

Schools need parents to play their part

By Roslyn Guy

In the mid-1980s I taught at a vibrant state secondary school in the western suburbs. The staff was mostly young and energetic and in those days there was plenty of money from both federal and state governments for programs to redress the disadvantage experienced by many of our 1000 or so students.

It was a difficult school but, as well as daily battles with teenagers whose honour depended on being able to rile teachers, there were memorable successes. Young people whose parents spoke no English, or who had left school at 14, became the first in their families to go to university; others won sporting acclaim or showed musical or artistic talent.

Of course, not everyone was convinced by these achievements and one comment by a colleague has stayed with me. It was at the end of an after-school curriculum committee meeting. We had finalised plans for a new outdoor education program and the excitement was infectious. Someone exclaimed: "This is a great school." As most of us - young and childless - smiled and nodded in agreement, one older teacher shocked us out of our complacency. "It is, but you wouldn't want to send your own kids here, would you?"

I thought of my tough year 11 English class and knew what she meant. At least half of them had no interest in studying and it took a mighty effort to stop them from ruining the educational experience of the small but ambitious group that was determined to gain university entrance.

What my colleague meant was that she would not want her children mixing with people whose aspirations and backgrounds were very different from her own. In that, she resembled many middle-class parents who claim to value public education but whose actions propel their local schools towards failure.

Last week community meetings were held to discuss the fate of Albert Park College. One mother accused the Government of long neglecting the school. She said this caused most locals to make the only possible choice - paying for private education. A father was quoted as saying that middle-class parents were opting out because "no one wants their kids to be the guinea pigs" in any attempt to transform the school - they want a good local government school along the lines of those in Ringwood, Mount Waverley and Balwyn, he said.

It is not always easy to pinpoint what parents want - high standards, a caring environment, strong discipline, "good" values? The list is extensive and often contradictory. What is quite clear is that most parents underestimate their own roles in shaping their local school.

Schools that they point to as success stories - the ones that reportedly add a premium to real estate prices - did not spring fully formed from a bureaucratic planning document. An important factor in the success of these schools is that a large number of parents, from various backgrounds, enrol their children in them. When there is a sizeable group of students whose parents not only value education but have the time (or money or energy or confidence) to be actively involved, the school blossoms.

A principal alone cannot do it - by all accounts Barbara Elvin at Albert Park College is an inspiring leader. Committed and capable teachers can only achieve so much. As Tom Bentley, a British social policy commentator soon to be director of policy for Victorian Premier Steve Bracks, warned principals at a conference in Melbourne recently, when social inequality becomes entrenched in a school, it is difficult to make significant progress.

Every time parents who value education and have high expectations for their children flee the state system seeking, among other things, the "right" peer group for their children, they are making it more likely that their local school will fail. They also rob their children of the chance to mix with students from a range of backgrounds and understand something of the complexities of society.

The appeal of famously popular state secondary schools such as McKinnon, Balwyn and Glen Waverley is evidence that architect-designed buildings and extensive playing fields are not necessarily a priority for parents. These are fairly standard government school buildings. They may be in better condition than places such as Albert Park College but this too is due to support from the local community. High enrolments mean they have more money to spend on facilities and more parents able to pay voluntary fees or join in working bees.

None of this should need to be spelt out. Its truth is clear from the affection most parents feel for their local primary school. For the first seven years of a child's education, families usually take it for granted that they will support the state school. They send their children along to be part of the educational journey without considering status or economics. They get involved in fund-raising and working bees, help with reading, join curriculum committees and school councils. The schools flourish and so do the children.

There is no need for parents at Albert Park College, and schools like it, to fear that their children will be "guinea pigs". All they need do is move as a group from their state primary schools to the college and use their power as educated parents to ensure that public education not only survives in their area but thrives.

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