

THE RANDOM BREATH TESTING FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

A synopsis of a presentation to the AEU Federal Conference 2008

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How Australia is dismantling public education.”**

The arguments against the current way Australia funds education are so powerful and conclusive that even confidential reports commissioned by the architects of the system (the Howard Federal Government), have to be buried and hidden from public view.

Yet, despite mounting evidence, the arguments fail to bite and politicians of all persuasions turn pale at the very mention of the issue of school's funding. So pale, in fact, that Education is hardly mentioned at all in the list of topics to be covered in the Rudd government's forthcoming 2020 summit.

Why?

There are many reasons for this conspiracy of silence. They include fear of the power of the churches, the desire of parents to buy their own children an advantage, the complexity and sheer bloody obscurity of the way we fund schools, meaning figures can be thrown about to support any and all points of view. And what Andrew Dowling of the ACER calls the “rail gauge” factor – by which he means inertia and fear of change, however sensible it may be. Most importantly, however, is the fear parents feel about the kind of world their children may find themselves facing in the future.

Nevertheless, attitudes to the ideal of public education remain positive. It is seen as a “good thing” but for someone else's child.

How do we turn supportive attitudes into supportive behaviour, which can then translate into real electoral pressure for funding policies to change?

Perhaps the famous example of the anti-drink driving campaign provides a clue. For decades, governments spent a fortune on media messages telling people not to drink and drive. The campaign worked – up to a point. In research group after research group participants agreed that drinking and driving was bad, their attitudes had well and truly changed. Trouble was, they still did it. What changed the behaviour of Australian motorists and so brought down the road toll was the introduction of random breath testing.

So what is the random breath testing for public education? What might actually change the behaviour of Australian voters and so Australian politicians?

There are only two motivators that actually change behaviour – hope and fear. And there is a powerful reason why school funding should be fairer and more about need

that can trigger both responses. But it is not about social justice or fairness. It is about the fact that Australia has one of the most segregated and inequitable education systems in the OECD. This puts us at a considerable long term disadvantage competitively. If we continue to be less effective at developing all our available talent than the countries we compete with, we will be left behind.

This incentive to change funding is already beginning to gain momentum. When the Business Council of Australia writes papers about education, when business starts to make anxious noises about capacity constraints and skills shortages they are really beginning to feel the pinch of decades of neglect of the schools that educate 70% of our children.

It would be nice to think that human beings change their behaviour because it is right, or fair, or just or even logical. As any parent or teacher can tell you, however, they actually only change when there are uncomfortable consequences if they do not.