

NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM

Friday March 27th and Saturday March 28th, 2009

Session Four: For all children - achieving quality and equity in Australian schooling

Comment

Justine Ferrari

Note: Justine Ferrari was unable to attend the forum. This is the text of the presentation she had prepared.

Quality and equity for all children sums it up. Not a good education for most and a better-than-nothing education for others, but a quality one for all. It should be the motto of our education system. It should be etched across the doorway of every school. It should be the aim of every government, every school, every teacher, every parent.

There's no doubt our public school system struggles. It's a mantra among public education supporters: school buildings are rundown or falling down, basic resources such as toilet paper are paid for by the P&C. While the private school down the road has electronic white boards in every classroom, public students are lucky to share one among the whole school.

In some areas, particularly in remote indigenous communities, essentials such as chairs, desks, books and even a classroom are absent. Capital spending on schools in the private sector has far out-stretched the money governments have invested in school facilities over the past couple of decades, embarrassingly so.

And teachers in the public system struggle. They're undervalued and should be paid more, a lot more. They're asked to teach subjects outside their area of expertise. They battle lack of interest from students, an increasing workload as more and more is demanded of schools, and often in conditions that most in the workforce would shun.

It's not startling to say public education is suffering an image problem. In part, I believe this stems from the debate over the past decade or so being dominated by funding issues.

Campaigners continually compare public schools with the privates, disparagingly. Parents and the community hear a lot about what public schools don't have, why private schools are better. Parents don't need to visit their local public school to find out what it's like; the shortcomings are broadcast from one end of the land to the other.

But money doesn't necessarily buy quality. The quality of a school is judged by what happens in the classroom and public schools provide as good or better an education than the private school next door.

It's not to deny the need for equipment, for a safe environment or the role that well-designed and well-resourced school buildings can play in making kids want to come to school. But quality is about expectations as much as resources, and in this arena, public schools can punch above their weight.

Equity is ensuring that all students, no matter where they live, have access to the same quality of education. It's more than making sure children in remote areas have broadband access at school; it's about ensuring that indigenous children are offered the same range of subjects as big city kids, that cultural differences are not used as an excuse to expect less of them, and to offer them less.

In an equitable school system, all children have an equal opportunity to do their best. They have equal access to a rigorous and quality curriculum, and the mindset that you can't teach Shakespeare to kids in western Sydney is flushed out.

A quality school system always strives to do better, and not settle for good enough. It knows that all children can learn to read and write, and have the maths skills required for daily life, and accepts nothing less. In Australia, one in ten students in year 9 is functionally illiterate, falling below the standard deemed necessary to progress through school and into the working world. No one should be satisfied with that. While we rightly celebrate that Australian students are among the best in the world in international tests, we must not lose sight that 10 per cent of children are floundering.

Public schools are the ones that can offer quality education to all children, without selection based on natural talent or economic advantage. As such, the sector should welcome the accountability system being established by the federal government, because it will reveal the good job it's doing.

The lesson from Joel Klein's visit to Australia is not to suggest a model that we superimpose on our school system, that we grade schools from A to F and close the ones that fail. The New York experience shows how accountability can remake bad schools. Of course, conditions in Australia are different and we don't have the luxury of closing schools because there isn't always one around the corner out the back of Bourke, but that doesn't mean we should shy away from identifying schools that are failing their students, and fixing them. Protecting those schools only harms their students.

Instead of focusing on all that is wrong in public schools, the debate needs to widen to encompass the achievements of teachers and students and how it can do better. A funding argument the public system can make and win is that resources should follow students' needs. The neediest students are in public schools. The extra teachers in literacy and numeracy, in teaching English as a second language, in providing extra tuition for students are predominantly needed in public schools.

The more public schools cry poor in comparison with private schools, the more parents will wonder if they're up to the job. They will continue to walk past the public school to the private school down the road. The more public schools appear struggling, the more parents wonder if they can provide the quality education, the nice environment, the discipline and care that every child deserves.

Public schools need to start selling what they're good at, and argue for money not to catch up to private schools but to provide the equity and quality that underpins the education they can provide.