

'Suffer The Children Left Behind'

By Prof. Richard Teese,

Professor and Director of the Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning in the University of Melbourne

The largely bipartisan schools policy views public education as a broken sector. It's not a position worth voting for.

It is hard to think of a time when the two major political parties in Australia agreed so much about education policy. That could be a good thing if the policies were good. But are they?

National reporting of school performance aimed at market discipline is a shared commitment. So is the testing behind this - though the Coalition wants more testing. National curriculum is a shared commitment. So is payment by results. Maintenance of non-government school funding in real terms is also shared-with change more or less delayed.

There are certainly points of divergence, which we will come to later. But what sort of consensus is it that combines national testing, national performance reporting, and a national curriculum with a feudal mix of public and private schools, differently funded and administered? These things do not fit together. Yet they do reflect a shared view about Australian schooling. And it is this underlying view that is the most disturbing aspect of the cross-party convergence on school policy.

Labor, like the Coalition, has been careful to protect those parts of the feudal regime that are truly medieval-confessional schools serving church and sect, diocesan authorities and boards, and the grammar schools with their episcopal or ecclesiastical patronage that barely covers their corporate rears. Australia has invested mightily in these schools to raise them out of their historical mediocrity. Today they are a very secular sector of choice.

Representing the modern state are the public schools. These are widely seen as the sector of second choice. The Coalition says they are value-free, sub-standard, and given over to "social engineering". It is the Coalition that initiated testing in the 1970s to lift standards in public schools. But Labor has perfected the instruments to compare schools and impose market responsiveness.

Both see public schooling as a sector to be fixed. Make it more like private schooling. This is why the two big parties share the one tool box-national curriculum, testing and reporting, payment by results, the marketplace, school autonomy.

Neither party sees that the harder they drive the privatization agenda, the weaker they make the public sector. The expansion of private schooling drains the public system of cultural and academic resources, makes schools unviable in size and mix, and diverts scarce funds into an over-resourced and predatory sector. Access to demanding courses, to model students, to specialist teachers, to good facilities is being whittled away.

Christopher Pyne is on record as saying that "needs in government schools are greater" (ABC 7.30 Report, 11/8). But the list of policies on the Liberal Party website does not include a single initiative specifically addressing those needs. Instead the commitment is to "protect choice". We protect choice by diminishing chances for others. This is a fundamental injustice.

It is remarkable that Christian Schools Australia can demand more choice with no thought for the impact on children left behind by choice.

Labor, under Rudd, took up the national reform agenda developed by Victoria. It struck national agreements through COAG to improve low SES outcomes. But the 2 partnerships do not address underlying issues-major funding disparities, operating conditions in schools, and the residualizing effects of the "choice" (which Labor itself promotes as if to undermine the agreements).

These operate within a framework of national testing which narrows educational effort and is content with modest relative gains in basic skills. Neither Labor nor Coalition expects more.

Marginal improvement relative to circumstances explains the superficiality of the high-profile policies concocted by ministerial staff. Teach for Australia, Teach Next, Rewards for School Improvement, and Reward Payments for Great Teachers have all arrived from the United States with a contentious and largely negative history. They are short-cuts devised in response to a faltering public system, neglected in favour of choice.

It is a failed vision of public schooling that subjects the Labor Party to the indignity of scavenging on the scrapheap of failed educational reform.

The Greens, by contrast, start from the premise that public schooling is intrinsically valuable and the best vehicle to engage all children. They want a public system that is "recognized as among the best in the world". Can either of the big parties say this or mean it? Is either prepared to draw out the consequences-setting high standards for all public schools, adopting the funding priorities that this requires, making durable improvements in the quality of the teaching force?

The big parties' vision of public schooling as a broken sector is not worth voting for. Australia needs a national system of schools. We want schools which care for all, not just for their own. We need a national system, not because the states cannot manage, but because the ALP and the Coalition are destroying the viability of public schools. If it is important enough to have a national curriculum-to expose all children to high cultural standards, not simply literacy and numeracy-it cannot be less important to have a national system of schools which gives all children the resources they need - good teachers, good peers, good programs.

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