

NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM

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Session Two: Past and present - the changing framework for public education

Schools and the marketplace - fallacy and fallout

Chris Bonnor

Introduction

A few weeks ago I attended a school reunion in Tumut, a delightful small town about two hours west of Canberra. There I was with solicitors and shopkeepers, millionaires and mechanics – a wonderful experience. The school enrolled everyone - I had almost forgotten that my early years were shaped by such places. Those rural comprehensive schools were the pioneers of fully inclusive public schooling - and they may also be the last remnants of it.

Those at the reunion seemed quite successful, happy and well balanced citizens. If they had been bruised by attending a school with kids from both sides of the tracks they covered the bruises well. If they had missed some of life's opportunities by not having choice and not having their school blooded and 'improved' by competition they didn't show it.

Of course Tumut High School was essentially the only school they could attend. There were no private schools, selectives, grammars, specialist schools or centres of excellence. How did we cope! Not only that, if you think NSW is still a fairly centralized school system, back then it was positively Stalinist. How did we cope!

We are all conditioned by our learning, growing and working experiences. I later became principal of a comprehensive school. I remember the day when the state government dropped a selective school into the next suburb. I soon learned that there is no better way to beggar your school neighbor than to pilfer its most engaged and aspiring learners. 'The choice will be good for you', the community was told. It was good for a few, but bad for the rest – and that probably sums up the impact of free-market¹ ideology of competition and choice as it has applied to schools.

My presentation is about this impact, about the ground level fallout of the free-market experiment, an experiment that failed. My focus is mainly on secondary schools, partly through experience but also because they have been in the front line of choice and competition for the longest period of time.

Escapees from the free-market

The idea of the free-market is that choice creates quality because consumers vote with their feet. And so, as the narrative goes, pressure is placed on low demand schools to improve and become more attractive. Over the years such claims have been far more voiced than validated.

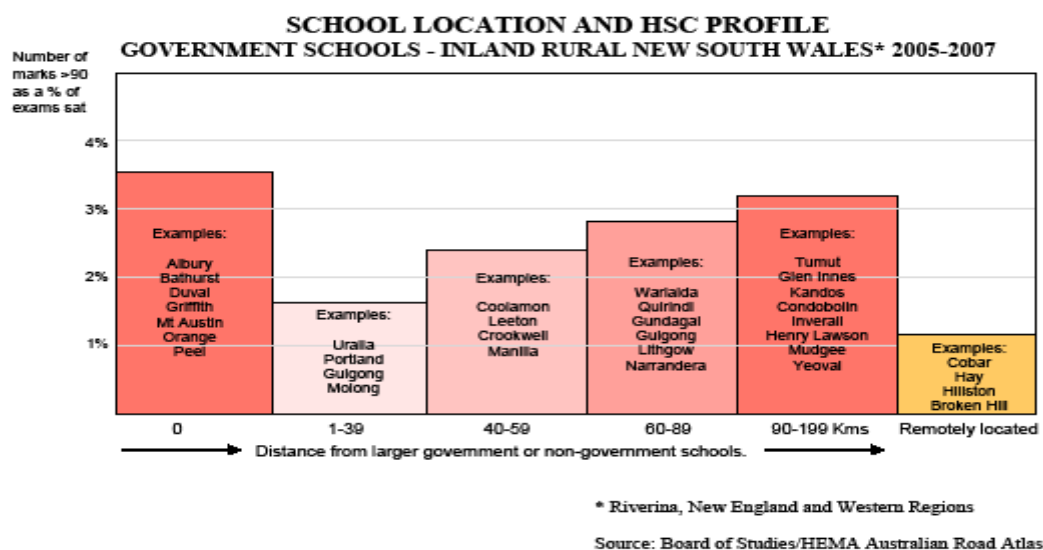
It is quite difficult to plot the impact of competition and choice in schools in urban areas where the marketplace of schools is usually complex and crowded. Rural areas are simpler, with fewer schools and a less cluttered geography of choice. They are also interesting to study because the more recent impact of the free-market impact has been substantial in some towns and almost negligible in others.

My recent interest in rural schools was prompted by *Inside Story* which is the journal arm of Australian Policy Online². APO was interested in the phenomenon of rural schools producing very good results. It seemed to challenge accepted wisdom about such schools being disadvantaged. Certainly a scan of the media at the end of each year reveals a number of quite remote schools with a high academic profile. I choose those words carefully: a school which has a high academic profile may or may not be a good or 'top' school as common parlance might suggest. This paper is not about good or bad schools.

To find out more I looked at student achievement in schools in inland NSW, using readily available HSC data³ to map the school-by-school distribution of high scores. I also scanned the Overall Position (OP) data used in Queensland⁴ to allocate university placements. Finally I looked at the 2005 ranking of Victorian schools by VCE study scores⁵. In effect this type of data creates crude league tables - but when it is adjusted for cohort size it does give a good indication of the academic profile, and by implication the enrolment profile, of each school.

The schools which have avoided the buffeting and/or the alleged benefits of choice and competition make an interesting starting point. HSC data for schools in rural NSW⁶ (2005-2007) shows that in general the academic profile of public schools actually increases the further they are located away from larger competing schools. This is illustrated in the graph below. The quite high profile of schools in the large regional centres is shown in the first column, along with the names of some of these schools. The schools closest to these towns, by contrast, have a more subdued profile. Many of their students attend school in the nearby large towns.

Only when you get beyond commuting distance do you find the profile of the schools increasing again. These schools enrol almost all their local children and their profile reflects this. The high profile schools such as Coonabarrabran, Mudgee, Crookwell and Deniliquin weave a pattern through inland NSW, keeping a respectable distance away from the large regional centres. For other reasons the profile of the most remote schools is again lower.



I found similar results for Queensland and state high schools like Gin Gin, Clermont, Cloncurry, Dalby, Kingaroy and Miles are amongst those with a good proportion of high achievers. In Victoria the highest scoring state schools belong to two main groups. The first includes many higher SES schools in inner or east Melbourne. These are the schools which Stephen Lamb (2007)⁷ shows were best able to capitalize on devolution – the winners, if you like, in the brave new world of the free-market. But the second group includes schools which are located in quite distant rural areas. The first group entered the competitive race already in front, the second were too far away to be affected.

So in rural areas we have living examples of schools which have been denied the benefits of the free-market. Lucky them, and lucky kids – just like the friends I met up with at my school reunion. By enrolling all the local children such schools continue to generate not only respectable achievement but also the social capital so essential in their towns - communities which are under siege enough as it is from drought and three decades of restructuring in the economy.

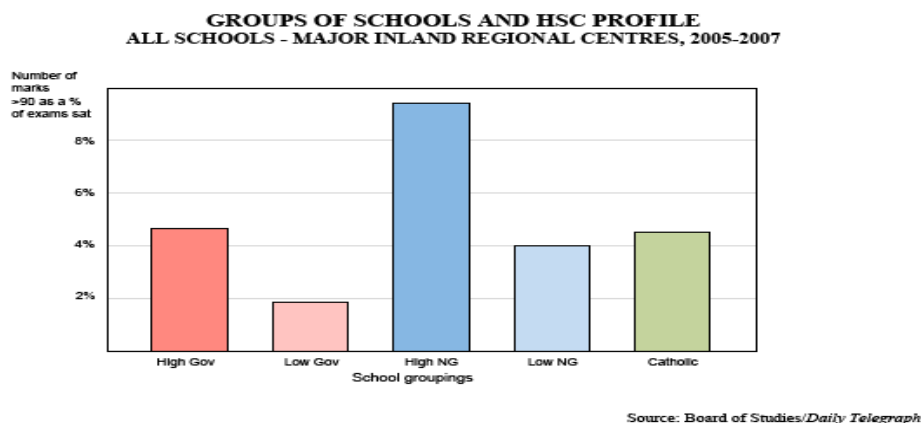
When the free-market comes to town

So which rural schools have faced the blowtorch of competition and how have they fared? In NSW these schools are located in or near the big regional centres such as Tamworth, Orange-Bathurst and Wagga Wagga. Geographers call these places sponge cities because of the way they soak up services and people, including schoolchildren, from their surrounds.

When we look inside these big centres we see all the features of schooling in urban Australia. The schools form a hierarchy that has arguably less to do with quality or lack of it, and much more to do with the real impact of competition as it applies to schools. In these towns the two or sometimes three public high schools (plus one Catholic school) have been joined by other private secondary schools. Just as the large centres have cannibalised the nearby countryside their schools 'compete' with each other. It is an undeclared and often unspoken competition, conducted on a very tilted playing field. In this competition the prizes include preferred students and the kudos they bring to the school. The free-market has come to town.

The inevitable result is that within each regional centre there might be anything up to four high academic profile private schools and one and sometimes two equivalent high profile public schools. Struggling alongside these are typically one or two lower academic profile, mainly public schools - often joined by those Catholic schools serving their historical mission to the Catholic poor.

When you combine and average the HSC profile of these different groups of schools the hierarchies they form become very obvious, as indicated in the graph below. The most prominent group of schools are the high academic profile private schools. When it comes to sifting and sorting in the marketplace of students these are the schools with the greatest choice, in particular absorbing those who can afford, and are prepared to pay, school fees.



Neighbours ... with a difference

Public and private schools have much in common but the differences are critical when it comes to competition. By definition most public schools must accept all local enrolments. Being an agency of government they are subject to FOI and public audit. Private schools have a range of accountabilities but they also have more flexibility in the extent of their obligations and in the manner of their operation – especially in highly symbolic areas such as discipline and school uniforms.

The way in which schools are funded also has a local impact. While the level of income available to private schools varies considerably most schools access funds from three sources: commonwealth and state government grants and private sources, mainly fees. There are wide differences of opinion on the rationale and equity of private funding (most countries which fund private schools won't allow it) but the local impact of having some schools resourced at higher levels than others is often keenly felt.

Some might argue that any academic difference between types of schools simply shows that some schools, especially private schools, deliver better results. But research in Australia and overseas consistently shows that the ownership of a school – public or private – has little if any influence on the results achieved by students.⁸ Most research into such differences properly takes in account socioeconomic status of enrolled students, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, extent of English proficiency, school location and resources.

There is little about the developing hierarchies of schools in these big towns that is unique. It is happening all over Australia – it is just easier to see in the bush. It is also true that some of this would happen anyway: even large country towns have income and other social divides between suburbs or localities. But the growth of private schooling creates yet another layer. As we'll see later, when fee-charging schools operate alongside free schools (which must also be inclusive), the enrolment profiles of the schools start to look quite different.

A note on hierarchies of schools.

Even a cursory glance at what passes for league tables reveals that our schools have evolved into hierarchies which have more to do with sifting and sorting enrolments than much else. In NSW the top of the HSC ladder is dominated by the (ever increasing) academically selective schools, both public and private, followed by (in approximate order) high-fee private schools, then a mix of public schools in middle class areas and lower fee private schools, dominant regional schools, then some more distant rural schools, followed by the rest.

In Victoria the 2005 VCE list of schools, one which is readily available on the internet, shows only 23 public schools in the first 100 (ranked by percentage of candidates with a VCE score of over 40). The highly ranked public schools are either located in inner or eastern Melbourne or in the bush.

There is also an interesting academic hierarchy amongst the private schools, one which parallels the level of fees - and all that such differences in resourcing might imply. The first 50 ranked private schools charged upper end (Year 12) day fees averaging \$17200 in 2008/9. Fees for the second 50 private schools averaged \$9531. Fees in schools below this top 100 averaged \$5556.

Obviously many of the schools are outstanding, regardless of enrolment and resourcing issues. But which students enroll, and whatever they bring with them to school each day – prior learning, family culture, aspiration...and money - is critical to the profile and the apparent success of the school.

The worsening divides

What were our schools like in the years before we became infatuated with the ideology of choice and competition? Is it possible to be overly romantic about the value and contribution of comprehensive schooling or did we always have substantial differences between schools? As Sydney University academics Campbell, Proctor and Sherrington⁹ indicate, we have always had a hierarchy of schools. But as their book *School Choice* also demonstrates, an increased (if complex) hierarchy is one of the outcomes of changes over the last few decades. They also point to changes in the social class character of school enrolments in more recent times.

It doesn't take long to find that the development of such hierarchies has increased. For NSW both current and previous HSC results, and school enrolment data, can be used to map the changing academic profile of schools. While the data has to be adjusted to make it comparable¹⁰ there have been interesting changes in NSW between 2000 and 2007.

These two years are significant. Those completing the HSC in 2000 enrolled in Year 7 before the most recent surge in private school enrolments. Those completing in 2007 started secondary school at a time of very high private school growth rates. While this is not strictly a free-market 'before' and 'after', it certainly indicates what happened as a consequence of the most recent period of private school growth during the years of the Howard government.

Enrolment figures can be used to identify three main groups of secondary schools in the larger regional (multi-school) towns in 2007. They are:

- Private schools – all types
- Larger public high schools
- Smaller public high schools

There were twelve larger public secondary schools in Inverell, Armidale, Tamworth, Orange, Bathurst, Southern Highlands, Goulburn, Queanbeyan, Wagga, Albury and Griffith. Alongside each of these, thirteen schools were noticeably smaller in 2007. The larger schools averaged 929 students; the smaller schools averaged 650.

DISTRIBUTION OF HIGH HSC SCORES BY CATEGORY OF SCHOOL						
INLAND NEW SOUTH WALES#, 2000 AND 2007						
	Number of schools in 2000 and 2007	Number of students in each group, 2000 and 2007	Average enrolment per school in 2000 and 2007	Number of DAs* as a proportion of total group candidature 2000 – 2007	Share of DAs* in each group of schools: 2000 and 2007	Number of schools in the first 50 in the study area, 2000 and 2007
Private schools	29 - 33	13,726 – 14,921	473 - 452	44.84 – 220.46	34.19% - 50.60%	16 - 23
Larger regional centre public schools	12 - 12	11,038 – 11,149	919 - 929	14.97 – 60.79	10.75% - 13.95%	8 - 7
Smaller regional centre public schools	13 - 13	10,421 – 8,458	801 - 650	13.44 – 25.00	10.35% - 5.74%	6 - 1
Other schools	67 - 67	25,742 – 25,687	384 - 383	66.04 – 129.47	44.74% - 29.72%	18 - 17
Totals (where appropriate)	121 - 125	60,927 – 60,215			100% - 100%	48 – 48 (excl. gov selective schools)
# The study area mainly includes the NSW Department of Education and Training Western, Riverina and New England regions						
* Distinguished achievers - note that it may not be valid to compare the raw number of DAs between the two years.						
Source: NSW Board of Studies and <i>Daily Telegraph</i>						

Obviously a range of factors might impact on school size and growth or decline, including size of drawing area and local demographic shifts, as well as genuine differences in quality and the impact of school leadership. But several things happened between 2000 and 2007:

- The larger public secondary schools in the regional centres held their numbers.
- Enrolment in the smaller schools contracted sharply, from an average of 800 to 650 - a fall of almost 20%.
- The number of private schools with HSC candidates increased, with a corresponding small decline in the average size of each school.

The table also shows the changing share of high-end HSC results amongst these schools between 2000 and 2007. When compared to all the schools in the study area:

- The private schools as a group increased their share of distinguished achievers by around 42% in a space of seven years.
- The dozen larger public high schools increased their share of distinguished achievers by 30%.
- By contrast, the nearby smaller high schools not only lost students but their share of high achievers almost halved.

Both the larger and smaller public high schools once had a similar share of distinguished achievers, but this changed significantly. Some of the changes took place before 2000 - we have to go back to the mid 1990s to find schools such as Kelso, Koorngal and Murray High Schools with anything like a consistently reasonable academic profile. Schools which were increasing their academic profile included Oxley, Bathurst and Albury High Schools.

The schools listed above have at least one thing in common. Despite having felt very different impacts of the free market, all have been placed in the same “like school group” (LSG) by the NSW Department of Education and Training. In another LSG are schools such as Wellington, Dorrigo, Inverell and Peel High Schools. For different reasons two of these schools have been advantaged and two disadvantaged in the new competitive environment. If they ever were “alike” they certainly aren’t now. It challenges not only efforts by the states to categorise schools but also calls into serious question the move, under the Melbourne Declaration, to encourage comparison of schools in such “like school” groups.

Advocates for a free-market of schools would hold that obviously some schools improved in this time and others fell behind. Indeed, many commentators point to government schools which seem to do well out of competition. Some certainly have done well – but when the free-market forced all schools into a competitive race some schools were already ahead of the starting line.

The advocates for the free-market choose to ignore such differences. A few years ago the then Federal education minister Brendan Nelson issued a little booklet describing high-demand government schools¹ – the message being that if they can do it, anyone can. But only five of the schools were located in places with low average median incomes compared with the Australian average¹. Only three of the 20 chosen schools were small and a majority had been upgraded. There were none from NSW which might suggest that there are no high demand schools in NSW - or the government and education department didn’t want to be party to fraud.

The table above shows that the schools which have jumped furthest ahead in terms of academic profile were and still are those private schools which could, actively or otherwise, apply a number of enrolment discriminators. Then, in the scramble to retain a reasonable spread of higher achieving students even some of the public schools in the larger towns have turned on each other as well as trying to compete against private schools. Like many Sydney schools, Karabar High School in Queanbeyan offers a gifted and talented program. It is a double-edged sword: what some people see as a wonderful opportunity others see as a thinly-veiled attempt to enrol preferred students. Principals guardedly talk about similar scenarios in other towns.

For a range of reasons it tends to be the more aspirational and able, and mainly middle class, students who are mobile between schools. Various studies point to this qualitative as well as quantitative shift. In his Melbourne study Stephen Lamb shows that the students who travelled to attend schools away from their local area had a higher academic ability. The travellers were brighter kids.¹¹

The personal school choice experiences of middle class Australians, as told through the pages of *School Choice*, are complex – and the authors have identified seven middle class sub-groups with often different backgrounds and aspirations. But one of the common threads running through their stories is parental fear of the consequences for their children if they have to enroll with less able/at risk or sometimes just different others in the local public comprehensive school. Such fears are expressed in different ways - both overtly and in coded language – but it is real and has substantially driven their school choices.

It is hardly surprising that the schools they left behind have a higher concentration of the most disadvantaged students, with the obvious impact on the academic profile of the school. In places such as England or New York such schools might be labeled as “failing” – then closed, re-badged and given a financial shot in the arm...until the whole cycle starts again. As Trevor Cobbold shows, in Australia we sometimes top them up with inadequate compensatory funding - but we’re not really very serious about that.

The more hard-nosed advocates for a free-market of schools would again respond to all this with ‘so what – that’s the free-market and choice at work’. The problem is that the losers in this market are usually kids and

families with little capacity to choose. Through no fault of their own they face a huge risk of falling further behind.

Inevitably someone will claim that the bigger schools did better because they became big and the private schools did better because they are...private. But even the ACER's LSAY study couldn't find any significant difference between student outcomes in public and private schools.¹² Any supposed achievement boost for students in large schools is well-challenged by Trevor Cobbold's review of the research.¹³ Stephen Lamb did find a size advantage for big schools in Melbourne in the 1980s but points out that the profile of shifting enrolments has meant that school size has become so associated with social intake that it no longer exerts an influence by itself.¹⁴ Lamb shows how one of the main effects of free-market devolution has been to accelerate the growth of middle and high SES government schools, while schools serving low SES areas tended to wither and decay.

The real differences between schools

In recent times Julia Gillard, Deputy-Prime Minister has made considerable efforts to talk down the idea that there are significant differences between school sectors. So what are some of the differences between schools indicated and suggested by the above research? The table below hypothesizes about the differences between high academic and low academic profile schools in rural NSW.

SCHOOLS WITH A DIFFERENCE Common characteristics of high and low academic profile schools		
	HIGH ACADEMIC PROFILE	LOW ACADEMIC PROFILE
Type/sector	Mainly 'private' (fee-charging) with some middle class (high demand) public	Mainly low demand public and some Catholic schools
Growth and enrolment	Usually larger – some growing. Many enrolment discriminators	Smaller and shrinking. Few enrolment discriminators
Enrolment profile	Higher average family income	Lower average family income
	Few indigenous enrolments	Many indigenous enrolments
	Few learning disabled	More learning disabled
	Fewer 'at risk' students	More 'at risk' students
Affiliation	Mainly church or faith schools	Mainly secular schools
Future	Compounding advantages	Compounding disadvantages

Let's look at each of these in turn.

Firstly **sector and size**. Schools with higher academic profiles are mainly 'private' (fee-charging), as well as noticeably middle class public schools. These are 'high demand' schools which have little trouble attracting enrolments – in rural NSW their enrolments were sustained between 2000 and 2007. Lower academic profile schools are mainly public and some Catholic schools. These tend to be low demand schools which may struggle to keep up their numbers and their average enrolment fell in the study period. Again this trend isn't unique to rural NSW. The graph below shows how enrolment growth in Melbourne secondary schools was most pronounced in the higher SES areas¹⁵. The variation in the trend in the early 1990s was created by school closures.

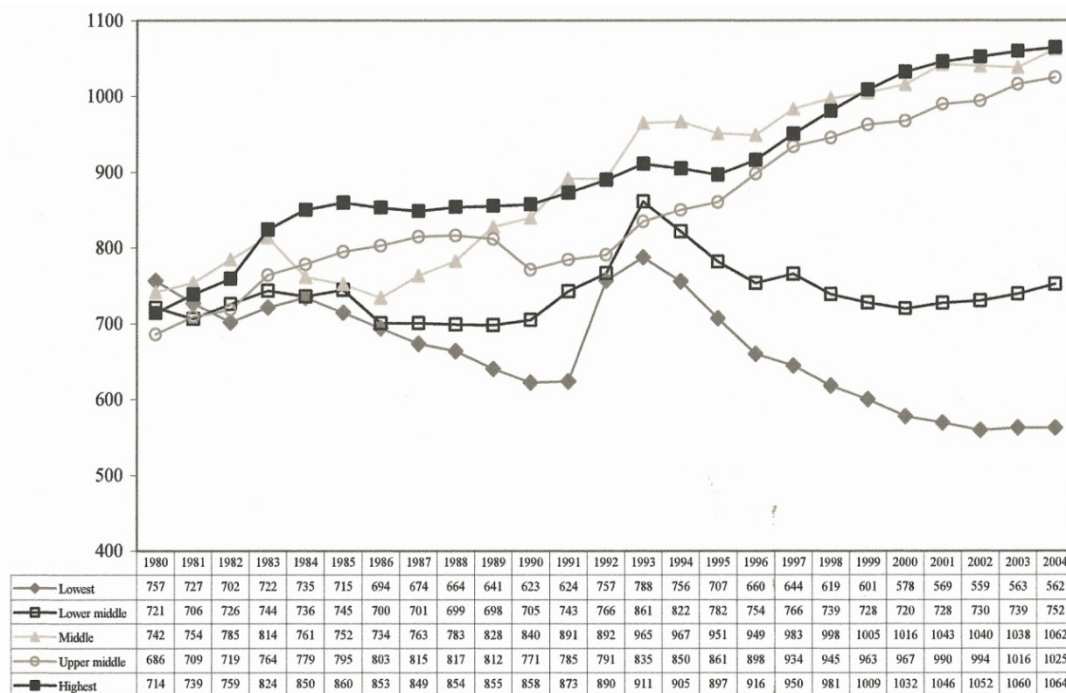


Figure 1.5: Changes in Mean School Enrolments, 1980-2004, by SES (quintile): Melbourne Secondary Schools with Enrolments in Every Year

Next, enrolment profile differences.

Stephen Lamb shows that, after a couple of decades of devolution the enrolment profile of schools in Melbourne revealed huge differences. Whatever the category – those needing welfare support, indigenous status, students with disabilities, ESL students – the schools in higher SES areas had fewer of them, the schools in the lower SES areas had more.

“the school reforms driving the growing diversity in schools over the last decade have intensified the gaps between schools serving the rich and those serving the poor, gaps marked by growing differences in school size, student intake, resources and achievement.”¹⁶

The table above suggests many differences between the high academic profile (mainly private) and low academic profile (mainly public) schools. While my analysis has not probed features of the enrolment other than academic profile, it is worth restating what we know about the enrolment profiles of public and private schools in Australia.

- At-risk students. Adam Rorris reminds us that while public:private enrolments are in the ratio 67:33, the equivalent ratio in the case of at-risk students is 78:22¹⁷
- Indigenous: the Productivity Commission shows that indigenous kids make up 5.6% of public school but only 1.7% of private school enrolments.¹⁸
- Family income. Barbara Preston shows that 26 per cent of students in Independent schools were from high income households, compared to 16 per cent at Catholic schools and only 8 per cent of students at government schools.¹⁹ Preston also shows the changing ratio between low and high income families in schools. In 1996 this ratio in government primary schools was 1.21 to 1.0. Ten years later this increased to 1.35 to 1.0. The ratio for secondary school students increased from 1.34 to 1.62. The opposite trend occurred in private schools.²⁰ This gap is increasing.
- Family occupation. Campbell and Sherrington show that in 1976 over two thirds of people classified as professional and managerial had their kids in NSW public secondary schools. This had shrunk to half by 2001.²¹
- Disabled. The Productivity Commission shows that disabled students make up 5.3% of public school enrolments but only half that figure in private schools.²²

Facts or fantasies?

Every time such facts are presented there is a flood of stories to try to show that the opposite is the case. There is a considerable gap between the picture as painted by such data - and impressions left by politicians and some media. In recurring appeals to get 'beyond' the public Vs private debate the Deputy Prime Minister claims it is impossible to say that one sector is rich and the other poor. Notwithstanding variations between schools in any sector, the facts simply and depressingly contradict such claims.

But such facts aren't the stuff of media stories. There isn't any counter-intuitive angle, no Christian charity, no noblesse oblige and no stories of personal sacrifice. It doesn't mean that the principals and staff of advantaged schools don't feel some measure of discomfort. Cardinal Pell lamented a few years ago that his schools no longer served the poor, and some Catholic schools have since set targets to increase their share of indigenous kids. But, as Barbara Preston has shown, the ones that are already enrolled mostly come from the higher income indigenous families. It is hardly likely that the vacant beds of boarding schools are going to be filled by the poor and dispossessed.

Other data which purports to measure school achievement highlights differences in the enrolment profile of schools. *Productivity Commission* reports (2009) show retention rates in non-government schools 20% higher than in government schools.²³ This is despite the growth of VET in schools, lowest in independent schools. One could parade all manner of similar measures of attendance, staff turnover, critical incidents if these were readily available.

We need to keep in mind that the differences stated above are averages. The real difference between schools in some communities is much greater. Perhaps those in doubt simply need to take a drive through the large NSW regional centres. The schools which lose the vital resource of aspiring and engaged students and families, who lose their achieving role models, have ended up serving an increasingly marginalized enrolment of strugglers and the disengaged. It is now possible to identify the marginalized schools in so many of our large towns. It is also possible in our cities but in urban areas our advantaged and disadvantaged schools are often suburbs apart. Our social, religious and even racial divisions - worsened by our framework of schools - are side by side, on full view in the bush.

Who really gets to choose?

On its very first page, the recent book *School Choice* is instructive. Unsurprisingly it is a book about middle class Australians. As the authors explain, school fees, religious tests and place of residence, as well as ability to pass scholarship and school entrance tests provide the hurdles that a great many families cannot negotiate.

In the Australian context, choice of schools is largely an illusion. Less illusionary but also less widely understood is the manner in which schools choose students. As the authors of *School Choice* put it, “The market is not free and the freedom to choose is not the same as the ‘privilege’ of being chosen”.

A scan of school websites illustrates the many hurdles and mechanisms used to sift enrolments. While most high-fee schools claim to be non-selective they routinely ask for the following before placing a student’s name on the waiting list: some non-refundable fees, reconfirmation two years prior, full family details, details of referees and additional details at interview. In some cases the schools openly discourage students with disabilities. Schools at various levels in the pecking order apply additional discriminators or incentives in the form of scholarships, entry tests, restrictive (including religious) criteria – and, if it seen as necessary, often hasty expulsion practices.

What advocates for the free market see as a variety of schools offering wonderful choice is, in reality, a hierarchy created by the schools’ unequal capacity to choose.

But this isn’t entirely a public-private issue. While NSW essentially retains zoning it is less possible to generalize about the profile of a public school in terms of the character of its drawing area. Even in this relatively centralized system the enrolment profile is impacted by the school’s capacity to discriminate in enrolments. The greatest capacity belongs to the burgeoning number of state selective schools.

School principals also know that being a low or high demand school carries a momentum of its own - school catchment areas don’t get in the way of determined parents or principals. I was principal of a relatively low-demand school in a lower middle class area, one which had to work very hard for every enrolment. I later became principal of a relatively high-demand school in an upper middle class area. My capacity (but not willingness) to discriminate in enrolments increased. While he enrolled before my time, one school captain at Davidson High even travelled each day from his home in Blacktown.

The irony is that there has been substantial effort in some countries to safeguard against schools discriminating in enrolment policy because the social effects are well-known. In Australia it is rarely discussed.

It is true that some schools, public and private, work harder than others to attract enrolments – and not all this activity is a diversion from teaching and learning. But no one should be surprised at the way in which the enrolment profile of schools has diverged and why this has happened. In fact the scenario we are witnessing was predicted over two decades ago.

“... A continuing significant decline in the government school sector’s share of overall enrolment is likely to change substantially the social composition of the student population in government schools, with potentially significant negative consequences for the general comprehensiveness of public school systems. The cumulative effect of these financial, educational and social consequences could, in the long term, threaten the role and standing of the public school as a central institution in Australian society.²⁴

Even in the mid 1950s the visiting American educator Freeman Butts predicted that non-government schools would increase claims for state aid and this weaken government schools – strengthening class, religious and social distinctions in Australian society.²⁵ That future has arrived.

Across Australia such distinctions have made the task of lifting up the bottom – so essential to student success, community-building and even productivity and economic growth – much harder to achieve. Increasingly there is

no one at school for the strugglers to look to in order to see how it is done. We need to seriously question the wisdom of trying to narrow the gap without tackling policies which widen it at the very same time.

There is considerable irony in the headlines achieved by the Rudd government in its unfolding plans to implement findings of the Higher Education Review. Earlier in March the Deputy Prime Minister increased pressure on universities to enrol poor students. She stressed that schools and parents must work harder to raise the bar for kids.

Indeed they must, but raising the bar is always easier if parents and teachers can readily point to other kids who do it - even better if there is a critical mass of achievers in the same school to set the pace. As Anna Patty (*SMH* March 10) commented, "Universities have been asked to make up for more than a decade of inequity entrenched in the school education system".

To make a real change the Deputy Prime Minister now needs to turn the equity blowtorch on all schools. She already has the script. In fact she should have started with the schools.

The table showing our divided schools also points to other differences, including religion. It seems hard to understand why more people of faith are not concerned at the strong alignment of faith schools with social class and other divides...and why they apparently accept that the occasional and even significant acts of charity somehow balances the picture. As far as the faith divisions are concerned, the onus needs to be placed on advocates for separate faith schools to show, with evidence from Australia and abroad, that having schools divided on religious lines creates something better. In the process they might like to show which bit Henry Parkes and others got wrong when they said that inclusive and secular schools were the foundations of democracy.

In some places there is also an undeniable racial divide between our schools. A survey of secondary principals showed that in some parts of NSW Aboriginal students are disproportionately found in local public schools while government-funded private schools, other public schools or schools across state borders, are becoming refuges for white families. It may not be endemic, but where it occurs it is a concern. I took the survey to the NSW government. The words "white flight" are probably overused but they certainly describe the reaction.

We cannot walk away from the multiple roles of schools in managing cultural diversity, in being agents of social bonding and cohesion and in generating social capital. It is time for a major national forum on these topics alone. Our avoidance of emerging problems even reached the lofty heights of the Rudd government's 2020 Summit last year. Buried at the bottom of page 19 of the final Canberra Summit report is this statement "Some argue that the fragmentation of schooling arising from funding policies inhibits social inclusion and exacerbates social divides."²⁶ It is time for the "some" to be heard.

Can schools win against the odds?

I want to pre-empt the criticism that is usually directed at the sort of concerns I have raised. Those who point to the need to address issues outside the school front gate are often accused of subscribing to some sort of 'biological social determinism', believing that we can't make a difference against the odds for kids in some contexts and communities. Nothing could be further from the truth – and any teacher or principal who believes that they can't lift the achievement levels of their students has no place in the profession.

The education profession is full of remarkable people who actually can do anything against the odds – and we need to learn from and emulate people who are authentic achievers. But in education we are besieged by heroes and gurus including education chancellors and newspaper barons from distant lands. Perhaps the reality is summed up in this quote:

"In every country there are outstanding examples of individuals and individual schools who overcome the constraints and achieve more highly than their socio-economic status would suggest. Examples of excellent schools, committed communities and motivated learners achieving above the norms or system-wide averages are often used to 'disprove' the idea that relative affluence fixes your position in life....But they may also be exceptions, which prove the general rule..."²⁷

It was said by Tom Bentley when he was Director of Demos, an independent think tank in the United Kingdom. He also has written:

“Allowing voluntary choices to alter the fundamental structures of educational opportunity in ways which inhibit social mobility will also harm educational achievement overall, and represent a massive long-term cost for any society to bear”²⁸

He is now senior advisor to Julia Gillard. I am not sure if he has restated this in recent times.

Instead of dealing with this reality we are bombarded by school reform. We have seen a host of public school restructures and reforms. The names alone make you feel all warm and runny: Destination 2010, Schools of the Third Millennium, Renewing our schools, Choice, diversity opportunity. Public education has been born again so many times that one has to question its secular status.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing industry of school improvement and school reform – forever urging teachers to constantly raise the bar. In the process many reformers are reticent to acknowledge real and pressing issues – their commitment to bandwagons, careers and getting the ear or the money of government seems to be more important.

Conclusion

Just like the errant economic market, the free-market of schools – and the problems it has created - won't self-correct. The Prime Minister has talked up the role of the state as regulator, funder and provider of public goods. As far as schools are concerned, the regulating is timid, the distribution of funding is simply bizarre and the providing of public goods advantages some of the public over others.

The application of the free-market to schooling has been at best a very mixed blessing and at worst a disaster. Competition has never lifted all schools for the benefit of all. It is great for running races and sporting teams and has a place in the classroom, not least because teachers can help most kids become winners of some kind. Competition between schools might even improve some aspects of their operation. But in this competition, some schools are starting well behind the blocks.

The ones which lose out don't have to be the worst or even bad – they just can't compete as easily on a playing field which is tilted against them and their kids. This sort of competition just lifts their most achieving kids out of their classrooms and places them in what parents see as more advantaged schools and circumstances. This is not about blaming parents – it is just what happens.

Competition has one impact on learning. It has quickly taught schools and principals a golden rule of business: the quality of the product - and the reputation of the producer - is enhanced if there is greater control over the inputs. In the case of schools the most important inputs walk in through the school gates each day, carrying bags, benefits and baggage.

There are so many solutions. Trevor Cobbold stresses the need to get serious about funding for equity. We have to seriously support marginalized kids and their schools. We also need to keep in mind that we can't bridge and widen the gaps at the same time. Stephen Lamb, Richard Teese and others talk about reshaping the way we offer schooling, especially in low SES areas. We need to do some of that, but such structural reform alone won't change the direction in which we are heading.

The four national groups that have come together for this Forum need to jointly support a project to compile the research, or undertake further work where it is needed, on our widening gaps and the barriers to equity and progress for all our kids. Then we need to reconvene this Forum at least every two years with a smaller group meeting more often to chart progress and determine priorities.

We have to reverse policies which widen the gaps, policies which mock our rhetoric about equity and support for the poor. In particular we must seriously commit to funding on need, to jettison policies that strip disadvantaged schools of their achieving kids – and we need to reward schools which commit to inclusive enrolment practices. Local public schools should be funded so that they become a real and active choice for all families.

It won't be easy, especially for a generation of politicians reared on the language and the diet of the free-market. But with a little courage, and a genuine commitment to evidence-based policies and root and branch reform, almost anything is possible.

Chris Bonnor, co-author, *The Stupid Country*
www.futuredforum.blogspot.com

- ¹ For convenience there are two imperfect and inadequate terms used throughout this paper. “Free-market” is used to describe the regime of school competition and choice driven by neo-liberal ideology in the last few decades. “Private school” is used to describe any school operated by a private entity rather than a public agency.
- ² <http://www.apo.org.au>
- ³ NSW Board of Studies and *Daily Telegraph*. The newspaper adjusts the number of distinguished achievers against the cohort size for each school. See (for example) http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/maralynparker/index.php/dailytelegraph/comments/2008_top_schools_in_the_hsc/
- ⁴ <http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/about/617.html>
- ⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_schools_in_Victoria,_Australia_according_to_2005_VCE_results
- ⁶ The study area includes most secondary and central schools in Western, Riverina and New England regions with the exception of the most remote schools. Inland schools in North Coast, Hunter and South Coast regions are also included. The total number of schools is 140.
- ⁷ Stephen Lamb (2007) *School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia – A case of Residualising the Poor* in R Teese, S Lamb and M Duru-Bellat (eds) *International Studies in Educational Inequality, Theory and Policy Volume 3: Inequality: Educational Theory and Public Policy* 2007 Springer
- ⁸ See for example Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski, *Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data*, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education Teachers College, Columbia University 2006.
- ⁹ Craig Campbell, Helen Proctor and Geoffrey Sherrington *School Choice – How parents negotiate the new school market in Australia* Allen and Unwin 2009
- ¹⁰ To avoid the possibility of different measures being used to identify distinguished achievers, the number of achievers in each group of schools is restated as a proportion of the total number in each year surveyed.
- ¹¹ Stephen Lamb (2007)
- ¹² G. Marks, J. McMillan and K. Hillman, *Tertiary Education Performance: The Role of Student Background and School Factors LSAY Research Report 22*, ACER Press, Melbourne, 2001.
- ¹³ <http://www.soscanberra.com/>
- ¹⁴ Stephen Lamb (2007)
- ¹⁵ Stephen Lamb (2007)
- ¹⁶ Stephen Lamb (2007)
- ¹⁷ Adam Rorris *Investment in Australian Schools Somewhere between the virtuous and the vicious* in Chris Bonnor (ed) *2020 School Education Summit – the public good and the education of children* 2008 www.thestupidcountry.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/school-education-summit-june-2008.pdf
- ¹⁸ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services*, 2008 4.1 Profile of School Education
- ¹⁹ Barbara Preston *The unintended consequences of government policies & the historic power of rent-seekers protecting positional goods* in Chris Bonnor (ed) *2020 School Education Summit – the public good and the education of children* 2008
- ²⁰ Barbara Preston (2008)
- ²¹ Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherrington, *The Comprehensive Public School, Historical Perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 136-138.
- ²² Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services*, 2008 4.1 Profile of School Education
- ²³ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services*, 2008 4.1 Profile of School Education
- ²⁴ *Planning and Funding Policies for New Non-Government Schools*, Commonwealth Schools Commission, para 20. Cited by Barbara Preston, (2008)
- ²⁵ Cited by Craig Campbell, Helen Proctor and Geoffrey Sherrington *School Choice – How parents negotiate the new school market in Australia* Allen and Unwin 2009, Page 47
- ²⁶ http://www.australia2020.gov.au/final_report/index.cfm
- ²⁷ Bentley, Tom, *A fair go: public value and diversity in education*, Demos, London, 2004
- ²⁸ Tom Bentley (2004)