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What is to be done?

In just the past two or three months no fewer than five prominent individuals and organisations have addressed themselves to an increasingly vexing question: ‘What is to be done about the reform of Australian schooling?’. Australia, these various commentators agree, is among the school reform dunces of the Western world. While other countries forge ahead (so the argument goes) we are stuck. The evidence includes findings that some schools and school systems, as well as some particular curriculum areas, have done better than others but, since the turn of the century or thereabouts, none has done much more than flatline, strenuous reform efforts by state and federal governments notwithstanding (Gonski, 2011; Masters, 2015).

It is on this stubborn ground that the battle of the reform agendas is being fought. Some of the reformers whose recent work is discussed in this paper want to press on in the current direction; some want a quite different agenda; and some want a different system.
The dominant agenda

To press on is to persist in the view that if schools are exposed to the right combination of pressures and given the right capacity to respond, they will lift ‘performance’; that is, in terms of improved student attainment, as measured by standardised tests. This agenda was promoted to a dominant position by Julia Gillard, first as Minister for Education and subsequently as Prime Minister, via NAPLAN, the MySchool website, and a flurry of other measures aimed at encouraging parental choice, making schools more accountable for student attainment and taking us to ‘top 5 by 2025’.

Gillard’s Coalition successor in the education portfolio, Christopher Pyne, bought that line and packaged it up as what he called the ‘four pillars’ of reform (Pyne, 2015a).

Two of the recent five reports under discussion in this paper – one by prominent academic and consultant Brian Caldwell, the other published by the CIS (Centre for Independent Studies) (Jha and Buckingham, 2015) – belong to this agenda. Their concern is not with the pressure side of the equation, but with the amount and kind of elbow room schools need if pressure is to turn into ‘performance’.

Brian Caldwell

Professor Caldwell has been the leading Australian proponent of school autonomy since the publication of his seminal The Self-Managing School (co-authored with Tasmanian school principal Jim Spinks) in 1988. Caldwell was among the first to argue that autonomy should serve educational as well as professional and organisational ends, and was therefore among the first to realise that a causal chain which has ill-defined ‘autonomy’ at one end and closely-specified ‘outcomes’ at the other is a long and tangled one.

The most recent of Caldwell’s many investigations of this connection, based on the experience of four government schools in Victoria, Queensland and the ACT, finds that yes, ‘autonomy’ does improve ‘performance’ – or can do, anyway, sort of. The analysis tends to confirm (Caldwell concludes) that higher levels of school autonomy are associated with higher levels of student achievement providing there is a balance of autonomy and accountability.

(Caldwell, 2015, p 76; emphases added)

In other words, in the universe of schooling, where everything is related to everything else, it all depends.

Such inconvenient caveats, qualifications and distinctions eluded the sponsor of Professor Caldwell’s study, then-Education Minister Pyne.

Great schools have leaders and teachers who have the independence to make decisions and deliver the education that best suits the needs of their students (he enthused in launching the report). And the research, including the findings by Professor Caldwell, tells us this is the right approach.

(Pyne, 2015b)

Actually, it doesn’t (Suggett, 2015) and it didn’t. ‘Autonomy’, Professor Caldwell, and seventy million Commonwealth dollars in the form of an ‘Independent Public Schools Initiative’, have been roped into a highly politicised and dubious campaign, interested not in whether, how and to what end relationships between schools and systems need reform, but in making public schools more like private ones.

The CIS

The CIS is also a supporter of autonomy and of independent public schools, but wants to go several steps further. It wants Australia to follow the example of the US, the UK, Sweden, Chile and most recently New Zealand, in introducing
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About the Author
Dean Ashenden has worked as a teacher, an academic, a political adviser and consultant to education agencies and authorities in all Australian states/territories and at the national level, and in journalism. He is the author/co-author of books, monographs, reports and articles published in academic, professional and mass media, including the influential Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division. He was (with Sandra Milligan) co-founder of the first evaluative guides to Australian higher education, the Good Universities Guides. In recent years he has written on education and other issues in The Weekend Australian, Meanjin, History Australia, Crikey, Inside Story, the Financial Review, The Age, The Guardian and Eureka Street.

About the Paper
An earlier version of this paper was published on the Inside Story website. Ashenden explores the visions for educational reform of Brian Caldwell; CIS; Geoff Masters; Grattan Institute; Lyndsay Connors and Jim McMorrow; David Gonski; and the Nous Consortium. Focusing on the relationship between reform and segregation in the current system, he comments on Nous’s observation that in Australia ‘the concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools is substantially higher than in any comparable OECD country … while the proportion of all students in mixed or average SES schools is well below the OECD average.’ ‘If Gonski is lost’, he concludes, ‘then so is any chance of arresting and reversing the segregationist logic of the system for many years …’