3
	Obsolete ideology	2	2
	School autonomy	2	2
	Innovative governance	1	1
Total		43	45

Transformation not revolution

It will take 10 years for an education revolution to succeed, as it did in Finland. There was partial acknowledgement of this in Julia Gillard's address to the National Press Club last week (Gillard, 2010) when she acknowledged that 10 years will be required ('this is a 10 year program'). She also shifted her language to refer also to 'transformation' ('the Education Revolution is about transforming schools and driving the reforms of the future'; 'it is transforming schools with new capital and equipment'; 'this investment is transformational') and

However, the Rudd Government's efforts are faltering, with a progress score of 45 out of 100. It can quickly gain momentum if it moves on strategies that are currently 'fragile' or 'missing in action'. However, I am not optimistic. Too much faith is being placed on My School. Kevin Rudd is reported as saying that the website 'would drive improvements across the entire system' (Robinson, 2010). The Prime Minister gave

the game away last weekend when he declared that the national curriculum was essentially a 'back to the basics' project. It must, of course, ensure that all students succeed in 'the basics' but learning in the 21st century demands much more.

Sir Ken Robinson is a powerful advocate for the nurturing of 21st century skills and for an intensely personal approach to learning:

Education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions (Robinson, 2009).

Robinson warned of dangers such as we may experience in our 'education revolution':

Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardised testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education (Robinson, 2009).

Speaking on trends in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury stated that 'we have in the past few decades created an extraordinarily anxious and in many ways oppressive climate in education at every level in the search for proper accountability' adding that 'all of this gives a clear message about the priority of tightly measurable achievement over against personal or spiritual or emotional concerns' (Archbishop of Canterbury, 2009).

Apart from an unseemly preoccupation with what has occurred in New York, the major features of the 'education revolution' are more like what has occurred in England. Despite the Blair Government's 1997 manifesto, with its top three priorities being 'education, education, education', what transpired was a marginal lift in achievement in literacy and numeracy with flat-lining over the last five years. Indeed, highly regarded former Secretary of State for Education and Skills Estelle Morris resigned when targets for further growth were not achieved. While I hope otherwise, I fear that we may follow the same trajectory in Australia. We also seem to be following the pattern in England where there is general consensus that the highly centralised micro-managed approach ran its course some time ago. This approach is likely to be abandoned in the next few months, regardless of the outcome of British elections.

Schools are leading the revolution

The real breakthroughs are already occurring in schools that don't need the 'education revolution' to achieve transformation; indeed, they may be constrained by it. The high profile Digital Education Revolution ('computers in schools'), for example, is no more than catching up with the remarkable progress made in many schools over the last 20 years. These same schools are moving ahead at breakneck speed as they recognise the capacities of young people for whom the latest technologies are an every day every minute tool for anytime anywhere 24/7 learning.

Just as we are coming to terms with a national curriculum these schools have essentially internationalised their curriculum as they enable their students to be the world's first 'global citizens'. They take state-based or national curriculums in their stride because they must, but they are moving on and beyond.

NAPLAN and My School are similarly incorporated in the skilful use of data that has become part of the culture in many schools. They can spot where areas of improvement are needed and they are aware that the differences between classrooms can often be greater than the differences between schools. They have been providing parents with accurate, up-to-date reports for several years. While some schools are having difficulty with the concept of 'personalising learning', often believing it is impossible to achieve, many schools have truly personalised the learning experience for each of their students.

Some of the new designs of schools are breathtaking when they have been freed from the constraints of standardised templates, and these include some new public schools and many private schools. I can understand why students would rather spend their time in these schools than anywhere else. It is no wonder that in the past many such students were disengaged in having to learn in outdated run-down facilities.

Leaders in these schools are constantly on the move, physically and in cyber space, networking with others to share knowledge, solve problems and pool resources. These schools are futures focused at the same time that they honour the past and address with gusto the imperatives of the present.

It's an exciting world out there and it would be a tragedy if efforts like these were constrained by a 'back to the basics' mentality and a narrowly conceived testing and reporting regime.

A scenario for 2020

Writing a scenario is a useful technique for thinking about the future. A scenario is not a prediction. It describes an alternative future, either probable or preferred, with a narrative that credibly explains the pathways from the present to that future. Here is a narrative for an alternative future to 2020 that describes how we might proceed in the contentious areas of testing and transparency?

In 2020 there will be a higher level of transparency and more testing in Australia's schools than at any time in the past. However, approaches associated with NAPLAN and the My School website introduced in 2009 and 2010 have been abandoned because a united profession and the public soon realised that expectations had not been realised. They inhibited rather than drove the transformation of schools. Australia became isolated in the international community for proceeding with an approach that had been abandoned elsewhere as country after country moved ahead with a more enlightened approach.

Long-overdue reforms in teacher education meant that teachers became expert in skilful testing, diagnosis of need and immediate support of their students in an unprecedented and comprehensive approach to personalising learning. Every school or community of schools has teachers and other professionals on call who give immediate support to their colleagues to ensure that no student falls behind. A new national agency prepares tests that schools can choose to use if they wish but the level of professional skill ensures that most schools use their own. Parents obtain real-time online reports of how their sons and daughters are progressing, and meaningless out-of-date comparisons of schools have been abandoned. Teaching to the test and the narrowing of the curriculum are dysfunctions of the past. The

curriculum has been broadened to address the range of knowledge and skills demanded in the 21st century. Public schools have far more autonomy than in the past, with many opting for an international rather than national curriculum. In short, Australia finally caught up to Finland in testing and transparency, but belatedly, as countries as diverse as Finland and the People's Republic of China moved on to even higher levels of professionalism that meet the needs of their dynamic societies and economies.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that despite the popular appeal of the national curriculum, national testing and the My School website, we are unlikely to see more than marginal improvement until such time as we move ahead on a number of fronts. A command-and-control system driven from Canberra will have no greater success than it has had in England. We must open the doors to the creative spirit in our schools that should operate in the future in the broadest of national frameworks and the best of local support. As far as performance on the international stage is concerned, we may make progress in the short-term but other nations are moving faster and further.

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