

Why copy England?

**Opinion Piece prepared for the
Australian Education Union**

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October 2008

In England, since 1988, education ministers from different political parties have sought to create an education revolution. They have dismantled the powers of local authorities, created new types of secondary schools (with different governance, finances and powers), encouraged parental choice, established a National Curriculum, introduced mandatory testing at 7, 11, 14 and 16, promoted league tables of results and made endless changes to teacher training.

Ministers have succeeded in using new legislation to change systems, organisations and procedures. Whether they have succeeded in raising the average level of achievement, overcoming the impact of disadvantage on learners or in creating a more just society is, however, questionable.

In the latest survey of childhood conditions carried out for UNICEF, the United Kingdom (England was not rated separately) was ranked bottom of 21 countries. Furthermore, the 2006 PISA (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) shows that average scores in reading, mathematics and science have seriously declined since 2000 and that equity in education remains worryingly low.

The centrepiece of the English reforms is the 'high stakes' testing regime. It has been calculated by an English researcher that a child will experience at least 100 formal tests or examinations over the course of their schooling. The assessment is not only about the progress of pupils but encompasses the quality of teaching and the performance of schools. This has led to situations where pupils are labelled, teachers blamed and schools threatened with closure. Yet, as any assessment expert can tell you, using the same tests for judging individual children's progress and for measuring school effectiveness will not work; it is not fit for the (different) purposes.

In my career in the education service, I have researched school effectiveness for over 30 years. I have argued consistently that all schools do not perform at the same level: some promote greater progress and better care for their pupils than others. But I have also acknowledged the limitation of school effectiveness. Whilst some talented individuals overcome the effects of disadvantage and some outstanding schools can – through superhuman effort - buck the trend for a period, they are the exceptions. In every school system in the world in which data are collected, the advantaged (as a group) - having experienced better diet, housing, health care, access to books and educational experiences from birth - outperform the disadvantaged. Trying to even up the life chances for the disadvantaged is the greatest challenge for education systems. The available evidence, however, does not support the view that it can be met through the transparency of report cards or league tables or through unfettered choice. These tools simply help the advantaged to make even more strategic choices.

In England, a market approach to schools has created a bewildering hierarchy of institutions - from the elite private schools for the most powerful and advantaged families to the 'bog-

standard' comprehensive for the most disadvantaged and least powerful. Is this what Australia needs?

If it is not – and many of Julia Gillard's arguments point to her desire for a better society – then, rather than adopting failed English policies, it would be more astute to study how Finland has managed both to top the world in average scores and to achieve a high degree of equity. Could this be due to its comprehensive, un-streamed schools, its lack of inspections and regular testing programmes and its huge investment in well-educated teachers?

Of course, politicians are attracted to macho policies. It is understandable that they want to change systems and produce dramatic change. But they need do so wisely. Making education systems work for the most disadvantaged is one of the most challenging tasks facing any government. It needs careful, well-researched trials, experimental use of resources and intelligent debate - rather than bloody revolution.

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