

Education Policy Brief

Reports Concede the Lack of Evidence for School Autonomy

Trevor Cobbold

August 2013

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

<http://www.saveourschools.com.au>

<https://twitter.com/SOSAust>

The Federal Government, Labor and Coalition state and territory governments and the Federal Opposition all support greater school autonomy over staffing and budgets. They claim that it will lead to better school performance and student achievement. The Business Council of Australia has also put its weight behind school autonomy.

However, the research evidence from New Zealand's decentralized schools, US charter schools, Sweden's free schools, England's academy schools and cross-country studies by the OECD shows no clear evidence that increased school autonomy leads to increased student achievement. The lack of evidence to support school autonomy is increasingly conceded by reports and some commentators in Australia as shown by the following.

Reports

Productivity Commission

The Commission's report on the Schools Workforce states that past studies "have found mixed impacts from delegating decision-making authority to schools..." [246]

"...allowing schools greater autonomy has the potential to exacerbate inequalities unless all schools are adequately resourced." [44]

"However, increased autonomy could, in several respects, work against the interests of disadvantaged students. For one, it could become more difficult for disadvantaged schools to compete for high-quality staff in school-level negotiations....greater autonomy could result in schools becoming more selective in the types of students they accommodate." [277]

Productivity Commission 2012, [Schools Workforce](#), Research Report, Canberra, April.

Senate Education Committee

A bi-partisan Senate Education Committee report on Teaching and Learning stated that "...it is unclear whether school autonomy ultimately improves student outcomes." [47]

The report recommended further research on the impact of school autonomy.

"Clearly further research into school autonomy and its impact on student performance is required." [47]

"The committee recommends that the COAG Standing Committee on School Education and Early Childhood conduct research into whether public school participating in school autonomy programs have improved student results." [48]

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2013, [Teaching and Learning – Maximising Our Investment in Australian Schools](#), Canberra, May.

Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission

A draft report on school autonomy in Victoria by the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission found mixed results of school autonomy on school performance.

"The Commission's assessment of past empirical studies looking at the relationship between autonomy and school performance reveals a mixed and inconclusive picture. While some

studies report a performance benefit – particularly if autonomy is accompanied by effective accountability mechanisms – others find little impact, or even negative effects.” [XXVII]

“In sum, the international evidence on the impacts of school autonomy on student achievement is mixed....There is some evidence, from country-specific and cross-country studies, suggesting that more autonomous school systems can improve student performance. Equally, there is some contrary evidence – including from country-specific and cross-country studies – indicating no gains or a deterioration in student performance relative to public schools or school systems not subject to those reforms. The mixed nature of the evidence is illustrated by the experience in the United States with charter schools, which have been operating for more than 20 years.” [42]

“A large number of studies have examined the performance of charter schools. In summary, the outcomes have been mixed.” [43]

“Similarly, research on academies in the United Kingdom – which have high levels of autonomy – paints a mixed picture regarding the impacts on student achievement.” [43]

“Several participants reported findings from cross-country analyses on the impacts of school autonomy. Taken as a whole, these studies are not definitive....cross-country analyses have found positive, negative and no associations between different measures of school autonomy and student performance.” [43-44]

“The existing body of empirical evidence on the impacts of school autonomy is by no means definitive. The international evidence is mixed regarding its impacts on student achievement and educational opportunity. It is also not conclusive about which areas or domains might benefit from autonomy.” [47]

Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission 2013, [*Making the Grade: Autonomy and Accountability in Victorian Schools*](#), Draft Report, Melbourne, May.

Grattan Institute

“On autonomy, Australia and other countries have the wrong strategy. The world’s best systems have varying levels of autonomy. But it is not central to their reforms. Instead, they articulate the best ways to teach and learn, then implement reform through high-quality systems of teacher development, appraisal and feedback, among other policies. Autonomous schools in Australia and other countries are no better at implementing these programs than are centralised schools.” [1]

“....the reality of school education means that relying on markets is not the best way to improve student learning.” [1]

“....both within-country and cross-country quantitative research suggests that the direct gain produced by increasing autonomy is relatively small. [25]

“Analyses that isolate the relationship between specific types of school autonomy and PISA performance find that schools with autonomy over curriculum and assessment matters tended to have higher scores. In contrast, there is no significant relationship between performance and autonomy over resource allocation. [26]

Jensen, B.; Weidmann, B. and Farmer, J. 2013, [*The Myth of Markets in School Education*](#), Grattan Institute, Melbourne, July.

“Well I think if you look at Victoria and around the world actually, there’s not a huge amount of evidence that says school autonomy has a great impact on student learning because it’s really not the end game. ... Overall what we see is that it’s very hard to identify the connection between autonomy and student performance.”

Ben Jensen, Education director at the Grattan Institute, [ABC PM Interview](#), 12 March 2012.

Melbourne Graduate School of Education

An evaluation of Independent Public Schools (IPS) in Western Australia by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education found little evidence of any improvement in student outcomes.

“In this early phase of the IPS development there is little evidence of changes to student outcomes such as enrolment or student achievement.” [8]

“...there was no evidence of substantial differences in outcomes between schools that were selected into IPS and those that were not.” [9]

“Analysis of the secondary data shows that IPS were generally high-performing before transition, and there has been no substantive increase in student achievement after becoming IPS.” [36]

“Similarly to student achievement data, analysis of available data on student enrolment and behaviour across all public schools showed no change for IPS. There were pre-existing differences in attendance rates between IPS and other public schools which remained unchanged over the three years of implementation. There were increases in enrolment for the first intake of IPS, but lesser increases for subsequent intakes. There were no differences in suspension, exclusion or retention rates between IPS and other public schools. IPS had lower numbers of moderate and severe students at attendance risk compared to other public schools, both prior to and after becoming IPS.” [38-39]

“As yet, there is no strong data indicating that the IPS initiative has significantly changed the ways that public schools engage with their communities.
...the secondary data shows no substantial change in staffing, student behaviour, attendance or performance between IPS and other public schools.” [56]

“...the IPS initiative has yet to realise changes in student achievement or attendance at school.” [66]

“At this stage of the IPS development there has been no evidence to indicate changes in enrolments or student achievement...
...the evaluation suggests that there has been limited change in outcomes for students, including achievement, enrolment, attendance, and exclusions and suspensions.” [72]

“...there were significant and pervasive concerns expressed by survey respondents and interviewees from all stakeholder categories that extending the IPS initiative to selected schools created a ‘two-tiered’ education system, to the disadvantage of schools that were not IPS.” [67]

Melbourne Graduate School of Education 2013, [*Evaluation of the Independent Public Schools Initiative*](#), Final Report, Perth, May.

Expert Panel on the Work and Roles of Principals and Deputy-Principals in Western Australian Public Schools

“...the biggest risk to the system is that students may fail to achieve desired educational outcomes. It appears that less emphasis is being given to managing risks relating to educational outcomes. The emphasis rather is on other compliance measures, not related to student outcomes, which take school leaders away from the key task of educational leadership. This means there is a risk that desired education outcomes for students may not be achieved.” [13-14]

[*Documenting the Dimensions*](#), Report of an Independent Panel, Perth, May.

Auditor-General of Western Australia

“IPSs have a number of perceived advantages in the open market that could result in a concentration of particular types of teachers in those schools, while other schools find it difficult to attract diverse or high quality teachers. There is the concern that some schools attract and retain the ‘best’ teachers, and that these schools are often good candidates for IPS status....

A possible outcome in an open market is that IPSs are more effective in recruiting teachers with experience and specific skills. Other schools may be left with concentrations of inexperienced staff, or a reliance on fixed term staff that causes problems with teacher continuity.” [22]

Office of the Auditor-General of Western Australia 2011, [*Right Teacher, Right Place, Right Time*](#), Perth, August.

Other

Peter Garrett, former Federal Minister for Education

“...there is little, if any, evidence to suggest overseas experiments like charter schools or student vouchers would lead to better education results.” [Letter to the Editor, *Australian Financial Review*, 30 April 2013]

Adrian Piccoli, NSW Minister for Education

“While we are talking about very significant devolution of authority from the centre out to local schools, we are not talking about wholesale autonomy,” he said. “We will not be introducing charter schools or independent public schools because there is no evidence that they improve student performance.” [*Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 2013]

Maralyn Parker, columnist for The Daily Telegraph

In referring to the report on Independent Public Schools by the Melbourne Graduate of Education Parker said:

“It says, so far, there is little evidence of changes to student outcomes in WA’s independent public schools, and major “challenges” are an increased workload for teachers and the creation of another set of schools that have advantages over other schools.

Yes the independent public school initiative has only been operating in WA for four years, as Pyne points out, and they may well improve in the future. However it seems a very flimsy premise on which to develop a plan for the whole nation.

I won't be the only one hoping we never see independent public schools in NSW, adding yet another layer to our already stratified schooling systems." [[The Daily Telegraph blog](#), 17 July 2013]

Professor John Smythe, University of Ballarat

Professor John Smythe warned a NSW Principals' Conference on 20 May 2013 that school autonomy is "insidious in all its aspects and needs to be robustly opposed".

Professor Smythe warned principals that school-based management was on a very short slope to the wholesale privatisation of public education. He said that after self-managed schools, the next stage was charter schools and academies, where schools are funded by government but are managed by the private sector at huge public cost. The following stage involved for-profit schools. [*Education*, 3 June 2013]

Dr. Cathy Wylie, Chief Researcher, New Zealand Council for Educational Research

Dr. Wylie told a NSW Principals' Conference on 20 May 2013 that school-based management introduced in New Zealand in the 1990s has not achieved gains in student performance, and there had been no reduction in inequality of outcomes. She said that the sharpened sense of competition between schools had resulted in reduced knowledge sharing. Principals have become preoccupied with funding and property instead of curriculum. [*Education*, 3 June 2013]

School autonomy is a way of cutting costs

Ken Dixon, Former general manager of finance and administration, NSW Department of Education

"The Local Schools, Local Decisions policy is just a formula to pull funding from schools over time". [*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 2012].

Boston Consulting Group

The Boston Consulting Group provided the blueprint for the Kennett Government in Victoria to cut government expenditure. An article on its website states:

"...an new program called Schools of the Future empowered school councils to set policy and approve budgets, while also increasing parent and community participation. Pushing more control to the local level made it possible to reduce central departmental staff from 2,300 to 600." [3]

Larry Kamener & Sek-loong Tan 2012, [Strategies for Taming Government Deficits](#), *Bcg Perspectives*, 24 October.

Expert Panel on the Work and Roles of Principals and Deputy-Principals in Western Australian Public Schools

School principals in Western Australia are overloaded, under-resourced and lacking in support systems under the new regime of increased autonomy in decision-making. The report shows that principals have not been given the resources to match their increased responsibilities while central and district office support services have been withdrawn. It concluded that the administrative burden on principals is excessive.

“The Panel was concerned to learn that school leaders are not being adequately supported to lead the changes that are being required of them in terms of delivery of quality student learning opportunities and educational outcomes.

In part, this is because the resources and supports that were previously available to schools through the central, regional or district offices of the Department are no longer available. Schools must do much of this work themselves.” [13]

“Some principals reported feeling abandoned by the system – and left to sink or swim on their own.” [14]

“The Panel is of the view that the support being offered to school leaders by the system is inadequate. The arrangements that the Department has put in place do not address the issues that school leaders are dealing with arising from the changed context of their work and the waves of devolution of responsibility and accountability to schools.” [101]

[*Documenting the Dimensions*](#), Report of an Independent Panel, Perth, May.

“There has been a significant devolution of responsibility and roles to schools. Generally, principals welcome that but the systems of support and administration are simply inadequate.”

Inquiry chairwoman Fran Hinton, former chief executive of the ACT Education Department, [*The West Australian*](#), 28 May 2013.