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EDUCATION

School lessons worth learning



Michael Hewitson, founding principal of Trinity College, pictured with Year 10 students, from left, Alexandra Ward, Jordan Hawkey and Alexia Jennings. Picture: Kelly Barnes

- CHRIS KENNY
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- THE free and fair education that is supposed to be available to all Australian children is something of a mirage.

In states where school zoning is strictly enforced, house prices escalate in the zones of the leading public schools. Real-estate agents advertise the school catchments of houses as if they were an extra room or a swimming pool.

Typically, in poorer areas the quality of the schools and the results of their students fall away along with real estate prices and the incomes of the parents.

This is not the way it is supposed to be. This is not Australia's egalitarian dream.

And as Justine Ferrari's exclusive report in The Weekend Australian today reveals, declining relative standards remain a problem, regardless of how much money governments spend.

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In a nation focused on a smart and productive future, the education challenge remains one of our greatest riddles. We look to academe and overseas - especially to the Tiger economies of East Asia - for lessons and prospective new formulas.

Yet the answers might be more practical, and closer to home.

In 1985 Michael Hewitson became the founding principal of a low-fee Anglican school on the dusty fringes of Adelaide's working-class northern suburbs.

It started as little more than a log cabin, with electricity connected the morning the first students arrived, and a dump as a playground. But it was determined to provide basic, disciplined education and pastoral care.

Remarkably, within 15 years Trinity College became the largest school in the state, with 3500 students ranging from middle-class backgrounds to those who had been welfare-dependent for generations. Classrooms emptied in nearby suburbs - some of the poorest in Adelaide - and the state primary and secondary schools were closed or merged. Hundreds of children proudly became the first in their families ever to complete school and go on to tertiary education.

Parents on low incomes or reliant on welfare found modest amounts - as little as \$5 or \$10 a week - to send their children to a school that reflected and imposed values.

The family backgrounds didn't change, the suburbs and job opportunities didn't alter and nor did the social environment. But the schooling results soared.

In areas where state schools had sometimes celebrated students passing individual Year 12 subjects, 70 per cent of Trinity graduates were going on to further study. There must be profound lessons in this experience.

Hewitson has penned a book, to be launched later this month, which is both a fascinating memoir of his long career and a prescription for improving our school system - particularly for poorer students.

How Will Our Children Learn? distills a lifetime of practical lessons, academic discussion, bureaucratic experience and pastoral commitment into three fundamental principles.

"That more money thrown at a non-performing system of schools does not, and will not, increase student access to quality schooling.

"That school governance is the core problem which must be addressed.

"That all parents, both rich and poor, must have access to a choice of schools."

The implications of these principles are quite profound and, taken together, would present a dramatic shake-up of how our state and federal governments provide for public education.

Hewitson is scathing of the emphasis on funding: "Money alone is no answer." His analysis matches that revealed in Ferrari's news report, which shows real funding growth from \$20 billion to \$42bn over less than two decades has been ineffectual.

Geoff Masters, of the Australian Council for Educational Research, says we need to change our approach; the Grattan Institute's Ben Jensen says we keep funding "bad policies that are ineffective" while failing to acknowledge the evidence.

"It is so frustrating," says Hewitson. "We now have growing public understanding that our schools are failing, yet the answers being suggested in isolation will also fail."

To understand the lifetime's experience that has shaped Hewitson's prescription we need to go back to a fork in the road in the late 1960s.

Presented with two tempting careers, either as a microbiologist or a salaried teacher at Adelaide's prestigious St Peter's College, a young Hewitson rejected both.

With what he now describes as naive altruism, he chose instead to join the state school system and asked to be sent to the least popular school, where he might be most needed.

And so he began at Eyre High School on the western fringes of Whyalla, the remote steel town on Spencer Gulf, flanked by desert, about five hours north of Adelaide. This was an era when even the toughest state schools managed to conjure an air of respect and discipline.

"In the 1960s and early 70s even a state school loaded with migrants from the wrong suburb of Glasgow and migrants from Spain brought in to provide a workforce for BHP's steel works and shipbuilding, plus the most working-class Australian students, was a school of learning," he recalls.

Hewitson attributes some important lessons to this experience, perhaps most importantly the need to understand that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds will often arrive in the first year without the background literacy and numeracy that we might take for granted.

So structured learning for these children to catch up on the basics was and remains crucial. It was a core principal Hewitson later made a priority at Trinity.

Yet over time this enthusiastic teacher saw what he viewed as the decline of the public system. "Schools were given freedom, but the question arose: whose freedom?" he reminisces. "Who was in control?"

Hewitson's memoir relates anecdotes from this period through his time in teacher education to the culminating story of Trinity College.

Primarily he invests his faith in parents as the ultimate evaluators of school quality. "The best way to measure school performance," he says, "is by parental demand."

This is one of the many reasons public schools in higher socio-economic areas perform better. Sure, children might have a better start with learning at home and higher expectations. And sure, some of the better teachers might gravitate to these schools. But importantly, argues Hewitson, there is competition. Because there are good private schools in these areas and parents have the means to send their children to them, the private schools help to set the benchmark.

The public schools lift their own performance partly in order to meet the demands of parents and students. And this is where the Hewitson prescription becomes fascinating and persuasive. Rather than advocate for public over private or vice versa, he sees choice and competition as the key.

He has a compelling point. In poor areas with a badly performing public education system we have tended to create, as he sees it, public education monopolies - monopolies in educational failure.

As the national education debate has raged in the wake of the Gonski report and competing responses in a pre-election setting, Hewitson describes a lamentable future under the status quo.

"The easy road to follow," he says, "is to keep spending more and more money to achieve less and less. Without significant change, however, our future will follow the laws of entropy and we will decline into disorder."

Both former prime minister Julia Gillard and incoming Education Minister Christopher Pyne have advocated empowering school principals.

"I want to transform school education by making sure that around the country, school principals get to lead their schools," said Gillard.

Pyne promised to "give principals and parents a real say in the running of their school", adding that the future of public schools depended on it.

Hewitson agrees with the centrality of this shared aim, but asks how it can be achieved.

"Non-performing state schools will have no pressure to change because most parents in the poorer postcodes have no schooling choice," he says. "The state school is a monopoly."

His radical plan to provide choice would allow state schools either to remain part of the state system or, if they chose, to become independent state schools, run autonomously by a board (with professional support from the department).

These schools would be open to all but free to develop their own values - their "hidden curriculum" - and respond to the wishes of parents and the community.

Importantly, existing independent schools - perhaps Anglican or Catholic - could apply to become independent state schools on the same basis.

They would be open to all comers at the same cost to parents as the state schools, and while they would be free to maintain their values they would not be allowed to proselytise.

Where there are no independent schools they could be established, not necessarily by a church group but perhaps with a local government or community group as a sponsor.

Parents in these areas would then have a choice. Simply by exercising that choice they would take a major step towards becoming more deeply involved in their child's education and school life.

Independent state schools that failed would be allowed to go bankrupt. "Schools which did not provide the schooling parents were seeking would reduce in size and be challenged to change their offering - or they would close so that their assets could be re-used," advocates Hewitson.

The philosophy behind Hewitson's prescription is about more than choice. After his decades of varied experience, it is perhaps better summarised under the heading of accountability.

"Who is responsible for the child's education?" he asks rhetorically. Ultimately he believes responsibility lies with the parents, which is why their choice of school is so important to them. But they make that choice based on who they believe is best able to deliver the results they want.

"Spending more on a school system that fails is just more expensive," says Hewitson. "Good teachers are important, but in badly governed schools where no one is clearly responsible for a student's learning, they will burn out, and - being skilled competent professionals - they will find a job outside teaching."

When he took children into Trinity, rich or poor, he knew the parents expected him as principal to deliver results.

This is a responsibility Hewitson clearly took seriously. But he believes most principals would, so long as that accountability is manifest.

In the state system he believes the direct line of accountability has become contested.

The principal, the school council, the staff, the bureaucracy and even the union all have a role, but not one of them accepts the ultimate responsibility. Accountability is diffuse.

If they are unhappy and there are other options, parents have the obvious choice of moving their children.

But if parents face an economically imposed state education monopoly, they are powerless. They must take what they get.

"We need to reclaim the prime importance of parental responsibility in making our education system one of the world's best," stresses Hewitson. "We can empower parents by giving all families, both rich and poor, a real choice of schools that parents would choose."

Hewitson's lessons

- Parents are the best evaluators. Monopoly schooling can fail. Parents in poor areas need choice.
- Schools may not be the best place for some students to learn. Teenagers over the age of 14 should be able to take up full-time apprenticeships.
- Any community group can sponsor independent state schools.
- State education departments should fully fund independent state schools with enrolment open to all.
- Existing state and non-government schools should be able to apply to become independent state schools. New independent state schools could open in poorer areas if parental demand exists, and accept all students.
- Public student performance testing for all schools should be mandatory and results made public.
- New schools are needed that offer more than just core academic skills. Schools need to offer values for living.
- To ensure a diversity in publicly funded independent state schools, there should be a separation of church and state. Proselytising of any faith system (including atheism) should not be allowed in state schools.

- New schools that parents wish to choose for their children are needed in lower-economic areas. Values matter, and schools need to overtly state their value systems for parents to choose.

How Will Our Children Learn? Choosing Better Schools: Educational Excellence in Every Postcode, by Michael Hewitson, is published by The Publisher's Apprentice