

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Education Research Brief

**School Autonomy is Not the Success
Claimed**

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Key Points

1. A range of forms of school autonomy have been implemented around the world in recent decades. They include stand-alone government schools in New Zealand, charter schools in the United States, publicly-funded private ‘free schools’ in Sweden and foundation schools and academies in England. All involve greater control for principals over budgeting and staffing and some include greater control over curriculum and assessment.
2. The evidence that greater school autonomy leads to improved student results is not compelling. Some studies show strong positive effects, but the mass of evidence from recent research studies in several countries is that it has little impact on student achievement. The summary results are:
 - New Zealand – no overall improvement;
 - Charter schools – mixed evidence; some better, some worse and some with no change. The major national studies show no overall improvement;
 - Free schools – mixed evidence;
 - Foundation schools – no improvement;
 - Academies – mixed evidence.
3. OECD research has found that in the vast majority of countries participating in PISA 2009, including in Australia, there was no significant difference between student achievement in schools with a high degree of autonomy in hiring teachers and over the school budget and in schools with lower autonomy.
4. Some sophisticated cross-country studies using PISA data have found significant positive effects of school autonomy on student achievement while others have not. However, it is more difficult to attribute causation in such studies because of the variety of educational, institutional and social/cultural factors affecting education outcomes in different countries which cannot be fully accounted for in the statistical analysis employed by these types of studies.
5. The evidence cited by the Federal Government and other Australian governments that greater school autonomy in budgeting and staffing increases student achievement is very weak, highly selective and misleading.
6. Greater school autonomy in New Zealand and the United States does not appear to have led to more innovation in teaching and curriculum.
7. Increased school autonomy in New Zealand, the United States, Sweden and England has led to greater social segregation between schools and, in some cases, greater inequality in resourcing and school outcomes.
8. These results suggest that the Federal Government’s \$500 million school autonomy program to be implemented over the next 7 years is unlikely to deliver improved student results. The funding would be more effectively spent on implementing the recommendations of the Gonski review to directly target increased funding to reducing the effects of disadvantage in education.

1. Introduction

The Federal Government has struck several agreements in recent months for the implementation of its school autonomy program called Empowering Local Schools [DEEWR]. It is providing \$69 million over the next two years to about 1000 government and non-government schools across Australia to implement greater school autonomy. It has committed \$475 million over the next seven years to the program.

Principals will have greater control over their school budgets, staffing mix and the hiring of staff to a much greater extent than at present. Schools will receive start-up grants of \$40,000 to \$50,000 to assist in managing their increased responsibilities. Each school will also receive \$3,500 for training of principals in their new responsibilities.

Agreements have been negotiated with the ACT, NSW, South Australian and Tasmanian governments for government, Catholic and Independent schools and with Catholic and Independent school authorities in Queensland and Western Australia. An agreement has also been struck with the Victorian Government which already has the most devolved school management system in Australia. The Western Australian Government has recently established its own program of independent public schools. The Queensland Government also intends to introduce independent public schools.

The extent of increased school autonomy under these agreements varies between jurisdictions. For example, in NSW principals will have control over 70 per cent of their budgets while in the ACT principals will have full control over their staffing budget. NSW principals will have greater decision-making responsibilities for purchasing and maintenance which principals in several other states already have.

The case for greater school autonomy is that it will increase student outcomes. The Federal Minister for Education, Peter Garrett, says:

We are doing it because we know it works. Evidence from overseas and pilot programs here in NSW have confirmed that when principals feel empowered and the local community is more involved, student attendance and results often improve. [Joint Media Release, 16 May 2012]

Evidence both here and internationally has also found that greater school autonomy is strongly linked with improved student results, behaviour and attendance. [Joint Media Release, 26 April 2012]

We know from international experience that schools with more autonomy tend to show improved results and this has been replicated in the NSW trial. [Media Release, 4 November 2011]

Despite the Minister's claims, the most recent research evidence on the success of school autonomy in budgeting and staffing in improving student achievement is far from compelling. The evidence comes from New Zealand's 20-year experiment with decentralized schools, charter schools in the United States, 'free' schools in Sweden, academies and foundation schools in England, and studies based on results from the OECD's Programme for International Students Assessments (PISA).

2. New Zealand

New Zealand has had the most decentralized school system in the western world since 1989 when it was introduced as the Tomorrow's Schools program. The New Zealand school system is unique in that government schools are stand alone schools. Yet, the head researcher at the NZ Council for Educational Research, Cathy Wylie, says that there have not been any

significant gains in student achievement and that there have been some significant costs with school autonomy.

We remain unique in having stand-alone schools that operate on their own, without being part of a school district, or a local authority. And we cannot point to any great system-wide gains in student performance or learning, new approaches to learning, or greater equality of educational opportunity that have clearly arisen from taking the radical path. [Wylie 2009: 4]

It is also notable that one of the costs of school autonomy was that the hours principals worked soared.

The hours our principals spend on administration remain the highest in international comparisons; and while many principals have relished much about their decision making, the price has been a growing sense that this has come at the cost of their ability to focus on educational leadership. [Wylie 2009: 12]

The picture Wylie presents of the state of New Zealand education after 20 years of school autonomy is not encouraging:

We do not think about ways in which we can enlarge a sense of responsibility to the system as a whole, beyond one's own school. We do not ask principals to work together on thorny local issues....We do not ensure that enrolment schemes are equitable, and do not exacerbate social segregation; we do not think and plan systematically about how to provide educational opportunities equitably within local areas. Few schools are sharing resources; we are still often trying, and failing, to provide the variety or depth of curriculum paths that are needed. Relations between schools continue to have a competitive undertow which too often results in resources allocated to the "bright and shiny" rather than useful change to teaching and learning. [Wylie 2009: 21]

In another paper, Wylie stated that school autonomy in New Zealand has made it much harder to tackle systemic issues such as disparities in education achievement and in school capacity and capability [Wylie 2007]. It seems, she said, that "school self-management was an end in itself, the main point of New Zealand education, rather than student learning" [3] and "...it is also clear now that on its own, it is unlikely to make much difference to the quality of education [23].

Eminent professor of education, John Hattie, says that by empowering 2800 schools to be "mini-markets", much wastage has occurred [Hattie 2009a]. Further, he says it could well have exacerbated disparity of achievement:

It is true that New Zealand has one of the greatest spread of outcomes between the brightest and the struggling. It is possible that this could well have been maintained, or even enhanced, by Tomorrow's Schools, which has resulted in schools pitting themselves against each other in competition for resources (especially students), and has led to many succeeding and too many failing. [Hattie 2009b: 123]

Wylie also concludes that New Zealand schools have become more stratified:

The system was more stratified: enrolments increased in the high socio-economic decile schools, and fell in the lowest socioeconomic decile schools, making it harder for those who served the most educationally needy students....No progress had been made in reducing the number of low achievers, or closing the gaps between students related to differences in their home resources. [Wylie 2010: 18]

3. Charter schools

Another form of school autonomy is charter schools in the United States. The large majority of charter schools are able to hire and dismiss staff, determine staff working conditions, determine their own curriculum and teaching methods, and control their budgets.

After 20 years of charter schools it can be said that they have not been a marked success. The weight of evidence from the most sophisticated studies of charter schools in the United States is that they are not more successful than traditional public schools in terms of student achievement [Cobbold 2012; Di Carlo 2011]. For example, the most extensive study to date was published by the Centre for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University [CREDO 2009]. It found that the gains in maths results for nearly half of all charter schools (46%) were no different from those in comparable traditional public schools while over one third (37%) of charter schools had significantly worse results. Only 17% of charter schools had significantly higher maths results than students in comparable traditional public schools.

A large study of middle school charters commissioned by the US Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences also found no difference in student achievement between charter schools and traditional public schools [Gleason et.al. 2010].

This has been the conclusion also of several meta-analyses of studies of charter schools. The most recent meta-analysis was published late last year by the US Centre for Reinventing Public Education [Betts & Tang 2011; see also Betts & Atkinson 2012]. It included 25 studies of charter school performance and found "compelling evidence that charters under-perform traditional public schools in some locations, grades, and subjects, and out-perform traditional public schools in other locations, grades, and subjects" [1].

An earlier meta-analysis which synthesized the evidence across 47 studies concluded that charter schools perform similarly to traditional public schools [Miron et.al. 2008]. Overall, 19 studies had positive findings, 12 studies had mixed findings, and 16 had negative findings. The mean impact rating for charter schools was indistinguishable from zero.

While the latest evidence from US national studies generally shows that charter schools do not achieve any better results than traditional schools, some recent sophisticated studies of charter schools in Boston and New York City have found gains by charter schools compared to traditional public schools [Abdulkadiroglu et.al. 2009, Hoxby et.al. 2009; CREDO 2010]. However, the gains are over-stated in two of these studies. The Boston study only included high achieving charter schools and these comprise only 7 out of 29 charter schools in the city at the time [Jennings 2009]. The Hoxby New York study contained methodological problems which when corrected resulted in much lower gains [Reardon 2009]. The size of the gains by charter schools in the CREDO study was relatively small.

Numerous studies have now been done on the impact of charter schools on student achievement in many states, cities and school districts across the US. Charter schools in some locations have done better than traditional public schools, in others they have done worse and in others no better. The overview of a recent special issue of the journal *Economics of Education Review* on the charter school experience concluded:

... the existing literature is inconclusive about the aggregate effect charter schools have on student achievement. Some studies in some locations find charters outperform traditional public schools, some find they are no different than the traditional ones, and some find they perform worse. [Toma & Zimmer 2012: 209]

As Research Professor of Education at New York University, Diane Ravitch, recently said:

The results are in: Some charters get high test scores, some get low scores, most are no different in test scores from public schools. The wonder is that there are so many low-performing and mediocre

charters when they have everything the reform movement demands: no unions, no tenure, no seniority, performance pay, and plenty of uncertified or alternatively certified teachers. [Ravitch 2012]

Nor is there evidence of more teaching and curriculum innovation in charter schools. Another recent paper in the *Economics of Education Review* [Preston et.al. 2012] found that charter schools are not more innovative than traditional public schools. It confirmed the findings of several earlier studies [for example, Lubienski 2003].

Studies also show that charter schools tend to segregate students by race and class. For example, a recent study found that charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the US [Frankenberg et.al. 2011]. The study analysed the relationship between charter schools and segregation across 40 US states, the District of Columbia, and several dozen metropolitan areas with large enrolments of charter school students. In some regions, white students are overrepresented in charter schools while in other charter schools Black and Hispanic students have little exposure to white students. It also found that while data about the extent to which charter schools serve low-income and English Language Learners is incomplete, it does suggest that a large proportion of charter schools do not enrol these students.

A study of charter schools operated by education management organisations found that they were strongly segregated by race and income compared with the public school district in which the charter school was located [Miron et.al. 2010]. They also enrolled lower proportions of disability students and English language learners. While charter schools have rapidly grown, the strong pattern of segregation found in 2001 was virtually unchanged through to 2007.

4. Sweden's free schools

Another source of evidence on school autonomy comes from the experience with so-called “free schools” in Sweden, which are being introduced in England under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat government coalition. Free schools are privately-operated schools which receive the same level of government funding as municipal schools in Sweden. They have been operating since 1992 and many are run by for-profit companies.

The evidence from studies of free schools in Sweden is also mixed – some show better performance by free schools and some show better performance by municipal schools. However, the studies of free schools are plagued by methodological and data problems. A recent review of the Swedish studies by Rebecca Allen from the Institute of Education at the University of London found that the benefits were small, largely concentrated on children from highly educated families and do not persist through to the end of school. It concluded:

The econometric evidence on the impact of the reforms suggests that, so far, Swedish pupils do not appear to be harmed by the competition from private schools, but the new schools have not yet transformed educational attainment in Sweden. [Allen 2010a: 7]

The most recent Swedish study shows a small positive impact of competition from free schools on student achievement, but that it is not sustained over the longer term [Bohlmark & Lindahl 2008]. It found that a higher share of free school enrolments was associated with a small improvement student achievement in grade 9. However, there was no impact on results at the upper secondary level, university attainment or years of schooling. Thus, the initial positive effect was not “large enough to lead to lasting positive effects” [23]. An earlier paper by the same authors also found that children from highly educated families gain mostly from

education in free schools, and the impact on children from low income families and immigrants was close to zero [Bohlmark & Lindahl 2007].

The weight of evidence also indicates that free schools have contributed to increasing social segregation in Swedish schools [Wiborg 2011].

5. England's foundation schools and academies

There are several different types of autonomous schools in the English education system, including academies and foundation schools. Academies and foundation schools are publicly-funded schools that have greater freedom over how to allocate their budgets and over staffing than more traditionally-governed state schools, now called community schools. Academies are managed by outside sponsors from business, religious and community groups and were initially established in disadvantaged areas, although now, under the UK coalition government, any school can convert to an academy. These schools also have greater control over their enrolments.

The evidence on the impact of these types of schools on student achievement is mixed.

A paper to be published in the academic journal *Education Economics* found no difference in the examination results of students attending foundation schools and local authority controlled schools once differences in student background were taken into account [Allen 2012]. The author states that “there is little evidence that a policy of school autonomy produces more effective secondary schools in the longer run” and that “there is no genuine difference in the effectiveness of authority controlled and autonomous schools” [14].

A recent study of academy schools published by the Centre for the Economics of Education at the London School of Economics found a significant positive impact on student achievement [Machin & Vernoit 2011]. It found that the results were strongest for the schools that have been academies for longer and for those who experienced the largest increase in their school autonomy. The authors of this study concluded that “...the results paint a (relatively) positive picture of the academy schools that were introduced by the Labour government of 1997 to 2010” [3-4].

In contrast to this study, another recent study published in the *Journal of Education Policy* found no clear evidence of a positive impact on student achievement by academies:

Of course, some schools are gaining higher scores since Academisation, but others are gaining lower scores. Using the most recent results available there is no clear evidence that Academies produce better results than local authority schools with equivalent intakes. The Academies programme therefore presents an opportunity cost for no apparent gain. [Gorard 2009: 101]

There is also evidence that increased school autonomy in England has led to greater social segregation in schools.

...there is some evidence that giving schools autonomy over their own admissions may produce more socially segregated schooling unless there are constraints to control how these admissions policies are devised and implemented. [Allen 2010b]

Consistent with this finding, another recent study published by the Centre for the Economics of Education found that academies have raised the average quality of their intake by reducing admissions of lower achieving students and increased stratification and worsened education inequality in the school system. It concluded:

....school renewal of this kind appears to have resulted in a more 'exclusive' pupil profile within Academies and reduced entry into these schools of pupils that may have otherwise lowered the general academic performance of the school. In this respect education inequalities and schooling stratification along the lines of ability and social background have increased as a result of the compositional changes that Academy schools have made. [Wilson 2012: 67]

6. PISA studies

The claim that giving schools greater responsibility for budgets and hiring teachers will improve student achievement is repudiated by the latest results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The findings on school autonomy and student achievement are contained in a report published by the OECD titled *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? – Resources, Policies and Practices (Volume IV)* [OECD 2010].

The study reports results from two types of analysis. One set of results is for cross-country correlation analysis of education outcomes in reading and school autonomy in resource allocation (budgets and staffing) and curriculum and assessment. The other set of results are for the education systems of individual countries and are obtained from multi-level regression analysis in which a variety of school characteristics are considered jointly to establish their relationship with student performance. Both analyses take account of differences in the socio-economic background of students and schools.

The cross-country correlation analysis found that education systems that provide schools with greater autonomy in selecting teachers and for school budgets do not achieve higher results in reading. The study concluded emphatically that "...greater responsibility in managing resources appears to be unrelated to a school system's overall student performance" [p.41] and that "...school autonomy in resource allocation is not related to performance at the system level" [Note 7, p. 86]. In contrast, greater responsibility for curriculum and assessment was found to be positively related to student achievement.

The within-country analysis shows that in the vast majority of countries participating in PISA there was no statistically significant difference between student achievement in schools with a high degree of autonomy in hiring teachers and over the school budget and in schools with lower autonomy over these decisions [OECD 2010, Table IV.2.4c, p. 169].

In only four countries (Chile, Greece, Korea and Peru) out of 64 do schools that have greater autonomy in allocating resources also achieve higher scores in reading after accounting for the socio-economic background of students and schools and for other factors related to school autonomy and competition between schools. In contrast, schools which have greater autonomy in allocating resources show lower scores in five countries.

The national study on Australia's 2009 PISA results reports a very small positive correlation between student achievement and school autonomy in budgeting and staffing [Thompson et.al. 2010, Table 7.31, p. 274]. However, multi-level regression analyses of the results in different countries show no significant relationship between the two for Australia [OECD 2010, Table IV.2.4c, p. 169]. That is, greater school autonomy in hiring teachers and for school budgets does not appear to lead to higher student achievement in Australia.

The national report on Australia's PISA results also shows virtually no difference in the correlation estimate for NSW, with lower autonomy for government schools, and Victoria which has a higher degree of autonomy. Moreover, there was no significant relationship

between student performance and school autonomy in budgeting and staffing in any school sector – government, Catholic or Independent.

The report also shows that achievement by 15 year-olds in Independent schools, which generally have a higher degree of school autonomy than government schools, is no higher than in the more centralized government school systems when the different socio-economic composition of the sectors is taken into account:

Once differences in students' socioeconomic background were taken into account there were no longer any statistically significant differences in the average reading, mathematical and scientific literacy scores of students from the different school sectors. [Thompson et.al. 2010: ix]

Other research based on NAPLAN results shows that high fee/high socio-economic status (SES) private schools across Australia, which are mostly fully autonomous schools, do no better than their high SES government school counterparts which have considerably less autonomy [Cobbold 2011].

In support of its claims, the Federal Government cites statistical analysis by the OECD which shows that combining school autonomy with the publication of individual school results increases student achievement [OECD 2010: 42]. However, the impact is trivial. Students in higher autonomy schools achieve only 2.6 points higher on the PISA scale than those in an average autonomy school. To put this in perspective, increased learning over the school year amounts to an average of about 35-40 points on the PISA scale. This is hardly compelling evidence.

Some other cross-country studies using PISA data show a positive impact on student achievement. For example, a study recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the US analysed data from the four PISA studies conducted since 2000 [Hanushek et.al. 2011]. It found that local school autonomy has an important impact on student achievement, but this impact varies systematically across countries, depending on the level of economic and educational development. School autonomy affects student achievement negatively in developing and low-performing countries, but positively in developed and high-performing countries. In contrast to other studies, it found no indication that autonomy differentially affects students with well-off and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Prior studies by two of the co-authors of this study using cross-country PISA data have also found positive effects of school autonomy [for example, Hanushek & Woessmann 2007]. However, as their most recent study points out, there are potential pitfalls associated with these studies because it is extremely difficult to disentangle various national policy, institutional and cultural factors influencing education outcomes from the impact of school autonomy [Hanushek et.al. 2011: 3, 5]. The findings of these types of studies are likely to be affected by a host of unmeasured country-specific factors which could influence the magnitude and even the direction of an observed relationship between achievement and school-based characteristics, such as the extent of school autonomy [Hamilton 2010: 10]. It is also difficult to account for differences in the extent and type of school autonomy and in other characteristics of schools between countries. For these reasons, many researchers prefer to focus on longitudinal analysis of specific countries or regions.

The recent study attempts to overcome problems associated with cross-country studies by including controls for systematic, time-invariant cultural and institutional differences at the country level. However, as the study itself concedes, the measures used for these country

controls are very broad. For example, it uses GDP per capita as an indicator of social and economic institutions of countries. While this may broadly allow distinctions between developing, middle and developed countries, it is unlikely to be useful in distinguishing cultural and institutional differences between, say, developed countries and their interaction with school characteristics and different features of school autonomy. In particular, it has the potential disadvantage of ignoring specific educational institutions which differ between countries. The authors state that “imperfect measurement of specific institutions lead us to be cautious in the interpretation” of the results [24-25].

Thus, while school autonomy is shown to have positive effects on student achievement in developed countries generally, interactions between cultural, institutional and educational and features of school autonomy in different developed countries may lead to different effects. In other words, it does not tell us much about the effects of differences in school autonomy between developed countries with varying cultural, institutional and educational features.

Moreover, the positive impact attributed to school autonomy may reflect other education policy measures not included in the analysis. The country-level measures of other features of the school system adopted by the study include competition, funding sources, school size, and teacher education. However, if some countries devote considerable effort to other education policies such as extra time in class to reading and mathematics or to improving the results of lower achieving students, the resultant increase in achievement could be wrongly attributed to school autonomy.

The multi-level regression analyses for individual countries by the OECD are likely to prove more reliable estimates of the impact of school autonomy than cross-country studies, even those that attempt to account for the interaction of various cultural and institutional features with school autonomy and other school characteristics. The analysis of the 2009 PISA results strongly indicate that school autonomy for budgets and staffing does not have any significant impact on student achievement in OECD countries in general and in Australia in particular.

7. Other evidence

Other evidence cited by government officials in support of school autonomy includes a recent report by McKinsey Corporation [Mourshed et.al. 2010]. However, this report does not provide any statistical analysis of the relationship between school autonomy and student achievement. It fails to distinguish the impact of different factors contributing to education achievement in the various countries considered, and amounts to little more than a collection of opinions and anecdotes. The report has been heavily criticised for its lack of consideration of research studies [Coffield 2012]

The World Bank has recently published reviews of the experience with school autonomy in around the world [Barrera-Osorio et.al. 2009; Bruns et.al. 2011]. The reviews note that there are very few rigorous studies of the impact of school autonomy on student achievement and that the available evidence is mixed. The reviews largely cover studies of school autonomy in developing countries.

A review of the research evidence published in the *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy* found that the outcomes from school autonomy are “mixed”, “generally small”, “not greatly encouraging” and “have disappointed” [Plank & Smith 2008]. The review concluded:

Placing schools at the centre of the policy frame, freeing them from bureaucracy and exhorting them to do better has not by itself generated many of the systemic improvements, innovation, or productivity gains that policy makers hoped for. [410]

Two decades of experience and research provide compelling evidence that simply setting schools free and holding them accountable for results is not in itself sufficient to conjure the attributes of effectiveness into being. Detaching schools from the bureaucratic structures within which they are embedded may enable the most privileged or resourceful schools to strike out in new and positive directions, but the rewards of enhanced autonomy for less advantaged schools are uncertain at best. [414-415]

The recent report of the Productivity Commission on the schools workforce concluded that the evidence is mixed [Productivity Commission 2012: 246]. Despite the Commission keeping faith with school autonomy in the report, the most it could say is that school autonomy “can potentially lead to improved outcomes” [245]. The report also said that school autonomy could exacerbate inequalities [44].

The Federal Minister for Education also claims that a school autonomy pilot project in 47 NSW schools showed improvements in school results [Garrett 2011]. However, the final report on the project does not provide any statistical evidence of increased student results [Department of Education and Communities 2012]. The report makes it clear that no such evidence exists:

The issue of the impact of pilot initiatives on student results is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify in so short a timeframe.....The period of the pilot (2010 and 2011) is too short to draw clear robust links between greater local decision making and widespread improved student outcomes. [8, 10]

8. Conclusions

The evidence that school autonomy leads to increased student achievement is nowhere near as compelling as the Federal Government, and other Australian governments, claim. The research evidence from around the world and in Australia on the impact of various forms of school autonomy on student achievement generally suggests that school autonomy does not lead to better school results.

There is no evidence of increased student achievement from over 20 years of school autonomy in New Zealand. Over 20 years experience with charter schools in the United States shows that some charter schools do better than traditional public schools, some do no better and some do worse. The major studies show that charter schools do no better than traditional schools. The evidence on the impact of free schools in Sweden is mixed. Foundation schools in England have not improved student achievement while the evidence on the impact of academies is mixed.

The OECD analysis of the 2009 PISA results strongly indicate that school autonomy for budgets and staffing does not have any significant impact on student achievement in OECD countries in general and in Australia in particular. A few recent studies of school autonomy in budgeting and staffing using robust methodology and data suggest positive effects on student achievement. However, the mass of evidence across several forms of school autonomy suggests very little or no impact. The most positive statement that can be made is that the evidence is mixed as the Productivity Commission recently concluded.

In addition, there is little evidence to suggest that increased school autonomy leads to more innovation in teaching and curriculum. Certainly, the long experience with school autonomy

in New Zealand and with charter schools in the United States shows no increase in innovation in teaching and learning.

However, several studies indicate that school autonomy leads to greater social segregation between schools and greater inequality in resourcing and student outcomes. Increased social segregation in schooling is associated with greater school autonomy in New Zealand, the United States, Sweden and England.

In the light of all this, the question has to be asked as to why governments are spending so much time and money on increasing school autonomy when, at best, the benefits in terms of student achievement are small. The fact is that the Gillard Government has placed its faith in extending the market in education – publishing school results was just the beginning of its agenda. Greater school autonomy is designed to extend the role of the market in education. The idea is that giving schools greater powers over budgeting and staffing will enable them to compete more effectively and that competition will drive improvements in student results.

Once again, the ALP Government is implementing a component of the agenda for market-based education begun by Dr. David Kemp as education minister in the Howard Government. Greater autonomy for schools was a fundamental policy tenet of Dr. Kemp. For example:

I would argue that the way forward, to ensure that government schools can compete effectively, is to give them greater autonomy from bureaucratic control and more freedom to exercise this leadership.... I want to be sure that these funds are going to schools which are autonomous and effective and this funding is not being used to support schools which are non-competitive and ineffective.... [Kemp 1997]

Kemp's successor, Brendan Nelson, said that we should "follow the lead of independent schools by giving principals in government schools in Australia the power and responsibility for delivering quality education for their communities" [Nelson 2003]. This is exactly what the current federal minister is doing, despite the lack of evidence that it works.

The lack of evidence to support the Government's faith in school autonomy parallels the lack of evidence that markets in education deliver better results. For example, a recent review of academic research studies published by the OECD found that the introduction of market reforms in education had little positive effects on student achievement, generated little innovation in education and brought greater likelihood of increased segregation by race and class [Waslander et.al. 2010]. Another recent review of the US experience with choice and competition in education concluded that their effect on student achievement is "underwhelming" and that "the evidence of the effects of competition on the school system remains inconclusive [Loeb et.al 2011: 158].

The widespread failure of school autonomy and of choice and competition in education to deliver better student outcomes and reduce learning gaps reflects a failure of ideology. The essence of this failure lies in seeing competition as the (cheap) alternative to devoting adequate resources – funding, teachers and facilities – to lifting the performance of low achieving students. It also reflects a failure to understand the importance of partnerships and collaboration in education between system and schools and between schools to improving teaching and learning.

The current government focus on increasing school autonomy is therefore completely ill-conceived and misplaced. There is no compelling evidence that it will improve student

results. Moreover, it diverts energy and resources which would be better spent on the most pressing challenge facing Australian education today as documented in the recent Gonski review of school funding – reducing the massive achievement gap between rich and poor. The \$500 million in funding devoted to this ill-founded program should be transferred to addressing the problems of disadvantage identified in the Gonski report. It would be a good down-payment on the Gonski recommendation for an increase of \$5 billion in education funding.

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