

## PARTINGTON

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Recently some West Australian state school teachers were actually **balloting** children out of their classes to convince the State Government that they would not teach classes of more than 32 pupils. The dispute is now stalemated and the parties to it appear a little shamefaced. A lower pupil-teacher ratio would obviously enhance teachers' career opportunities, but if that was an issue it was not discussed. The militant teachers' expressed concern was for the "quality of education".

The kids they turned away suffered an arbitrary reduction in the quality of their education. But let us put to one side the consistency of the teachers' argument and the justice of their methods, to ask: how do they know that the state school system is not as good as it could be, or that this particular campaign is a way to improve it?

There is plentiful anecdotal evidence that teachers are not alone in being unhappy with the quality of education. Further, the tendency for an increasing proportion of parents to pay for private education must be seen as hard evidence of dissatisfaction with public sector education in particular. Television coverage of the ballots can have done nothing to improve the public's confidence.

Even though the teachers' dissatisfaction with Australian education is shared by many parents and employers, the logic of the teachers' case is not compelling. An alternative view is that larger classes would permit the culling of the least effective teachers and this would improve education. My own school experience in large classes, and what I was able to observe of my children's education, inclines me to the opinion that the teacher is a more important variable than the class size. Unfortunately, neither the teachers nor I know the truth of the matter: the relevant differences in educational achievement have not been made public.

If educators lack believability they have themselves to thank. They have consistently and successfully opposed objective assessment of educational achievement. Geoffrey Partington (AIFP Policy Paper No 12) writes of a "darkness" surrounding educational standards: "Many groups professionally engaged in education are...very likely to oppose any measures to dispel the darkness they mistakenly believe gives them safety from external attack. Yet the establishment and

systematic monitoring of educational standards would empower teachers not weaken them, and would stimulate rather than discourage greater national investment in education".

I can see how ineffective teachers might lose from objective assessment but, if education really is an under-funded sector of the economy, what can teachers as a whole lose by measurement of the results? Because people value education, teachers, schools and school systems are assessed by discriminating users of their services. In the absence of reliable criteria, the public will not suspend judgement, but will employ the best available data. Even if objective assessment were to reflect badly on present educators, it could do little further harm to their public standing. Their public standing is but a shadow of the respect and political influence they enjoyed when I first entered parliament in 1974.

However unflattering the evaluation may be, teachers are not going to be put on the scrap heap. Most people believe that good education is needed to get the economy back on the rails, and we know that prosperous people demand more education. In the long run a proficient education industry must expand.

Geoffrey Partington describes several techniques readily available to measure educational achievement and points out that most Western nations have large-scale testing and research programs. The most interesting chapter of the study, however, is the one in which he disposes of each of the oft-repeated arguments against assessment. The most often heard of these is that making comparisons is somehow odious.

In 1982, the president of the Australian Teachers Federation (ATF) said: "Certainly we have nothing to fear from proper tests which can only reinforce the overwhelming evidence that levels of literacy and numeracy are improving". Nevertheless, the Directors General of Education and the ATF opposed external standardised testing on the grounds that information about educational achievement is open to manipulation, and that unfounded conclusions would be drawn from differences between schools, educational systems and ethnic groups. They even thought interstate comparisons were undesirable. Directors General are men of little faith in their fiefdoms.

When has the possible misuse of information ever been a reason to suppress it?

The same people who claim that Australian education disadvantages certain groups---for instance, aborigines, new migrants and children from poor families---find evaluation of the disadvantages invidious. It is different in the United States and Britain where information gained from comprehensive external evaluation is used to service the special needs of disadvantaged groups.

In 1975 the Whitlam Government conducted the "ASSP" tests of basic literacy and numeracy. The odious comparison that especially incensed teachers' unions was the comparison between independent, Catholic and government school systems.

In 1980, when the tests were to be repeated, the teachers wrecked them, even though the Fraser Government had specifically prohibited comparison of school systems. Since the 1975 testers had reported that "...the students from independent schools did better than those from the Catholic schools, who out-performed their age-mates in the Government schools", shouldn't we find out why this is? The performance of the independent schools might be dismissed as attributable to extra resources, but the Catholic schools have the highest pupil to teacher ratio of the three systems.

Absenteeism, nervous breakdown and premature retirement has increased among teachers. Why is teacher stress greater now when student-teacher ratios are 20-30% lower than they were a decade ago. We need to know.

No matter what it is thought important to teach, by what methods, teaching and learning are about getting things right. Education is predicated on the existence of standards, and it can be assessed only by those standards. It should be.

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