

inform asked four people to project secondary education into the next decade and consider what should change in our schools and system.

Secondary education

Where are we going?



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Well now, in these millennial times it is a comfort to simply travel four years into the future to suggest where public secondary education might head.

I start with a central proposition: that wherever we head, school culture is more important than school and system structure. Restructures in recent times have not always been unalloyed successes. The key criterion by which change ought to be measured is that of benefit to students. We can do without the pyrotechnics of a 'secondary school reorganisation' debate if it does not address the more urgent question of the internal culture of schools and our system.

How do our public secondary schools facilitate the teacher's task of providing the curriculum to open up life's possibilities for our young?

Perhaps we have not yet quite reached utter perfection in our current arrangements for post-primary education. Let us imagine, for example, the adoption of a co-operative model of planning amongst our schools and colleges where schools on a district or regional basis are called upon to develop complementary community plans which allow each educational institution to develop curriculum emphases without the current insular, wasteful and ultimately self-defeating competitive model which encourages not much more than a set of conflicting vanities. The public educator has a larg-

er responsibility than just one's own, current school. We leave that myopia to other, lesser systems. The fully professional public educator carries a responsibility to all of the children of their community and State.

Public schools are about serving whole, broad communities and, as public providers, we would be wise to plan our provision to optimise the number of youngsters in our care and to allow students to make choices based on a blend of practical and theoretical subjects. Then we will have become a true

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Department of Education and Training and have provided the basis for curriculum choice grounded in this synthesis of knowledge.

Certainly the question of accountability will, and should, remain. Public provision of services is under assault across the Western world. Without accountability we cannot survive. Interestingly, recent public questioning of the wisdom of privatisation has centred on the very lack of accountability (and quality) of privatised services. We now have legislative requirements in NSW that obliges the Parliament to be made aware of the educational performance of various groups of students - Aboriginal, rural, low-SES, NESB and others.

This is where the accountability issue

might most usefully travel in secondary education. Why are the educational outcomes for these groups so unequal? Can we continue to support a process of largely undifferentiated central provision of resources across our system which has vastly unequal educational outcomes? The soundest analysis of outcomes must also look at the question of inputs directed towards the areas of professionally identified need.

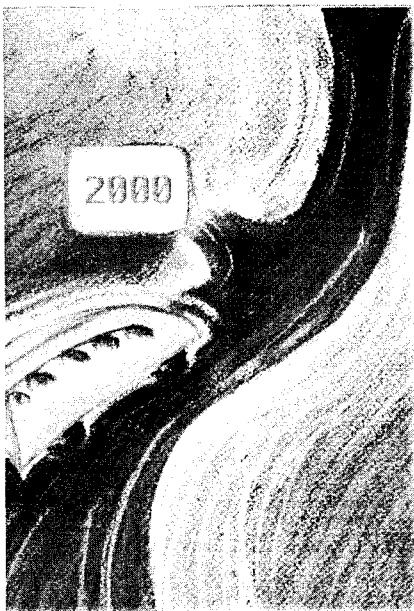
The public own our schools and they have an entitlement to have an accountability with meaning. At the moment the

consideration of accountability is yet to get past the perception of media voyeurism. Current accountability measures - set against a backdrop of competitiveness, internecine rancour and

populist chatter - have a narrow focus. The question: 'What do we really know about good teaching practice and how might we share it around?' is a more urgent consideration than a discussion around rebadging schools.

Some additional suggestions around secondary school culture:

- The early years of high school are the most important years of a student's secondary career whilst the HSC debate can be engaging but distracting. Organisationally, Years 7 and 8 are occasionally still an afterthought.
- HSC assessment practices have so converged with external forms of testing and so preoccupy and narrow the effort and attention of our students that it might be timely to consider ▶



methods of greater school-based, professional judgement about what we send into the Board of Studies.

- Teacher performance and efficiency must become a major issue to be firmly addressed by the major policy players if we are to systematically address quality in education.
- Processes of quality control which rely on remote control are futile. In a highly immobile teaching service, devolved and occasionally serendipitous mechanisms for assessing 'merit' only at the point of movement, misses the bigger picture and the larger need.
- 'Value-added' data can only become a useful tool in a climate of sane public

discussion, trustworthy methodology and an adequate research base that focuses on the exponential impact of disadvantage and alienation on particular young people over the course of their secondary school years.

- 'Comprehensiveness' is a most useful contemporary ideal based not simply on a particular form of school organisation but rather on the need of students to be exposed to a broad range of learning experiences and to a varied range of teachers with different personalities and methodologies, values and beliefs against which young people may grow towards their personal maturity.
- Any proposal about secondary reor-

ganisation ought to be measured against the utilitarian principle of optimal benefit. How are the greatest number of young people offered the greatest opportunity?

- Let us take care that the 'spectre of the test', which so dominates the senior years, does not overtake the junior years as I fear it might. We need to allow quality teaching practices which are programmatic and syllabus-driven rather than seeking the auguries of the specimen paper or last year's test to divine our classroom practice.

My final suggestion comes from Bertholt Brecht: Turn learning into common experience and justice into a passion.

For those fed up with millennium madness, the next milestone is 2010. By then the lump on the bell curve of teachers in NSW government schools, now peaking at age 47, will have shifted to the end, if not off, the graph and on to glorious retirement. But children who started infant school this year will still be in school, having just reached Year 12. The question I want to address is what school will be like when my generation has gone but the Kindergarten of 1990 are still there, just about to face their adulthood and our society's future.

The first thing to say is the rush of press early this year about class sizes *seemed terribly out of touch with a changing world*. There is no doubt that class size is an important factor in the quality of education in a conventional classroom, but classrooms, school days and even school weeks are rapidly changing beyond the one class-one teacher, 9.00-3.30 day.

Even in traditional settings in NSW, senior school students are being timetabled on a four-day week. While few government schools have gone as far as one non-systemic Catholic college, which has a 14-hour day and six-day week, the shape of schooling is being twisted and turned to different purposes and outcomes.

I know some will scoff at this observation, but it is not an academic fantasy. I have two children (nine and 16 years old). While some aspects of their school day is little changed from when I was in their shoes, others are radically changed. My concern is the extent to which schools recognise this and meet childrens' new needs, interests, skills and expectations.

Education is becoming a time, not a space. Already a significant number of young people spend more time on the web than in classrooms. Teachers find it



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hard to not only compete with the entertainment value of this alternative but also with the immediacy and contemporary quality of the information students are able to view and/or download; so much so that the notion of teachers as the repository of knowledge (and values, etc) is fast disappearing.

Even in school time, students are taking far greater responsibility for their own learning, working on contracts, at independent learning centres, at colleges of TAFE, at work sites, and using IT. Many days of the week, my Year 11 offspring spends more time out of class than in.

Teachers need a different professional privilege to maintain their relevance as the authority over various parcels of knowledge. Teachers' changing roles are to help students find, understand, analyse and manipulate knowledge in a

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way that counters the simplistic and often miseducative quality of much that is delivered electronically. These roles will earn the next generation of teachers high status and standing as a profession.

The other change creeping up on secondary schools is the issue of credentials, qualifications, matriculation and assessment. In 2010, schooling will still need to serve social purposes such as social equity and justice, equal gender opportunities and significantly improved outcomes for indigenous people and people of different ethnic and linguistic groups.

However, a single institution like a secondary school is unable to deliver these outcomes - partly because too much has happened before students get to secondary school, and partly because six years at secondary school is not enough to redress such huge socio-economic and cultural imbalances in society.

Longer-term practices just might. That is why credentials are changing to be multi-disciplinary as well as cumulative, over time and across institutions/providers. As indicated above, secondary school is occurring already across and within different contexts. One consequence is that students will come to design their own curriculum, putting together - much like a jigsaw puzzle - a unique credential that involves credits and course patterns that articulate between different levels of secondary and tertiary education.

More than that, this credential will

remain incomplete, to be regularly upgraded and extended in a life-long process of re-skilling and requalification. While an erratic labour market will be the driving force behind this change, this scenario holds liberating possibilities for the control future workers could have over the structure of their employment and 'working week'.

What these samples of secondary school life in the next decade illustrate is how decision-making about education can not rest on a set of dogmas. Today's young people are more individual and more alive to projecting into the future than my generation when most things seemed orderly and mostly permanent.

Today's lack of permanence makes it tougher for young people. It also means that dogmas about education will become irrelevant, partly because of their aloofness, but also because they have hitherto been unable to reflect the realities and practicalities of teaching and schooling, and show no sign of doing so.

That means teacher education will have to change too. 'Teacher' and 'learner' will become synonyms as the grand structure of 19th Century education breaks down into a more consummate vehicle for realising the capabilities and spirit of the class of 2010. This is not just an imaginative picture. Those young people sit in front of us now.



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Millennium changes provide the opportunity for dreamers to dream, sceptics to see the end of the world as we know it and change-agents to seize the opportunity for advancement of ideas wisely kept under wraps at less frenzied times of the calendar.

With these options in mind where could, or should, secondary education in this State move as the new millennium unfolds?

Firstly, I believe it should move towards a national model of education and training. Living where I do, I see an increasing level of mobility in the mining industry associated with compounding disadvantage for students as they move from State to State, curriculum structure to curriculum structure and age-based class groupings to performance-based class groupings.

As a country with a reasonably successful background

in multiculturalism, I believe we have started producing 'world citizens' in our schools rather than parochial individuals uncomfortable with diversity and unwilling to move far from their place of birth. The process is only beginning but it has started and we must accelerate this development as the years proceed. Workforce mobility will be vital to the development of this country and the world at large. Currently, with few exceptions, State-based credentials lack impact over State borders. The development of the National Training Framework shows this barrier can be removed. For the benefit of students and the country it is essential that this change influences all high school credentials nationally. The assessment of student performance in outcomes terms should facilitate this development.

Secondly, especially in country areas and declining city suburbs, secondary schools, in association with other education providers, should transform themselves into one-stop education and training centres for the whole population. Many secondary schools are declining in size and this process will continue as the demographic realities of the new century grind on. The chances of these schools offering more than a marginalised curriculum will be small. The drift to larger schools with broader and more relevant curriculum offerings will accelerate. The spiral will operate with increasing speed as the century passes.

Immediate attention should be given to the provision of one educational centre in each area which offers all the services currently provided by secondary schools, TAFE,

employment services, hospital-based counselling and various other community support agencies. Certainly, such a mixture is currently the responsibility of State and Federal governments but cooperation in terms of amalgamation is essential if any of these services are to be retained in a quality form in areas with declining or stagnant population patterns. These amalgamations will also ensure that life-long-learning and the reskilling of the workforce a number of times during their working career can be dealt with by a multi-skilled team of counsellors, teachers and trainers close to their home. Such centres

can be multi-campus in form if necessary but in many cases current school buildings are half empty and when combined with TAFE facilities would provide quite sufficient room for these expanded activities and services.

Thirdly, the issue of teacher accreditation needs to be addressed more thoroughly so that demarcation disputes do not arise in the multi-skilled campuses described

above. Even now, the issue of the interaction of TAFE and high school teachers in NSW as they jointly deliver vocational HSC courses has not been without its dramas.

The impact of vocational education within the curriculum is sure to grow as the century ages. To ensure the best people deliver the best service to our students much work needs to be done so that those with appropriate qualifications can move freely throughout the education scene without demarcation reducing their ability to deliver appropriate skills and information to the clients who need them at the time.

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My hope for the future of secondary education lies in student-focused schools in which students are encouraged to take an active role in their own education. The role of the school is to facilitate the needs of the student in a positive environment.

What is my concept of a student-focused school?

- Flexibility in subject choice and timetabling is instituted by the school. Instead of limiting the options available to students as the 'revised' HSC has done, we should aim to constantly broaden the scope of education and cater for the needs of all students. This can be done through schemes such as Joint Secondary Schools TAFE and Pathway programs which allow students to accelerate or accrue individual subject units towards their HSC.
- Extracurricular activities are encouraged and accredited by DET. These are recorded on School Certificate and HSC report cards. These activities are highly valued by students. Debating, acting, sport and music, for example, are activities which will keep students viewing schools as fun, enriching places to be. The learning which takes place through these activities is rich and varied.
- An innovative approach to discipline



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and welfare is promoted. I believe a strong link needs to be acknowledged between the way discipline is administered at school and the way students will view the school. All students accept discipline as necessary and should be consulted in the formation of discipline policies. Those students who are often disciplined should be precisely the students involved in this discussion. The problem is it is far easier to get the successful, well-behaved students onto SRCs. Unfortunately, many school executives have veto rights in SRC elections to ensure any student with poor grades or behavioural problems cannot serve. Student leadership in schools changes and develops students. Essentially, SRCs and other such bodies allow students to question their place within the school community. Many (perhaps

most) students view themselves as bound into a system of rules and restrictions. Therefore many behavioural problems at school are a form of rebellion. This frustration needs to be channelled into something constructive, thus changing the way students view themselves in this educational framework. Through giving students credit for being problem solvers, leaders, questioners and generally able human beings, a dignity is restored to them. Students with behavioural problems should be given power to change their environment into one in which they feel an important and valued member. We can make students feel important and valued by allowing freedom and change. By incorporating the suggestions and values of students into the structure of the school, the executive can work with students

rather than against them.

- Dynamic and explosive civics education courses are implemented from Years 7-10. The notion of civics education is incredibly exciting. Students do question the society we live in and do have a concept of themselves as citizens. However, this notion of citizenship seems to be a different concept to that which our parents' generation holds. To many teenagers, experiences of the State have not been positive and their view of society reflects this. I believe a civics education course should teach students about the structures in place for the government of our community but also allow students to decide for themselves about their relationship with the State. In short, a conservative civics education course will have a negative effect. Civics education is a chance to debate how our community functions, how it should function and the powers and positions we hold within society can be redefined not as a source of authority, but a marketplace of ideas struggling for power. I believe this to be a concept students will relate to and be inspired by. Students therefore should play a large part in the development of the curriculum, so it will be relevant.