

**\*FOC\* A REPORT CARD FOR SCHOOLS**

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Experience in the United States has made a leading American educator pessimistic about the prospects of the type of top-down, back-to-basics reform which Dr Metherell has decreed for NSW. Yet, somehow, I don't think the teachers unions will welcome his advice. Professor Chester E. Finn Jr, who has been brought to Australia by the Institute of Public Affairs, recommends a report card for schools and parental choice of schools.

The US experience, and the contention that there is a better way than Dr Metherell's, is obviously of critical importance to the Australian debate. We don't want to go through upheaval and commit even more tax to education if the changes we make won't produce better-educated children---i.e., if we merely repeat mistakes made elsewhere.

Professor Finn told the IPA conference, "Education: Pathways to Reform", that in the late 1970s the American public began to realise that modern high-school students were not learning to read, write and reckon as well as others before them. The decline in educational achievement was detected in many places. Tertiary institutions found that they had to offer 'remedial classes' to young men and women who had 'graduated' from high school; the army found that recruits could not understand basic weapons manuals; employers howled loud and long; and American productivity was not rising as quickly as productivity in competitor nations. The well-known and respected Scholarship Aptitude Test (SAT) average score fell from 980 in 1964, when it had peaked, to only 890 in 1980.

This was the climate in which the back-to-basics movement got under way. In the 1980s many US states actually enacted laws requiring students to pass 'minimum competency' tests before they were issued with high school diplomas. Because objective testing has been successfully opposed by Australian teacher unions, Australians do not have an equivalent of SAT. In other respects, however, Professor Finn sounds familiar---especially in NSW where Dr Metherell is trying to impose minimum standards on his system from above.

Plainly, the United States education systems were performing poorly. Measures of inputs---dollars per student, teachers per 100 students etc.---were rising, while measures of educational output---average SAT scores for instance---were

falling. During the 1980s many Americans really did try hard to do something about their problem of falling standards. 'Excellence' was on everybody's lips---especially politicians' lips. In a mere six years to 1988, education funding was increased from \$3,300 per student to \$4,800 per student---a 22% increase in inflation-adjusted terms.

But, so far, little has been achieved. SAT scores have recovered only 16 of the lost 90 points and by 1986 only 6% of 17-year-old high school students could correctly answer this question: "Christine borrowed \$850 from the Friendly Finance Company. If she paid 12% simple interest on the loan, what is the total amount she repaid?" As Professor Geoffrey Partington pointed out in the AIPP publication "What Do Our Children Know", it is because of teacher-union obstruction that we do not know whether our schools do any better.

US research showed a vast difference in the output of different schools which drew pupils from similar socio-economic environments. This knowledge has, in turn, given rise to "effective schools" research.

Of course, teachers in poorly-performing schools blamed the families and often convinced parents that Johnny was learning his three Rs. They did this by the simple expedient of issuing report cards which ranged from bland to meaningless. The unreliability of self-assessment by school systems was demonstrated when, in 1987, all school districts using standardised tests (i.e., essentially all of them) reported that their own students were above average---and improving. Such statistical fantasy resulted from cheating---a practice for which pupils were once punished.

The more effective schools turned out to be those with clear educational goals, exacting expectations, team spirit among those working within the school, good leadership, order, and a curriculum that matched the objectives. How surprising: Apparently children learn what they are taught! Common sense would lead us to expect something similar in Australia.

The lesson for Dr Metherell here is that teacher professionalism comes best from below. It cannot be imposed by the Minister, any more than the proverbial horse can be made to drink. Top-down reform will not substitute for bottom-up. Teachers must be given incentives to perform well and, what is more, perform differently in different circumstances. They, like all true professionals---doctors, lawyers, professional engineers, chartered accountants and prostitutes---must accept the direct discipline of the market. They must hang out their plaques and attract customers, even if they do so only as part of a school-based team.

This approach has already produced a few success stories in the United States, even if these have not yet much affected averages. The 'professional' approach is popular with the teachers directly involved, and with their unions which have entered collective-bargaining agreements which facilitate the new ways. Finally, parental choice caters best for children

with special needs and avoids the criticism that top-down, excellence standards drive out the low-performing student.

It will surprise no-one that parental choice is often opposed by school boards and unions. Nobody welcomes competition for themselves, and no teacher wants an empty class room reporting that he or she is a poor performer.

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