School systems in transition: the future of government school education in Australia

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"School Systems in Transition: The Future of Government School Education in Australia"

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Abstract

School Systems in Transition:
The Future of Government School Education in Australia

Since the mid-eighties state governments have initiated the restructuring of the public school systems in order to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. However, after controversial beginnings, the commitment to the principles underpinning the reforms has weakened. The reality lags far behind the loosely-applied rhetoric of devolution, accountability and productivity. While in this disabling transitional state, schools are now subjected to a new wave of change propelled by the economic restructuring agenda of the Commonwealth Government. Extraordinary expectations are being set for schools as a consequence of policies designed to connect the outcomes of education more closely to the requirements of industry. Under these conditions, public school systems are virtually unmanageable.

Professor Angus explores the reasons why efforts to restructure public school systems have stalled. He examines policy options which might enable school systems to respond to the mounting demands being placed upon them.

A key question considered is whether the concept of a ‘government school system’ which has served Australia during this century can survive into the next.
Introduction
By the turn of the century most state school systems across Australia will have celebrated their hundredth anniversary. The Western Australian centenary will occur during October 1993. These occasions are providing Australians with opportunities to recognise the achievements of past administrations. However, the celebrations will take on a more subdued tone when attention switches towards the future. Government school systems are in a state of transition, some would say degeneration, as new public education systems of government-funded schools take shape.

In this paper I will describe how the integrity of government school systems is being weakened to the extent that in some states governments are already putting in place new structures for public education. I will then describe in broad terms three possible public education scenarios which encapsulate where state education might be heading. Finally, I will comment on the way in which the transition is being managed.

Between 1872 and 1895 the six colonial governments in Australia passed legislation committing them to establish systems of education entirely supported by central government funds and under ministerial control. The colonial governments were determined to overcome the major educational problems of the day—chronic student absenteeism, unsatisfactory standards of teaching and overcrowded, substandard school buildings (Mossenson, 1972). Schooling was to be free, compulsory and secular, and administered through education departments. The departmental apparatus replaced local district boards composed of community members who were often associated with strong sectarian interests.

Newly-formed state administrations soon acquired four salient features which have prevailed until recent times, namely, centralised governance and decision-making through the office of the Director General of Education; uniform standards and educational experiences provided in accordance with prescribed curricula; extensive regulation of how schools were to go about their business; and professional leadership.

These state administrations were able to maintain considerable distance between themselves and the government of the day with respect to administrative matters. School systems, for most practical purposes, were insulated from day-to-day, political pressures because of the power of the administrative head, the Director General of Education.

However well government school systems may have served colonial and state governments of the past, they are now undergoing a period of transition that might lead to either their dissolution or their transformation into fundamentally new forms. In the sections that follow, four of the key forces will be described which explain why the degeneration is taking place. The question of whether a major transformation, or even the breakup, of state school systems is in the public interest will be considered later in the paper.

It should be emphasised that the focus of the discussion that follows is set firmly on the system rather than the individual school. Indeed, it is quite conceivable that a large proportion of schools may prosper while the system is in a state of decline or entropy.

The Degeneration of Government School Systems

The incorporation of school systems in larger, more inclusive systems with competing values and cultures

During the mid-eighties, state by state, governments deliberately sought to break down the insularity of post-colonial departments by implementing a series of reforms across the public service. The lead was given by the Commonwealth Government which under Malcolm Fraser had instigated a review of the public service, prompted by 'administrative failure' (Weller & Lewis, 1989). The Hawke Labor government, which had a detailed policy and commitment to reforming the public sector, applied the policy when it took office. That government's 1983 White Paper, Reforming the Australian Public Service, set in train a series of initiatives designed to produce a more 'corporate focus'. State governments soon learned the rhetoric (the Western Australian White Paper, Managing Change in the Public Sector, published in 1986, is illustrative). Government-wide interests were to supersede departmentally-derived priorities and practices. 'Whole of Government' became a catch-cry within the public service. This meant for education that it should be seen as a public service in the same way as health, fisheries, consumer affairs or any other government agency. According to this doctrine government rather than departmental bureaucracies hold responsibility for determining what is in the public interest and for balancing priorities across public sector agencies. The intention of government was to require departments to become more responsive to its demands and implement its policies. Several strategies were put in place to achieve this end.
First, governments set out to reduce the independent advocacy of departmental officials for additional resources or particular policies by more clearly subordinating them to government control. Typically, legislation abolished the position of permanent head of department and replaced it with the position of chief executive from which the incumbent could be transferred into another job at the discretion of public service commissioners answerable to government. In most states the position of Director General of Education, defined as the permanent head of the education department, was thus abolished. At the same time, ministers progressively assumed the role of public spokespersons on educational matters rather than their chief executives and screened themselves from departmental officials by appointing political advisers who controlled ministerial access. This latter device, according to Thyne and Goldring (1987), was an invention of the Whitlam government which successive governments found too convenient to dismantle.

Second, new administrative structures were set up which extended the administrative boundaries of the central education agencies to more formally incorporate non-government school interests as well as those of government schools. In some states ministries of education replaced or incorporated the restructured education departments; in these new structures officials were expected to adopt a non-partisan approach and formulate policies that were in the state's overall interest rather than in the interest of the government school sector.

A third strategy was to change the administrative culture of the central office of education departments by introducing a corporate managerialist ethic and by promoting into key administrative positions persons with management experience from outside the education sector. These developments are described on a state-by-state basis by Harman and his colleagues (1991).

By the adoption of these processes state governments sought to bring errant departments into line and by so doing began to blur the boundaries of the government school system with the larger system of the state public service.

Government school systems are being absorbed into a second, larger system. Education is increasingly being regarded as an industry. This is occurring as governments promote microeconomic reforms across all industries (including the education industry) and co-opt education and training systems as key instruments for their reforms. Government school systems are being required to adopt industry-wide frameworks which override the policies and practices that had been developed internally for nearly a century. For example, policies relating to industrial relations, occupational health and safety and equality of opportunity have been adopted by government without consideration of their appropriateness for school systems. The system idiosyncrasies have had to give way. So far education officials have been unable to persuade government that school systems should be exempted from industry-wide policies and prescriptions. Departmental officials have had to adopt policies that have run counter to the culture of systems, reschedule programs, and defer consequential decision-making to fit government priorities nominally designed to improve productivity.

It should be noted that these developments have occurred in government school systems in all Australian states and territories—they cannot adequately be explained in terms of local or state politics. Further the changes have been introduced on a public sector-wide basis—they have not been confined to education. It should be further stated that governments have not set out to ‘destroy’ government school systems. Rather their intentions have been to tie the administration of these systems more closely to government interests and to make them work more effectively and efficiently. Nevertheless, their net effect has been to weaken the cohesiveness of government school systems.

The shift from centralised to decentralised or enterprise systems of management

There is now a prevailing view among economists and management theorists that flexibility of work organisation and empowerment of local managers and workers to introduce changes in work organisation are the key to increased productivity. These ideas have become the conventional management wisdom and are being applied across industry and throughout the public sector.

The education sector has been a target for these reforms partly because of its size (it is allocated approximately a quarter of each state’s budget) and partly because it has been so centralised that it has drawn the attention of agencies responsible for public sector management reform. In the space of five years, without any national coordination, all state education departments across Australia have embraced the principle of devolution and sought to delegate to schools responsibility for functions that previously had been centrally managed. In some cases these reforms followed the endorsement by governments of public reports. For example, the Western Australian Ministry of Education report, Better Schools in Western Australia (1987), enunciated these ideas. In New South Wales the Scott Report
followed suit. In other states, such as Queensland, governments introduced similar reform agendas as a result of a series of consultations and internal reviews.

The devolution reforms were regarded as radical, externally imposed changes and a threat to the integrity of government school systems by teachers and teacher unions. The reforms challenged the virtue of the highly centralised control of schools exercised by both departmental and union bureaucracies. At the present time governments have made some progress with their restructuring agendas. Most have succeeded in devolving responsibility for aspects of financial management, introduced legislation directing schools to set up local decision-making structures which require community participation, and made some headway towards establishing less centralised staffing systems through the adoption of local selection panels for the filling of local vacancies.

The devolution reforms within the public sector are coinciding with a 'sea change' in industrial relations thinking. The long serving, highly centralised wage fixing system is set to be replaced by some form of collective bargaining at the enterprise level. Wage increases are to be tied to improvements in productivity. A key to productivity increases is thought to be the adoption of more flexible work practices so that managers and workers at each site can redesign the means of production to suit local circumstances. There is now a broad constituency of support for the shift from central prescription of working conditions and work practices towards more local control in determining how the work place is to function. The major point of political difference is whether the changes should be underpinned by agreed minimum wages and conditions determined centrally. These changes will apply to schools and school systems.

Government school officials have found these fundamental changes in thinking difficult to adopt. The attachment within all levels of the system to central controls is deeply rooted; the departments nurtured a culture of dependence, rewarding compliance and discouraging actions that challenged the organisational norms. Further the regulatory system is out of date and is inhibiting the devolution reforms; for the most part the regulations and ordinances are a composite of a century of accumulation. The difficulties are further exacerbated by the propensity of ministers to respond to incidents that ought be dealt with at the local level. This propensity is not by any means a recent phenomenon. Freeman Butts forty years ago recognised this phenomenon and commented:

The theory of ministerial responsibility is, of course, deeply embedded in the whole parliamentary system of government. It will therefore not be lightly changed, but the problem seems to be one of public administration policy and practice as well as of political structure. I cannot personally speak of the widespread tendency to centralise decisions in statutory corporations or other branches of government (although I am led to believe it is present) but I have seen the mass of administrative details with which the top administrative officers in Education Departments must be concerned. In one State Department of Education the question of expulsion of a particular boy was making its way upward from the headmaster through the Inspector and Assistant Superintendent of Primary Education to the Superintendent of Primary Education, then to the Director of Education and finally to the Minister. (1964, p. 18)

Finally, even where there has been acceptance of the principle of devolution in school systems there has been little agreement about how far the principle should be applied. For example, although most departmental officials recognise that there is no longer any need for a directive to principals about how to run school assemblies, there is much more ambivalence about whether decisions to hire and fire school staff should be made at the school level.

At present, it is not possible to gauge the longer term impact of devolution policies on school systems. There is no clear construction of how government school systems would operate if devolution policies were to fully apply even though the concept of a system of self-managing schools remains part of the official rhetoric. However, if the force to shift decision-making from the centre to the school site continues to be applied then it will eventually knock out a linchpin holding the government school system together.

The shift of the locus of strategic planning from the state to the national level

Although the Commonwealth Government has exerted considerable influence on government school systems since the nineteen seventies it is only in the last few years that state and Commonwealth governments have reached an accommodation on national policies. In general states have fought fiercely against Commonwealth domination of educational policy-making. While states have welcomed
Commonwealth dollars they have feared Commonwealth control. However, largely through the adept political manoeuvring of the Commonwealth Minister for Education, John Dawkins, the Commonwealth-state debate has been neutralised. The signal for this change is found in the 1988 statement, *Strengthening Australia’s Schools*, which linked the nation’s economic future with the development of national educational policies. State ministers of education have come to recognise that the major problems that they confront are of national proportions and can be most successfully dealt with by a concerted national response. Further, state ministers have been persuaded that the adoption of national policies does not necessarily lead to Commonwealth government control. The Australian Education Council, the council of state and Commonwealth ministers, has become the peak policy-making body in Australian education.

By any standard, Dawkins has been spectacularly successful. A series of resolutions were finessed through the Australian Education Council which established the architecture of a national structure for school education. In 1989 the Council agreed to a statement of national goals. In 1990, a national curriculum corporation was established to promote cooperation between states in curriculum development. States set in train the production of national curriculum frameworks and subsequently national profiles of student achievement which provide the foundation for comparisons of state and system performance. Since 1989, states have participated in the production of an annual national report.

This push in education received an impetus from the special meetings of premiers and the prime minister which were designed to remove impediments to microeconomic reform on a national scale. The premiers endorsed a series of initiatives designed to achieve common policies and standards in relation to the law, health, transport, and other sectors of government which previously were the preserve of state governments. It is now conceivable that the movement towards adopting common educational frameworks will extend to the employment and working conditions of teachers.

While state officials may perceive these national agreements to be of marginal administrative importance because they appear to have little impact on the day-to-day operations of school systems, in effect, they have shifted the arena for strategic decision-making from the school system to the national level. Individual states retain the power to exempt themselves from national agreements but they do so at the risk of foregoing Commonwealth funding and public approval of policies which have been promoted as serving the national interest. For example, in a key policy area such as post-compulsory schooling, the future directions of government school systems are being debated and set in national forums. Because of the links between post-compulsory schooling and economic policy, any state which sought to proceed independently without reference to the coalition of national business, trade union and government interests would require extraordinary local support. The net effect of the development of national policy-making structures has been to marginalise individual school system interests in the search for national consensus.

The shift towards the privatisation of publicly-owned and governmentally-managed enterprises

The view that government has the responsibility to provide essential public services has been embedded in the psyche of generations of Australians since early colonial times. Further, the faith in Keynesian economic theory reinforced this historical tendency. However, in less than a decade governments have modified their positions and begun to define their core functions as licensing, regulation and quality control; at the same time they have begun to shed responsibility for directly supplying services. Increasingly governments of both conservative and labour persuasions have adopted as a rule of thumb the maxim that public services should be provided either on a financially competitive basis with the private sector or handed over to the private sector.

This change of zeitgeist partly explains why governments in Australia are no longer champions of government school systems. They have recognised the political advantage of demonstrating a more even-handed administration of public and private systems.

For example, in 1992 the Western Australian Government in its pre-election policy statement on education, *Foundations for the Future*, announced that it would increase support for non-government schools to enable the current level of participation, currently 26% of school enrolments, to reach the national average of 30% by the year 2001. This declaration, which amounted to a decision to deliberately shrink the size of the government school system, was received without a public murmur. A decade ago, such an announcement would have generated a public furore and the mobilisation of political opposition through organisations such as the Defence of Government Schools. The principle of state aid is no longer a political issue (Ashenden, 1989).
An equally remarkable signal of how times have changed occurred in January 1992 when, in her presidential address, the president of the Australian Teachers' Union canvassed the wisdom of merging government and Catholic school systems into a single unified system (Foggo, 1992), a proposition that has been mooted privately by senior state officials.

Why has there been such a political shift and why has there been so little public response to developments that only a few years ago would have stirred the embers of a bitter debate?

Through Commonwealth and state funding policies it is now a reality that all schools are government funded and privately subsidised. Approximately 60% of non-government school funding, on average, is acquired from Commonwealth and state sources. According to the policies of both government and oppositions this proportion of funding is likely to increase. At the same time the contribution of private funding of government schools through school fees and sponsorship is increasing. The differential in the level of government support to government and non-government schools is being progressively narrowed.

As Catholic schools have acquired additional funding and their loosely constructed systems expanded, their head office structures have begun to assume the features of centralised government school bureaucracies. In 1990, 20% of Australian school children attended Catholic schools (Year Book Australia, 1992). Ironically, as the government school systems have sought to devolve and decentralise, they have begun to assume the features of the emerging Catholic systems. This organisational convergence, caused by the expansion of one system and the contraction of the other, is contributing to the homogenisation of Australian school systems.

The blurring of differences between government and non-government systems has been accelerated by the commitment of both systems to the principles of equity. Participation in Commonwealth equity programs, jointly managed by representatives from both sectors, has shifted attention from the historical sectarian divisions to differences in socio-economic status and linguistic background. Further, the promotion of choice and diversity in the government school system has undermined the core value of uniformity of provision which had previously been a hallmark of government school systems throughout Australia. Within the government school systems, relaxation of school boundaries, parental sponsorship and local control has led to the development of schools as elite as prestigious private schools. The adoption of common salary scales and the sharing of curricula have produced Catholic schools similar in most respects to their government system counterparts. The consequence of these changes over the last twenty years has been the obfuscation of what government schooling stands for.

The combined effect of these four forces on government school systems has been to open them up to external influence while simultaneously relocating decision-making from central offices to national and local levels, and finally to blur the distinctions with their traditional competitors from the private sector. Collectively, the forces have served to change the culture of the central offices of school systems, thereby distancing them from schools. Further, the leadership of government school systems has been weakened by dividing it at the central level between ministers and chief executive officers and by obscuring the leadership responsibilities of school principals who are expected to function as line managers in the system while at the same time serving as chief executives of self-managing schools.

Each of these forces has magnified the difficulties of routine management that are confronting the large centralised school systems and at the same time precipitated new problems of governance. It is virtually certain that under these conditions the government school systems will undergo a major transformation.

**Transition to What?**

**Re-configured, restructured government school systems**

Proponents of the devolution reforms expect that when they are brought to fruition government school systems will be placed on a more competitive footing. They will be re-invigorated, streamlined and more able to respond to the demands of government. However, if these hopes are to be realised then the forces that are presently pushing towards the degeneration of these systems will have to be nullified.

Firstly, the strategic leadership for education will have to be returned to the states and professional leadership restored in the systems. Secondly, the tensions between the central steering of the system and the local control of the work place must be resolved somehow. Thirdly, government school systems must either return to the core values of the past or become associated with values and standards that can differentiate them from the growing number of schools in the private sector. Finally, a more effective public and political advocacy for government schools must be established.
There is little prospect that these conditions can be met within the current political climate. It is almost certain that for the foreseeable future the state of the economy will continue to preoccupy government thinking and there will be mounting pressure on school system authorities to achieve more with fewer public resources. The demands on school systems to achieve government objectives on shorter and shorter timelines will compound this problem. Government impatience for results will lead to the imposition of even tighter controls over departmental bureaucracies. A restoration of government school systems as they once were is therefore no longer a political option; the debate is now past the point of considering whether government schools are doing a good job or not. The question is whether the corporate managerialist reforms of the eighties can deliver what governments want or whether more fundamental changes are called for. School systems are now caught in a tide of reform that extends across state, national and industry boundaries. School officials, responding to the mood of teachers by resisting fundamental restructuring, may gain a temporary respite for their employees from the gamut of change. However, in so doing they risk a retributive response from a reforming government frustrated by what appears to be professional self-interest.

School systems in a state of perpetual transition

Since the mid-eighties government school systems in Australia have been subject to constant restructuring. Like the mythical figure of Tantalus, unable to bring a cup of water to his lips before it empties, they are poised at the point of completing one round when they are required to commence the next.

There are two explanations for this pattern of restructuring. First, the architects of the restructuring have never satisfactorily defined the end point nor acquired public and professional acceptance that the system should be working towards the achievement of that end. There is no blueprint or completed model school system, either in Australia or overseas, to which governments can refer in order to monitor progress. Hence, restructuring has been a moving target with successive governments failing to hit the elusive bulls-eye.

A second explanation is the lack of decisiveness or persistence on the part of governments to see educational reform through to a point of conclusion. Usually, attempts to restructure government school systems have been launched with public fanfare but met with parental and union opposition; eventually the commitment to reform has petered out. State governments have learned to their cost that radical school reform is not always good politics. Under these circumstances school systems have drifted, occasionally caught in the ebb and flow of state politics. In Western Australia the government soon lost interest in the implementation of the report, Better Schools in Western Australia, when it calculated the political cost of union and parental opposition. The Minister for Education, Bob Pearce, who had actively promoted the reforms, was shifted to another portfolio. In New South Wales the uncompromising commitment of the Minister for Education, Dr Terry Metherell, to push ahead with restructuring led to his demise; Metherell was also moved to another portfolio. More recently in Victoria the Government commitment to the implementation of the Victorian Certificate of Education became a prominent election issue which according to some commentators was a factor in the election outcome (Slattery, 1992). These examples suggest that political leaders would be wise to adopt a gradualist approach to school reform. However, the cycle of elections militates against the pursuit of school reform over the long haul. Governments look to achieve results over two or three years. Yet, without government leadership and external pressure school systems cannot be reformed in any fundamental way. Entrapped, governments and their officials engage in constant tinkering around the edges.

Under these conditions—where the purposes and expected outcomes of the reforms are vaguely defined, and where there is a weak political constituency of support—school systems can expect constant, inconclusive change.

The dismantling of government school systems by opening public education to market forces

School systems, together with other public sector agencies, are operating in a political environment in which exposure to market forces is increasingly regarded as the best means of improving productivity and performance. Economic rationalism is clearly in the ascendancy and there is little public contestation (nor understanding) of its central tenet that rational, self-interested choices lead to optimal social efficiency. Economic rationalism has progressively (critics would say, insidiously) captured the thinking not only of the central agencies in government but also of key officials in school systems. Three of the principal values that underpin economic rationalism—choice, diversity and competition—are clearly evident in all Australian government school systems. Parents have been encouraged to exercise their choice of school by crossing school boundaries or by enrolling their children in selective primary
and secondary schools on the basis of academic competition. Schools have been encouraged to develop a curriculum specialisation and an ethos that is suited to their local community. They have also been encouraged to seek funding from private sources in order to develop these specialisations. Individual schools now compete for particular clienteles of students—high academic achievers and students with artistic and sporting talents.

The promotion of choice, diversity and, more recently, competition has occurred with strong professional support in the main though the limits have never been defined. There is now the prospect that these limits will be made more explicit and pushed to further extremes. Conservative governments are becoming interested in school reform proposals which will break down the systemic protections which have enabled government school systems to maintain uniformity of standards and conditions, a principle fundamentally at odds with the values that underpin economic rationalism. These protections, which for most of the last century were seen as a strength of government school systems, are being regarded as flaws and as impediments to worthwhile change.

The instruments for reform under these conditions may be the introduction of some kind of voucher system in which parents are not only able to exercise a choice of school that their children attend but are also able to direct government funding to that school with the consequence that popular schools will thrive and unpopular schools close. However, the notion of a voucher system has been touted by its proponents for more than 30 years and tried on a pilot basis in the United States without acquiring a political mandate (Chubb & Moe, 1990). The more likely strategy of state governments will be to install an opting out provision in school governance whereby school communities may choose to dissociate themselves from the government system and operate as quasi-private schools in a deregulated, competitive environment. Such arrangements are presently in place in England and are proposed by the Coalition Government in Victoria. During 1992 the Government of New South Wales proposed a similar provision whereby schools can elect to manage their operations under considerably more deregulated conditions than the mainstream of schools (Boston, 1992). The attractiveness of the opting out strategy lies in the fact that the emerging, new system can be 'grown' alongside the old until it is sufficiently developed and has acquired a sufficient constituency of support that it can become the dominant partner. This 'parasitical' model does not require the initial disturbance that usually accompanies system-wide reform.

The result of these 'experiments' is difficult to predict. Reliance on market forces to reform public school systems is unprecedented in Australia. Open competition is the antithesis of centralised planning in which the relationship between means and ends is subjected to close scrutiny and where the means of achieving the ends is carefully structured. Fragmentation is a likely outcome as self-regulating schools position themselves in new alliances or networks based on the mutual self-interest of the consumers. The networks would cross traditional system boundaries and be defined by characteristics such as parental wealth, religious affiliation, political ideology, geographic isolation, or the intellectual attributes of children. Such feudal, political networks would operate under a system of minimal state regulation until either the informal networks solidified into permanent sub-systems or the resulting incoherence obliged government to intervene and establish a new state structure. Under such circumstances the function of the government school system is reduced to that of providing a residual service for individuals and communities without the social and financial resources to acquire tailor-made education services. It is reasonable to assume that those currently advantaged will benefit most from such a redistribution of social goods (Jonathan, 1990).

The future is obviously unclear. It may well turn out that elements of all three scenarios characterise public education in Australia over the next decade. The hankering for the past may lead some state politicians and school officials to restore an old-style, centralised departmental control over schools which may last for a short while. The stop-start pattern of school reform may also endure until there is a broad coalition of support of sufficient strength to steer a major reform program through to completion. However, eventually all school systems are likely to be overtaken by the changing public and political attitudes towards local control, regulation, and competition. School systems will not be able to 'go it alone' in the face of such widely shared norms.

**Developing Public Policy**

**Developing public debate**

The feeling of powerlessness is the most salient emotion of educational officials regarding the changes taking place. In the space of a decade they have lost control of the management of government school systems. The key strategic decisions that are shaping public education in Australia are being made with
only scant reference to education officialdom or to the historic contribution of government school systems.

It has suited state governments to avoid debate on the future of government schooling. The political culture of Australia is now such that leaders feel required to demonstrate certainty in an age of uncertainty: governments which become embroiled in debate project an image of indecisiveness and needlessly expose themselves to criticism. Instead, they prefer to know what the public thinks about issues by constant public opinion polling for private consumption rather than by opening up issues for debate in the public arena. This disposition of governments has led them to favour short-term initiatives with obvious pay-offs and only introduce for public discussion issues for which there is a resolution which has such support that its public acceptance is virtually a fait accompli.

The price of this abrogation of political leadership has been to expose public education to reform without serious consideration of its implications for the social development of its citizens, with the reforms driven almost exclusively by economic perspectives (Porter, 1990). Side-lined, the education profession has sat quietly on its hands, nonplussed by the scale and diffuseness of the reform agenda and the speed of its implementation.

Developing more realistic assessments of what central education authorities can deliver

It has suited the interests of government and education department officials to promote the myth that central authorities can realise government priorities which are in fact well outside the realm of successful implementation. The central office and schools form a loosely-coupled system in which signals from the central office are only weakly, if ever, received in classrooms. There is no powerful lever which, if yanked in the chief executive's office, will cause teachers, secure in their classrooms, whether a thousand metres or a thousand kilometres away, to respond. Classrooms are sanctuaries; the devolution reforms, unintentionally, have made them even more so. It is one thing to change the cultures of the central offices of eight state and territory departments of education; it is quite another matter to change the cultures of the nation's 10,000 schools and weld them into line-management structures.

These are important conclusions to reach for the purposes of this paper. Governments and departmental officials may well be deluding themselves by thinking that a new management structure for school systems will solve a problem that is cultural rather than structural. Major cultural change is a long term proposition, extending well beyond the life of most governments. Hence, governments which see system restructuring as a means of achieving immediate results will need to perpetuate the myth of effective central control. From this perspective it is understandable that governments become fascinated with deregulation strategies. The shift from central planning to management via market forces, however problematic for moral and social reasons, does away with the overstated expectations of what governments can deliver through central management. If the service is unsatisfactory then blame can be more easily attributed to the provider than sheeted home to government.

Educating the public

That such fundamental change to public education in Australia is taking place following such meagre public debate is both remarkable and disturbing. Departmental officials usually point to the media as the guilty party, criticising the banal, uneducative reporting in newspapers and the 20 second grabs on television news. Little effort is given to explaining issues or setting a story in context. Media representatives, in turn, complain of the naivety of departmental bureaucrats and their timidity in exploiting their medium. The truth is probably even more unsettling. By and large the public is satisfied with the level of public participation in macro-education policy-setting. Over the past century government school systems have successfully educated the community to accept that responsibility for administering public education is best left in the hands of departmental officials and teachers. The recent initiatives of governments to involve the community in school-level decision-making will require the participation of several generations of parents and students before the wider community regards participation in the governance of public education as a duty and a right. A start has been made by legislating for community participation, though ministers and officials will need to promote the spirit of this reform as well as the letter of the law if there is to be public ownership of state education. For the moment governments are stepping back from this reform: an educated community of parents would quite significantly alter the present balance of political powers and influence the prospect of school system restructuring in ways that cannot yet be calculated.
Conclusion

Government school systems are in a state of transition. Like all open systems, school systems in the process of adapting to their external environment typically become more differentiated in form and more elaborate in structure. As Scott (1981) points out:

Social organizations exhibit such an amazing capacity to change their basic structural features that researchers who study organizations over time have difficulty in determining when the units they are studying are the same organizations with reorganized structures and when they represent the birth of new organizations. (p. 110)

Seen from this perspective the trials and tribulations of Australian government school systems during the last decade represent a stage in their organisational evolution. The changes of themselves are neither necessarily good nor bad but rather can be seen as adaptations to a rapidly changing external environment. There is an inevitability of transition. However, I do not intend to conclude on such an amoral and dispassionate note. The particular adaptation will follow the path of least political resistance. The structural changes will almost certainly favour some groups of students ahead of others. For example, if government school systems, as we know them, are replaced by educational market-places then those already advantaged will benefit the most from such reforms. These matters constitute bread and butter politics and must be fully and publicly debated. The future of public education is too important to be decided privately by cabals of party faithful and public relations experts, or to be resolved as a consequence of governmental inertia. Such a debate will not happen of its own accord. Unless initiated by the education profession it may never happen at all.

References


