

# THE IMPACT OF HIGH STAKES TEST DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY

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## Synopsis

*Innovation, creativity and passion are alive and well in schools throughout Australia. However these are increasingly constrained in a command-and-control approach that is leading to an unprecedented level of centralisation, standardisation and bureaucratisation. My concern about the impact of current constraints arises from the experience of these same schools and my ongoing assessment of progress in the 'education revolution', the centre piece of the federal government's policy for schools but to which all states and territories are bound through national partnership agreements. As far as the future of the nation is concerned, my over-arching concern is that innovation, creativity and passion – the key requirements for a vibrant society and a successful economy in the years ahead – are in jeopardy if we continue on our present path. My focus in this presentation is on the impact of high stakes testing.*

## The Agitation Hill Lecture

I gave voice to my concerns on 29 May 2009 when I delivered the Agitation Hill Lecture in Castlemaine on the topic 'Want world class schools? It's time to agitate' (Caldwell, 2009a). I focused in particular on plans for NAPLAN and what we now know as the My School website.

Agitation Hill was the site of a major uprising in 1853 following the decision of Governor La Trobe in 1851 to introduce a monthly licence fee on the goldfields of Victoria. Others were the Monster Meeting at Forest Creek, the Red Ribbon Rebellion around Bendigo and the dramatic events at Eureka in Ballarat in 1854. These agitations and the language of radical dissent they invoked were key events in the story of democracy and responsible government in Australia.

I concluded my review of developments with the statement: 'Unless there is agitation on an epic scale, such as refusal by teachers to administer the tests or by parents to have their children sit for them, it seems that league tables of limited validity that mean little to parents are a fait accompli'. I added: 'parents and the profession will be standing on the high ground if the language of radical dissent is adopted on this issue'.

Everything that has occurred since then leads me to affirm these conclusions today.

## The Educational Transformations report cards on the 'education revolution'

The federal government and former minister Julia Gillard should be commended for their intentions in regard to education. In partnership with the states they have been able to achieve a lot after a decade or more when there was little progress on some fronts. Progress has been made in 'new federalism'.

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In late 2009 I prepared a 'report card' (Caldwell, 2009b) on progress in the first two years of the 'education revolution'. The 10 criteria were based on a 10-year strategy for an education revolution that Jessica Harris and I had proposed in the final chapter of our book *Why Not the Best Schools* (Caldwell & Harris, 2008) which drew from a six-country study of school transformation. Here in brief summary form are the 10 criteria or strategies:

1. A national curriculum is designed that is broad enough and sufficiently adaptable to ensure the professional judgement of a highly-skilled profession will prevail at the school level
2. Initial teacher education is transformed to ensure all teachers have a master's degree and remain at the forefront of knowledge and skill through continuous professional development
3. New structural arrangements are designed to ensure diversity of programs in the post-compulsory years in an effective constantly-changing alignment of education, economy and society
4. National testing of all students is minimised as the highest levels of knowledge and skill are developed by teachers and those who support them
5. The wider community including business is seriously engaged in design and delivery with public and private funds deployed through networks of foundations and trusts
6. Transparent needs-based mechanisms are designed to ensure the efficient deployment of public and private funds
7. Innovative approaches to governance are introduced along the lines of publicly-funded no-fee charter schools to ensure that public schools maintain their appeal to parents
8. School ownership ceases to be a factor in determining the amount of public funds that are disbursed to schools
9. Higher levels of school autonomy in the public sector are achieved within a framework of accountability and choice
10. Most schools in the public sector are rebuilt or redesigned to make them suitable for learning and teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The score in the Educational Transformations report card was 43 out of 100. On only one measure was a good rating achieved and that was for the rapid development of a national curriculum after more than a century of mis-matched state curriculums – a score of 8 out of 10.

I provided an update at a public forum on education in Hamilton, Victoria on 4 March 2010 (Caldwell, 2010), reporting a marginal increase to 45 out of 100. Marked down was 'modernising infrastructure', reflecting concerns about 'value for money' and 'value for learning' in the implementation of the Building the Education Revolution component of the economic stimulus package. Small increases were registered on a couple of criteria, especially in relation to the work of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and its broad agenda to build the capacity of the profession.

If I was to provide a further update, the score would likely revert to 43 out of 100 or even less. Too many concerns have been raised about Building the Education Revolution (BER). I have no doubt that communities have valued the additional funds and some good facilities have been built but there is a real possibility that funds will dry up and what we have or will shortly complete will be 'as good as it gets' for the foreseeable future, given that state and territory funds will be limited if the federal government scales back its support. We based our criterion / strategy on the remarkable commitment of the Blair / Brown Labour Government in England, which

established the Building Schools for the Future program to rebuild or refurbish all secondary schools or most primary schools in England over 10 – 15 years at a cost of over AU\$100 billion. However, the Conservative - Liberal Democrat Coalition government cancelled the program in early July as one measure to rein in the budget deficit (Curtis, 2010). The outcry around the country has led to division in Conservative ranks (Shepherd, 2010).

In general, I think it is time to rest the rhetoric of the 'education revolution'. Expectations for centralised, top-down, one-size-fits-all strategies are rarely met. Serious transformative change calls for action on a school-by-school basis as the education profession itself is transformed.

### **The impact of high stakes testing**

The use of NAPLAN in the My School website has been based on developments in England and the United States, with Joel Klein, who heads the public school system in New York, called on from time to time to spruik the benefits. It's worthwhile to summarise the evidence of impact in both places.

#### *England*

The Cambridge Primary Review of policy and practice in England was published in 2009 under the title *Children, Their World, Their Education* (Alexander, 2009). Project Director Robin Alexander delivered the Miegunyah Distinguished Lecture in the Dean's Lecture Series at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education on 10 March 2010 on the topic 'The Perils of Policy: Success, Amnesia and Collateral Damage in Systematic Educational Reform' (Alexander, 2010). Many of the fears in Australia about the dysfunctional effects of national testing, an excessive focus on and unrealistic expectations for standards, the narrowing of curriculum, and high levels of stress for students and teachers have been borne out in experience in England.

Alexander was careful not to make comparisons or offer recommendations about the implications for Australia but the message was not lost on his audience. I sensed that many were shell-shocked, especially when he drew comparisons of England with Finland, which has no national tests, has decentralised decision-making, and provides high levels of school and teacher autonomy. Finland has a high-performing school system where students do not start school until they are seven. Finland is in the top ranks of nations as far as innovation is concerned. All but about two percent of students attend public (state schools).

Also sobering was the way Alexander contrasted the 'spin' of government, overstating outcomes, with the 'substance' of the reforms, which mostly reflect flat-lining in achievement.

There is a danger in Australia that the dysfunctional effects of current policy will inhibit passion in learning as well as innovation and creativity in schooling. In an eloquent statement at the launch of the Schools First initiative in 2008, Julia Gillard declared that 'All children have some gift and even some potential greatness within them. Finding that gift, nurturing it and bringing it to life is the responsibility of every single one of us'. Her words echo those of Sir Ken Robinson, who is a powerful advocate of an intensely personal approach to learning. Writing in *The Element* (Robinson, 2009) he stated that:

Education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education but to personalise it, to

build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.

But Robinson warns that the policy framework in England, now being replicated to a large extent in Australia, will impair the nurturing of the 'gift' and 'potential greatness' of which Gillard spoke:

Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardised testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education. (Robinson, 2009)

If one seeks another authority on the issue, the Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking on trends in England, stated that 'we have in the past few decades created an extraordinarily anxious and in many ways oppressive climate in education at every level in the search for proper accountability' adding that 'all of this gives a clear message about the priority of tightly measurable achievement over against personal or spiritual or emotional concerns' (Archbishop of Canterbury, 2009).

Anyone in doubt about these effects in England would have been blown away when they accessed the website of *The Times* (London) last year that published the league tables of primary schools on national tests (ranked from 1 to more than 13,000). Accessing the website from Australia led to an advertisement for an Australian company that offered coaching services for NAPLAN tests. Accessing the website of this company led to a link to Beyond Blue, the national organisation that deals with depression and related conditions.

### *United States*

One of the most powerful critiques of the impact of high stakes testing in the United States was offered recently by Diane Ravitch, a distinguished scholar who has supported the approach in the past. She was an adviser in the administration of George W. Bush. She has changed her mind. Referring to the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation she describes how 'many states now claim dramatic improvement in their test scores, but these gains are not reflected on the tests given every other year by the federal government':

In Texas, where there was supposed to have been an educational miracle, eighth grade reading scores have been flat for a decade. Tennessee claimed that 90 percent of its students were proficient in 2007, but on [national tests] only 26 percent were.

Many schools suspend instruction for months before the state tests, in hopes of boosting scores. Students are drilled on how to answer the precise types of questions that are likely to appear on state tests.

As more time is devoted to reading and math, and as teachers are warned that the scores in these subjects will determine the fate of their school, everything other than reading or math gets less time. This is what doesn't count: history, literature, geography, science, the arts, foreign languages, physical education, civics, etc.

*Personal, political and professional perspectives*

Nothing in the foregoing questions or challenges the importance of literacy and numeracy and raising levels of achievement in these areas. Nothing in the foregoing precludes a critically important role for state, regional and district levels of government in providing support for schools, but these must be viewed as enablers rather than regulators. All of these things can be accomplished within a national framework that provides the necessary sense of direction.

I am not a 'Johnny come lately' on these issues. My second book with Jim Spinks *Leading the Self-Managing School* was published in 1992 (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992). We had the following to say about the impact of high stakes testing in the light of developments in England where the Conservative Government had introduced national testing in primary and secondary schools and league tables were starting to appear.

There are limitations in these approaches to testing, not the least of which is their narrow focus and the resultant distortion which may occur in learning and teaching, especially for testing at the primary level. Highly valued goals may be devalued (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992, p. 142).

There will be great pressure to release the raw data of school-by-school comparisons in a manner that will distort the accountability process . . . In our view the strongest possible stand should be taken against the release of such data when accompanied by claims or implications of relative effectiveness (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992, p. 155)

I became more sympathetic a decade later when improvements in literacy were registered in England as a result of an unrelenting effort by the Blair Government which expanded the testing and league tables approach of the Conservatives. However, achievement soon plateaued. One of the most powerful advocates, Secretary of State Estelle Morris, resigned when targets for improvement had not been achieved.

The observations I am making and the conclusions I am drawing should not be interpreted in a narrow political frame, especially as this symposium is being held during a federal election campaign. I am alarmed at what the government is doing in partnership with the states and territories. I am equally if not more alarmed at what has been proposed by the opposition which calls for testing at every level from Grade 3 to Grade 10 (as reported by Harrison, 2010). Such a proposal shows no understanding of the nature and purpose of assessment and testing, no understanding of the capacities and potential capacities of the profession and no understanding of what has occurred elsewhere and the evidence of harm.

Finally, from a professional perspective, it is important to acknowledge that Australia has the expertise to test well and construct websites like My School. Professor Barry McGaw and Dr Peter Hill, as Chair and CEO, respectively, of ACARA are at the international forefront in respect to their skills in these domains. They lead talented teams. This is not the issue. The issue is about the purposes that are served and the impact of the testing and reporting regimes.

*Conclusion*

It is a paradox that Australia is moving to a more constraining, less creative and less innovative approach in education at the same time that world leaders in these fields

are building their strengths, as evidenced in reports of *The Economist*. In world rankings in 2009, Australia barely makes it into the top 20 innovative nations for the period 2004 to 2008. While all nations above us have a national curriculum, none have national tests or the equivalent of My School websites except for England (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales do not have these). Most provide a higher level of school autonomy.

My conclusion is that despite the popular appeal of the national curriculum, national testing and the My School website, we are unlikely to see more than marginal and short-term improvement in outcomes for all students, or a closing of the gap between high-performing and low-performing students, until such time as we move ahead on a number of fronts. We must open the doors to the creative spirit in our schools that should operate in the future in the broadest of national frameworks. If we can't do this we may make progress in the short-term but other nations are moving faster and further and we'll soon be left behind.

### **Advice to Ministers and ACARA**

The purpose of this symposium is to offer advice to Ministers and ACARA. I will adopt a futures perspective in formulating my advice, which is presented as a scenario for 2010.

I drew earlier on one of two recent books I have co-authored (Caldwell & Harris, 2008). I turn now to a second for a different perspective. *Our School Our Future* (Caldwell & Loader, 2010) will be published by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) in August. The book extends work I undertook with David Loader in 2009 when we conducted 18 workshops in every state and territory for more than 500 leaders from about 300 schools. The national workshop series was the centre-piece of the Futures Focused School Project of Teaching Australia (now AITSL). The *Our School Our Future* package includes a text and a resource book for use by schools that seek to build a capacity to be futures focused.

David and I described a futures focused school in these terms:

A futures- focused school 'sees ahead', but it also 'sees behind', honouring and extending its accomplishments in the past. It 'sees above' in the sense of understanding the policy context. It 'sees below', demonstrating a deep understanding of the needs, interests, motivations and aspirations of students and staff. It 'sees beside' by networking professional knowledge to take account of best practice in other schools in similar settings. It 'sees beyond' by seeking out best practice in other nations and in fields other than education. It is consistent and persistent; it 'sees it through'. The metaphor of 'sensing' is also helpful given that 'seeing' refers to what is already in place or is projected. A futures focused school is alert to signals in its internal and external environment that may influence what may occur in the future and that may subsequently be 'seen'. These signals may be strong or weak and a high level of sensitivity is required to distinguish among them (Caldwell & Loader, 2010, p. 24).

I have endeavoured in this presentation to 'see' in the sense described here, especially to 'see above' (the current policy context), 'see below' (the impact on students and schools) and 'see beyond' (England and the United States). The evidence suggests that a different approach is needed.

Writing a scenario is a useful technique for thinking about the future. A scenario is not a prediction. It describes an alternative future, either probable or preferred, with a narrative that credibly explains the pathways from the present to that future. In *Our School Our Future* (Caldwell & Loader, 2010) we provide a template for writing scenarios at the school level.

Here is a narrative for an alternative future to 2020 that describes how we might reverse current and likely trends as far as impact of high stakes testing is concerned while we nurture innovation, creativity and passion.

*In 2020 there will be a higher level of transparency and more testing in Australia's schools than at any time in the past. However, approaches associated with NAPLAN and the My School website introduced in 2009 and 2010 have been abandoned because a united profession and the public soon realised that expectations had not been realised. They inhibited rather than drove the transformation of schools. Australia became isolated in the international community for proceeding with an approach that had been abandoned elsewhere as country after country moved ahead with a more enlightened approach.*

*Long-overdue reforms in teacher education meant that teachers became expert in skilful testing, diagnosis of need and immediate support of their students in an unprecedented and comprehensive approach to personalising learning. Every school or community of schools has teachers and other professionals on call who give immediate support to their colleagues to ensure that no student falls behind. A re-modelled national agency prepares tests that schools can choose if they wish but the level of professional skill ensures that most schools design their own. Parents obtain real-time online reports of how their sons and daughters are progressing, and meaningless out-of-date comparisons of schools have been abandoned. Teaching to the test and the narrowing of the curriculum are dysfunctions of the past. The curriculum has been broadened to address the range of knowledge and skills demanded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Schools have far more autonomy than in the past, with many opting for an international rather than national curriculum.*

*Innovation and creativity flourish and there has been a resurgence in the arts and science. New world-class facilities have been an important factor in attracting able people to the profession. There is a passion that has not been evident for several decades.*

Is such a scenario far-fetched? I take the lead from the great Czech philosopher, playwright and president Vaclav Havel. Some may hope that things will play out this way. I am optimistic that they will.

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