The School as Market

Bill Hannan

'Equity' and 'choice' delude Labor and create inequities for generations of students

With the government going to the polls with an inconclusive 'Education Revolution' and contested My School strategy, and without any breakthroughs in sight whoever wins power, the education debate has surely lost its way. We have gone down the market track, as in every other arm of government, and alternatives are hard to see. It's worth retracing developments in the Australian system over decades and even the century of public education to get our bearings.

There is good reason to believe that the education debate in Australia has lost its way. It is not an easy matter to get things right when it comes to education, and distortions in policy have been the rule for quite a few years. Recent emphases on education markets and on standardised measurement in the My School internet strategy have made their own contribution to this process.

Declarations of goals for Australian education are re-written every ten years and bear the name of a state capital: Hobart (1989), Adelaide (1999) and Melbourne (2009). A large assembly of federal and state authorities of all colours and from all sectors endorses and issues them.

The first goal of the 2009 *Melbourne Declaration* is to promote 'equity and excellence'. Excellence has figured in all three declarations, usually in the form of 'access to high-quality schooling'. 'Equity' appears for the first time in 2009, which may reflect the predominance of Labor ministers at the table. The Howard-era *Adelaide Declaration* spoke of 'all young people' and Hobart invoked the unfashionable concept of 'equality'. Equity is clearly a more inconstant goal than excellence. Of its several elaborations, the *Melbourne Declaration's* is the most explicit (if such a word can be applied to documents of this sort): socio-economic disadvantage will 'cease to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes', and other forms of disadvantage will be reduced.

In recent years, the measure of excellence has been how well we keep up with other OECD nations. Here, according to Barry McGaw, a distinguished scholar and current head of Australia's Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 'Australia is a relatively high performer, on average'. On the equity front, however, we are not so strong: 'students' social backgrounds', says McGaw, 'are more strongly related to achievement in Australia than in countries such as Canada, Finland and Korea'. Differences in school performance can, he says, 'be explained by the social backgrounds of individual students and those whose company they keep. The negative effects of poor company may be much greater than any positive effect of good company'. 'Poor', in this case, can be glossed, in both senses.

As many have pointed out, a choice between good and not good is scarcely a choice. Nor can such a choice be justified as a right. It is an illusion, an image in a distorting mirror.

For some time now governments have pursued policies that effectively put good students in good company and poor students in poor company. The states have multiplied selective schooling, sometimes deliberately, as in New South Wales, and sometimes by default, as in Victoria. Annual listings of Year 12 results consistently advertise the virtues of selective schools. For other levels the Commonwealth uses its program of tests (NAPLAN) and its My School website to highlight parallel differences. Selective schools rank well. Non-selective schools have their results modified by indices of disadvantage. From this sort of 'transparency', as then Minister Gillard loved to call it, interested parents can have little doubt about the company various schools keep and conclude, if they hadn't already, that excellence is for their children, equity for other people's children.

No matter what states do, parents will always find ways to seek good company. But states seeking equity ought to reflect on whether official policies might actually vitiate the pursuit of both equity and

excellence. Official policies at present promote a doctrine of choice, and policy experts speak of school systems as markets. If such ideologies are ill-conceived or have unforeseen consequences, they should surely be reconsidered.

There was a time when it was taken for granted that the state would provide evenly for all comers, first in the local primary school, and thence in a district high school. In Victoria, a free, colony-wide primary system was set up definitively in 1872, but when secondary schooling was legislated in 1910 it was in multiple and selective forms. It was not until secondary schooling expanded enormously after World War II that it too became a system, highly centralised and regulated by enrolment zones, inspectors and ordained curricula.

Schools offer droves of scapegoats: parents who don't care enough about their children, leaders who can't lead and above all teachers who are not putting in.

That idea of a heavily regulated public system began to change in the late 1960s. This was partly because it was so overwhelmed by numbers that it could not cope. Students could spend years with unqualified teachers in makeshift accommodation. One union of teachers, the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association, rebelled dramatically against the crisis in the system. In a confrontation with government it enforced the related principles that teachers should be both qualified and trusted to get on with their profession without regular assessments from inspectors. Further, and this time in concert with a reforming Director of Secondary Education, Ron Reed, schools gained control over the curriculum. These were of course great challenges to central control, but both sides were as one on the essential principle that the state should provide good local schools for all comers.

Despite the crises that beset the system in those days, teachers' morale was high. They believed in the destiny of the system to provide for all. Today's situation seems to be the reverse. Conditions in schools are immeasurably better but school authorities appear to have lost faith in the capacity or willingness of many teachers, even of entire schools, to do their job. The Rudd–Gillard era, I suppose unwittingly, highlighted this conundrum. Much was spent on material resources, but the maligning of teachers by both Commonwealth and state authorities and the promotion of choice undermined not only faith but also the system itself.

The ideology of choice had had a spurt of growth in the 1970s. It had been present since the time when Catholics resolved to run their own school system. Their choice, they maintained, should be aided by the state. For a century it was not, and the Catholic schools sank into deplorable conditions. Whitlam resolved to rescue the Catholic system, but in doing so set up a battle, which persists to this day, between public and private schools. Had the Whitlam and later governments brought Catholic schools into the public system as a condition of their being funded, the battle might have faded away. Such an arrangement had occurred in England thirty years previously and would shortly come about in New Zealand. Yet Australia let Catholics and wealthy Protestants form an unholy alliance. Parochial Catholic schools in desperate need of funds were lumped in with established grammar schools, which needed no public funds at all. A mix of class warfare and religious prejudice left little room for principles of equity or rational planning.

As 'private' schooling became cheaper, choice inevitably became the controlling slogan. Parents, ran the argument, had a right to choose between private and public schooling. The state should facilitate the exercise of this right.

For a good while, choice remained chiefly a function of the public–private dispute, to be exercised mostly on the competitive playing fields of examinations for university entrance. Since that particular choice had long been sold as a right, choice in general, at all levels, was destined to be accepted as a self-evident good. In the early 1980s, the Commonwealth Schools Commission ran a project called Choice&Diversity. In the states, selective schools were either deliberately established or allowed to grow. The rationale was to create serious competition between the public system and private schools. The result, probably unseen, was to create good and bad schools. Twenty years on, as Chris Bonner has pointed out in New South Wales and Stephen Lamb and others have demonstrated in Victoria, an insidious pattern has developed. In any area of reasonable size, there will be one popular secondary school, effectively or officially selective, and two or three also-rans.

Choice was built into legislation in Victoria in the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*. It

is also now the essential purpose of the Commonwealth's My School website. Again rights are invoked: 'informed' parents will be better able to exercise their right to choose. Accompanying spin about accountability, transparency and the power of information to change schools does not attempt to hide the reality that the choice is between good schools and others, the 'others' sometimes crudely described as below average, but more often as under-performing or disadvantaged.

As many have pointed out, a choice between good and not good is scarcely a choice. Nor can such a choice be justified as a right. It is an illusion, an image in a distorting mirror. It is not, however, a harmless illusion. It has consequences. Generations of young people will be relegated to the bad schools. Yet the policy makers, beguiled from outside the Giggle Palace by news of the success of choice and selectivity among the self-interested, have failed altogether to think of these consequences. Worse, seeing that the show is out of control, they hunt about for scapegoats. And schools offer droves of scapegoats: parents who don't care enough about their children, leaders who can't lead and above all teachers who are not putting in.

Intended or not, the result is to expose failing schools and expect parents to abandon them. Once the school is effectively abandoned, various schemes are advanced to repair the hole in the local provision. A task force may close the school and propose a new one, perhaps with some tempting specialism—music, sport, technology and the like. The possibility of importing the 'charter school' (in effect a fully supported private school) idea from England or the United States is canvassed. So too are vouchers, which put funding in the hands of parents.

In the minds of policy analysts, choice is but a part of a larger image of education as a market and there is no system in the traditional sense. Schools, they say, operate in a market. Authorities should do things to stimulate the market and sit back to watch it work.

If choice is an interesting concept vitiated by failure to consider its consequences, the market idea is simply foolish. When New South Wales took to the idea and created dozens of selective schools it was thinking of its system being in competition with other systems. What it overlooked was that it was creating competition also within its own system. However well the image of a market of competing systems might play out, the image of the system itself being a market is a triumph of image over reality. It might work as a description of the independent school sector in which each unit is comparable to a small business, but it is altogether inappropriate as an image of a fully funded public enterprise that pretends to universal provision. The markets we know do not consist solely of small businesses reacting directly to demand. If we must have a business image for a large enterprise with many units, it would be more like a corporation—a large bank or a supermarket chain, for example. These organisations run as systems. They do not offer customers a choice between good and bad branches, nor do they publish unfavorable comparisons between their customers (which My School does in the name of justice). Their corporate reputation depends on the quality and the accessibility of each of the units.

As I have said, Victoria did once have a deliberately planned school system. It had manifest fault—it was authoritarian and inefficient—but its basic premise and overall goal remain valid. The goal rested on faith in education for all. Its premise was to aim for geographic completeness—a primary school in every locality and a secondary school in every town or suburb. For over half a century this even spread of provision was sustained by a quite strict enrolment policy: students had to go to the school in their zone. I well remember my principal in the 1960s consulting his street directory to decide on an enrolment. Today it is parents who use the directory to find how far they will have to drive their children to school.

In the minds of policy analysts, choice is but a part of a larger image of education as a market and there is no system in the traditional sense.

Nowadays it would be impossible to enforce zones, which is one reason why shopping around is encouraged. But the concept could be realised in other ways. If a school, for example, was defined as a district or sub-regional cluster consisting of multiple campuses, primary, secondary, tertiary or specialised, there could be some plausible restrictions on moving between districts. Choice could be made within the cluster but limited outside it. Sound leadership, management and control of quality would be more attainable, as would a more robust form of competition. The essential principle is that the basic units of a system have to be strong.

The many elements required to create strong units already exist. We are familiar with successful senior colleges, with specialised schools in arts, sports and the like, with teachers and youth workers skilled in getting through to resisters, with ways of breaking large campuses into small, caring sub-schools and so on. The weakness is that these elements exist haphazardly. Some students can get to them, but many are still in units too small to muster the resources needed to provide for all. Nor can such a haphazard system track the journeys through school and work of all the young people in an area.

Victoria's reservoir of tradition and innovation in schooling provides all the ingredients for a strong system. What is lacking is political will. Sensible direction, matched by realistic funding of the necessary infrastructure, could wind back some of the worst by-products of choice and yet permit

healthy versions of choice and competition within the system. But a search for equity cannot stop at reorganising the shape of the system. No matter how the system is organised, what is it that parents seek and schools must offer?

The answer to that question probably lies in the nature of secondary schooling and the way it connects to tertiary education. From its beginnings in the colonies primary schooling was imagined and organised as a universal system. But when Victoria legislated for state secondary education in 1910 its mind was on schools that would gain entry for selected students to tertiary education—university, teachers' college or technical college. Selection was ultimately by examination but also initially by enrolment procedures. Tertiary destinations fell into a hierarchy of prestige, with university at the top. Equity of a sort was achieved through scholarships awarded by examination.

If we must have a business image for a large enterprise with many units, it would be more like a corporation ... They do not offer customers a choice between good and bad branches, nor do they publish unfavorable comparisons between their customers.

This continues to be a fair description of upper secondary schooling today. Year 12 results and tertiary entrance rankings are the essential stuff of school information and eventually league tables. Built into these results is the ancient dichotomy of head vs. hand. Academic studies yield more rewards than technical ones, and within the academic curriculum studies taken by the best students contribute most to the ranking. Selective schools, official or de facto, public or private, with few exceptions pursue success within this narrowly academic framework. For a long time governments have said the right things about the virtues of vocational education, but lack of provision keeps pushing the issue to the perimeters. Any re-organisation of secondary schooling has to right this imbalance.

Historically, the character of upper secondary schooling has determined the shape of middle and lower secondary school, but not that of primary school. Choice, however, has crept into primary schooling and is starting to sort the schools out academically. National tests are largely of things learnt in primary school, essentially the three Rs. The ministers of education expect that test results reported by My School will wake parents up to their responsibilities and keep teachers on their toes. A national curriculum for the early years will straighten out those progressives who don't teach phonics or grammar. The curriculum, former Minister Gillard told the press (at a doorstop on 1 March 2010), will ensure that once again children will be able to sound out the word c-a-t, then recognise its meaning, then be able to put 'cat' in a sentence: 'The cat sat on the mat'. National assessment of the outcomes of this curriculum will show the world where the good and the bad teachers are. To act on this discovery, a dose of WorkChoices might help: let principals hire and fire staff and keep the unions out of it. And since it is teachers, not buildings, that make good schools, and since punishment works better than rewards, it can all be done within budget.

Teaching is the heart of the matter. Fortunately, no one doubts that good teaching matters more than anything else. The problem is that governments both red and blue currently believe that the cheapest and swiftest ways to buck up teachers is to have them all do the same thing and be exposed if they don't measure up. A national curriculum is a means to this end. So too are the 1950s ideas of replacing teachers with barely qualified aspirants, and reviving inspectors. What is not considered adequately is improving teaching as a profession.

Better pay is clearly one way to improve things. So are greatly improving qualifications and training. Since the beginnings of state education, the qualifications of primary teachers have markedly risen, but those required of secondary teachers have changed little. To teach excellently and equitably, a teacher must be thoroughly on top of both content and method. If you still can't teach well enough there should be ways to move you on. One way might be to augment the meagre ranks of para-professionals employed to free successful teachers from bureaucracy and so-called non-teaching duties.

Above all, teachers need to be trusted. There is a case for national consistency and objectivity in curriculum, but that can be achieved within a relatively simple framework and set of guidelines. The detail, progression, method and assessment are matters for respected professionals. Everyone agrees that reading and writing are essentials throughout school, but experienced professionals know that there are various ways of achieving success in these basics. They are not helped—rather they are insulted—by fanatics urging phonics upon everyone and ministers spelling out 'The cat sat on the mat'.

When the nation really has faith in the educability of all young people, and trust in teachers to bring it about, we may be able to celebrate a revolution in another decennial declaration.

←←←
The School as Market
Bill Hannan

→→
Re-enchantment a Post-industri Wor
Ian Bar

Ian Barns is senior lecturer the School Sustainability Murdoch Universit