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Freedom to obey

Schools are being seduced with moves towards local autonomy which are more about budget cuts than student outcomes.

With the school funding review due to report to the federal government at the end of this year, we can't allow policies of devolution to create the precondition for defunding schools.

As state and territory governments attempt to build momentum around the implementation of the federal government's Empowering Local Schools election announcement, it's timely that we revisit the ideology that drives devolution.

Before doing so, we should remind ourselves that this policy – aimed at refashioning public schools so they operate “more like private schools” – was announced during last year's federal election without consultation.

The Gillard government's rationale is that it will improve student performance by providing so-called “local autonomy” to give principals, parents and school communities greater input into the management of their local

schools; greater responsibility for school budgets, determining the mix of staff and setting local priorities.

It also claims that the evidence from national and international experience indicates that devolving greater autonomy to schools leads to higher achievement for students from both disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds.

There is no doubt that a lot of this language about autonomy and local control is very seductive.

However, the government appears to have conveniently ignored a large body of evidence which presents a strikingly different view. It undermines its claims by showing that policies like Empowering Local Schools have not led to improved outcomes for students.

In 2009, OECD PISA cross-country correlation analysis found that education systems which give schools greater autonomy for budgets and teacher selection don't achieve higher results in reading. It concluded that “greater responsibility in managing

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resources appears to be unrelated to a school system's overall student performance” and “school autonomy in resource allocation is not related to performance at the system level”.

There is also evidence that local autonomy threatens equity of student outcomes within and between schools. This has the effect of reinforcing social disadvantage.

Interestingly, the *PISA 2009 At a Glance* report found that increased autonomy of schools, in relation to what was taught and how it was assessed, did correlate with improved student outcomes. But increased school autonomy over curriculum and assessment are two key areas not featured in our government's policy agenda.

What a stark contradiction it is that this latest devolution initiative comes at a time when we are witnessing the centralisation of curriculum, and, more dramatically, student assessment and reporting. We are told that, in addition to national standardised testing, we have only five letters for student reporting purposes: A, B, C, D and E.

One can be excused for concluding that, rather than being given any autonomy, we are being given the freedom to obey.

Component of cost-cutting

Authoritative empirical research also shows that devolving greater powers over the management of existing resources has not significantly changed the quantum of resources in schools after initial financial inducements to become involved are no longer available.

The evidence suggests that what is done in the ▶ **Continued on page 19**

“The priority for governments should be ensuring our public schools are properly resourced – rather than shifting management responsibility, risk and blame for budget cuts onto local school communities.”



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Replacing experienced ‘expensive’ teachers with ‘cheaper’ teachers, paraprofessionals or no-one at all has a profound impact on the quality of teaching and the breadth and depth of curriculum taught in schools.

Of course, policies of devolution also have the potential to undermine established industrial instruments and the processes of their negotiation.

Given this concern, the AEU sought specific clarification from the federal minister on whether the Empowering Local Schools policy would require the adoption of any practices – including moving employees onto individual and/or executive contracts – which would compromise the integrity of the industrial instruments and processes that regulate the employment terms and conditions of teachers, principals and other education workers.

The minister responded that “with respect to the impact of the

empowering local schools policy on industrial instruments...I can confirm that the Australian government does not intend that this policy would breach or disrupt those legally binding arrangements. The Australian government...has not asked, advised or required the state and territory governments...who are party to those agreements, to change those instruments as part of this policy.”

The most recent ministerial meeting endorsed a proposal whereby states and territories would be able to negotiate the extent to which they will devolve autonomy in three focus areas: staffing, funding and governance. With the commencement of these negotiations, we must remain vigilant and ready to act in the interest of our students’ learning conditions and our working conditions.

We remain open to negotiations with federal and state governments about the appropriate and properly supported implementation of greater levels of local authority in a manner that respects the professional judgment of teachers and principals, and our

professional autonomy with respect to teaching and learning.

However, we must never allow governments to absolve themselves of their primary obligation to properly and adequately resource our schools. That means ensuring the guarantee of a high-quality curriculum, and sufficient qualified teachers and resources in every school to deliver it.

The priority for governments should be ensuring our public schools are properly resourced – rather than shifting management responsibility, risk and blame for budget cuts onto local school communities. ●

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