



Independent Schools
Council of Australia

THE EDUCATION WARS

New Federalism and the Nationalisation of Australian School Education

Independence

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Bill Daniels, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, argues that independent schools are suffering collateral damage as the Australian Government seeks to exert more influence over how state and territory governments deliver school education.

Australia appears to be forging its way to a new national agreement on schooling even as education has become a fierce battleground in the war between the Australian Government and the states. This war is variously called the ‘new federalism’ or the ‘new centralism’ and on the schools front is leaving casualties in the field. The independent sector is certainly suffering collateral damage, and for that reason alone it is worthwhile taking a closer look at the fight zone.

On the one hand the Australian Government has control of a substantial arsenal – some \$33 billion for the 2005-08 funding quadrennium. On the other, the states and territories also have heavy artillery. Over this four-year period they will together spend close to \$100 billion on schools. What’s more, they are an allied force – their alliance strengthened by their uniform political colour. But they have even greater advantages. First, they actually own around 70 per cent of Australia’s schools and, more importantly, they regulate 100 per cent. Even so, the Australian Government has won substantial territory in what has proved to be a sustained campaign.

National Education Framework for Schools

In 1999 the Australian Government won a major battle with the states and territories with the introduction of benchmark testing. Minor victories in the areas of maths and science teaching, targeted programs for improving literacy and numeracy and the education

outcomes of indigenous students were more in the nature of a seduction as the federal government committed substantial funds to buy influence in Australian schooling.

At the same time the Australian Government was testing its muscle for a new assault linked to the 2005-08 quadrennium. On 13 November, 2003 the federal Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, announced the Government's 10-point National Education Framework for Schools, which formalised the Government's key concerns, and within months had marshalled powerful new allies – parents.

War by regulation

In January 2004 Dr Nelson invited parents to send him samples of their children's school reports. On 11 March 2004 the Government announced that there would be an additional \$8 billion for school education in the 2005-08 quadrennium linked to what it described as an 'enhanced performance framework' for all Australian schools. New reporting requirements would help parents make informed decisions and enable poorly performing schools to be 'identified and targeted for action'.

School performance measures that were to be publicly reported included the academic outcomes of students, VET options, school leaver destinations, teacher qualifications and professional development, absentee rates of both students and teachers and student performance against national benchmarks.

School authorities would also be required to sign up to:

- a uniform school starting age by 2010
- common outcomes testing in the key areas of Mathematics, Science, English and Civics and Citizenship
- formal commitment to a national safe schools framework, and
- school reports that give parents timely, plain language feedback on their child's performance.

There was also mention of performance measures covering scientific literacy, ICT literacy, VET in schools and Civics and Citizenship.

On 30 April 2004 the Government added a little more flesh to its requirements on the public reporting of school performance measures and stipulated that this information should be accessible on the internet. It was also suggested that schools might want to publish the information in annual reports or on signs at the school gate.

When the Government introduced the quadrennium funding legislation to Parliament on 22 June 2004, it outlined the new funding conditions under several key themes. New this time round was that, in addition to plain language student reports, schools would have to report student benchmarking results relative to the child's peer group at school. Further, at least two hours of physical education in the compulsory years of schooling was to be a condition of funding.

The Government had also opened a new flank in its war with the states, over the teaching of values in schools. Now, to be eligible for funding schools would be required to have a functioning flagpole, fly the Australian flag and display the National Values Framework in a prominent place. State and territory governments would also be required to give principals in their schools the autonomy to hire and fire staff.

The Commonwealth was blatantly buying its way right into the classroom and the day to day business of schools and teachers. The move was unprecedented in the history of Australian education yet media attention at the time focused almost solely on the requirement of schools to have a functioning flagpole.

The *Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004* was not passed before Parliament rose for the 2004 federal election. When it finally passed in December 2004, the regulations were still outstanding.

The independent sector had queried the educational value of some of the draft regulations, but with most of their government funding coming from the Australian Government schools could not afford to jeopardise their 2005 payments. They signed their funding contracts without knowing the detail of what they were agreeing to.

The states and territories, with their own substantial financial resources to command, held back for several months but eventually capitulated, signing off on their agreements in June 2005.

The Australian Government's campaign to force the states and territories to raise the quality of their schooling provision left the independent sector with some serious wounds. As the Government was attempting to force quality gains in the government schools sector with mandated autonomy for principals, it was undermining the autonomy of independent schools. And it is educational autonomy that has underpinned the high quality and unique character of education provision in the independent sector. Further, the Government was loading schools with a new administrative and regulatory burden, the cost of which in the independent sector would have to be borne by parents.

Harnessing the power of the consumer

As well as engaging in frontal attack, the Australian Government was at the same time undermining the states' power as education providers by growing the power of education consumers. If the states were slow to meet national educational accountability demands of the national government, they might be forced to become more accountable to parents.

There is no doubt the Australian Government is committed to supporting a viable non-government sector – not because it wants to undermine government schools, as is often claimed – but because it sees competition in schooling as an important means to leverage quality gains across all school sectors. Hence the repeated claims from the Government that it supports choice in schooling. This is not empty rhetoric; it is market ideology applied to schools.

The new reporting requirements, the vouchers for literacy and numeracy tuition, the channelling of additional capital funding through government school organisations rather than state bureaucracies and the establishment of the Australian Technical Colleges are all evidence of the Government's interest in facilitating competition and choice, empowering parents as consumers of education and ramping up the external pressures on schools to do better.

This has not been war by stealth. The Prime Minister has clearly and publicly outlined the Government's agenda, most recently in his address to the Centre for Independent Studies on 14 May 2007:

So what is the education challenge in Australia in 2007? It turns on one word: quality. For a long time, education debates in Australia focused almost exclusively on quantity – on inputs, not outputs; on money spent, not results produced; on the supplies of the state, not the demands of society and individuals. This is still the territory staked out and defended fiercely by many educationalists, state bureaucracies and the education unions. [...] What's increasingly clear from education debates around the world is that quality demands choice, diversity, specialisation, transparency and competition.

The states fight back

Under Education Minister Julie Bishop the Australian Government has pushed its 10-point plan harder in the area of national consistency.

Already the *Schools Assistance Act 2004* regulates that national benchmarking tests for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are to be conducted in 2008, and the national Statements of Learning – which describe the key knowledge, skills, understandings and capacities that all students in Australia should have in English, Mathematics, Science, Civics and Citizenship, and Information and Communications Technology – must be implemented by 1 January 2008.

Minister Bishop has floated further ventures in a nationally consistent curriculum, including the history curriculum, and has initiated research into the feasibility of a national Year 12 certificate. In May 2007 she announced that for the 2009-12 quadrennium further conditions of Australian Government funding for schools would be external examinations for Year 12 students and performance pay for teachers.

In response to the Australian Government's use of quadrennial funding arrangements to drive its schools initiatives, the state and territory governments have sought greater control over the national education agenda by the use of stonewalling tactics in the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). Instead, collaborative effort is being directed through the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) and its new shadow body, the State and Territory Education Systems Officials Committee. STESOC is AESOC minus the Commonwealth. Similarly, the new Council for the Australian Federation (CAF) – a shadow version of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), minus the Commonwealth – is also playing at national education policy making.

Of real concern for the non-government schools sector in this game play is that while we have had representation on MCEETYA taskforces and therefore a voice in the development of national education policy, we must rely largely on the good will of the states for consultation on AESOC, STESOC and CAF initiatives.

What the people want

In the education wars it is easy to spot the armies but hard to envisage who the winners will be. It appears that in the Prime Minister's mind at least, the Australian Government is fighting not on its own behalf but on behalf of the people. In response to a federal ALP discussion paper on federalism, which mooted untying Commonwealth Specific Purpose Payments to the states and territories, the Prime Minister said at a press conference on 31 July 2007:

[. . .] more than ever the Australian people want the Federal Government to play a more and not less active role in the affairs of Australia. In 2007, the two great sentiments within the Australian community regarding governance are nationalism and localism. They want their national government solving problems, they're not much fussed about theories of federalism or theories about blame games, they want outcomes, they want better results. [...] If you remove specific payments in relation to education you can't enforce national consistency in things such as literacy and numeracy and plain English reports and all the other national standards that people want.

In my view, the nationalisation of school education in Australia is something the independent sector must view with caution. Independent schools have long represented the prior rights of parents to shape the education of their children. If the educational autonomy of independent schools is undermined then so is the freedom of parents. In other words, by thrusting its way into the classroom – at least into independent school classrooms – the Australian Government may actually fail to give people what they really want, which is the best possible education for their children.

Parents have two great weapons when it comes to getting a better quality education for their children from state and territory governments – fight or flight. They have shown themselves adept at using both. The Australian Government could well move faster and lighter on the battlefield of education if they dropped regulation as their primary weapon and concentrated more on supporting choice and diversity.