



The success of school diversity speaks for itself

By: Kevin Donnelly, Director of Education Standards Institute

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A market-driven model of education - one represented by autonomy, diversity and choice - provides the best opportunity of raising student standards, writes Dr Kevin Donnelly.

A recent report by the Melbourne-based Grattan Institute titled "The myth of markets in school education" argues that autonomy and competition fail to raise standards, and that it is a myth to argue that a more market-driven approach to education lifts performance.

In relation to funding and better supporting non-government schools, the Grattan report also argues that attempts to raise standards by introducing "vouchers or subsidies to private schools (will not) make much difference".

The flaws and weaknesses in the Grattan report are manifold. To prove its contention that a more market-driven model is ineffective, the report notes that NSW, a highly centralised system, achieves stronger NAPLAN results than Victoria, where schools have greater autonomy.

Those familiar with statistics will appreciate the fact that correlation does not always mean causation. The reason NSW outperforms Victoria in the national literacy and numeracy tests might have nothing to do with whether schools are autonomous or not.

Other factors, not considered by the Grattan report, explaining the difference include the quality of the curriculum, teacher effectiveness, and the impact of school leadership.

A second flaw in the report's analysis is that it bases its conclusions on a very limited sample of secondary schools in South East Queensland, and 54 non-government schools failed to reply to one of the report's survey instruments.

The fact that the report's analysis is based on only one year level out of the four levels where NAPLAN is carried out, and that it ignores Year 12 results as a measure of school effectiveness, further undermines the report's credibility.

In arguing that autonomy and a more market-driven system are ineffective, best represented by the presence of independent and Catholic schools, the report bases its argument solely on the presence or otherwise of competition - as measured by the degree to which parents choose schools based on their performance.

After analysing enrolment patterns for the Queensland schools, the report notes that there is little movement and that "families generally don't move to high-performing schools nor leave low-performing ones".

That there is little, if any, movement, as the report admits, might be because popular schools are oversubscribed, enrolments might be restricted to those living in a school's catchment area, and parents might not measure school success in terms of Year 9 NAPLAN results.

The report also ignores the reality - attested by the fact that from 2000-2010 non-government school enrolments across Australia grew by 20 per cent while government schools only grew by 1 per cent - that parents do make decisions based on the fact that some schools achieve stronger educational outcomes compared to others.

Surveys consistently show that one of the main reasons parents choose independent schools, for example, is because compared to government schools and even after adjusting for students' socioeconomic background, they have a more academic culture.

One only needs to note the popularity of selective secondary state schools and the fact that parents often spend millions on real estate in the enrolments zones of successful state schools to see that competition is a factor influencing school choice and the drive for higher standards.

When it comes to the positive impact of a market-driven approach even the Grattan report is prepared to admit it has some benefits when it states, "This doesn't mean that school competition has a negative impact or does not have other benefits."

Instead of arguing that there are minimal benefits in a market-driven model of education - one represented by autonomy, diversity and choice - a good deal of research, and the success of Australia's non-government schools, proves otherwise.

After analysing the results of the 2009 PISA international test results an OECD report concludes: "In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to do better."

A second analysis carried out by Martin West and Ludger Woessmann based on the 2003 PISA results for 29 countries is also positive when it concludes: "Competition from private schools improves student achievement, and appears to do so for public school as well as private school students."

In a meta-analysis involving over 100 statistical studies the US-based Andrew Coulson also argues for a more market-driven approach when he concludes, "Across time, countries, and outcome measures, private provision of education outshines public provision according to the overwhelming majority of econometric studies."

It's ironic that the Rudd government's Better Schools plan is attempting to impose a highly centralised, bureaucratic, command-and-control model of education on every school in Australia - one guaranteed to undermine the autonomy and flexibility of schools, non-government schools in particular, and that will ensure falling standards and less school choice for parents and students.

Instead of arguing that markets in education are a myth, as the Grattan Report does, far better to argue for diversity and choice in education and a situation where schools have increased autonomy and not less.

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