

The Rudd-Gillard “Revolution”:

Looking Beyond ACARA

The Rudd-Gillard “education revolution” is a revolution by stages.

Stage 1 will be delivered with the completion of the ACARA website *myschool.edu.au*.

But this is really only the beginning. Why would a government go to such extraordinary lengths to compile performance information on schools without obliging itself to *act* on the shortcomings and weaknesses (or underperformance and failure) that such data will reveal? And what are some of the options for action?

Gillard is talking up “new resources and new reforms”.¹ The content of these will be the Stage 2 battleground.

How did we get here?

The defeat of the Howard Government on November 24 2007 signalled the Australian people’s rejection of industrial legislation that attacked the rights of working people. It also indicated the electorate’s unease about unfair funding practices in education. Rudd and Stephen Smith (before Gillard became involved) certainly did not underestimate the electoral appeal of a decisive change in direction for education policy and maybe only slightly overstated their case by collectively naming their policy proposals the Education Revolution². Of course, they are anything but!

Rudd had focussed on OECD research that “demonstrates strong links between levels of education, levels of earnings and levels of productivity...more educated economies are wealthier economies”.³ In various pre-election statements and papers, he and Smith argued that improvements in the quality of Australia’s human capital through education were needed to lift Australian productivity. It was already clear in this pre-election phase that the changes in educational direction were to be based on the needs of corporate profitability. They did not arise from any profound understanding of learning principles or social equity.

By October 2007, Rudd had started articulating a strategy of using COAG meetings as a form of national partnership to drive a new education agenda. Put simply, funding would be contingent on meeting certain Federal reform objectives. Rudd, a self-declared financial conservative, was determined to lead a government that would avoid being tarred with the accusatory brush of

¹ http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Transcripts/Pages/Article_091111_113125.aspx

² Rudd and Smith used the term as early as January 2007. See http://www.alp.org.au/download/education_revolution_r1.pdf

³ <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0107/spe230.php>

wild and reckless spending used so often against Labor governments. He promised to “impose on schools a level of rigour not yet seen in Australia by linking funding to improved standards rather than handing state governments or private schools a blank cheque”.⁴ Forget the gratuitous implication that advocates of education simply want a “blank cheque”; Rudd was stating that funding was not about resourcing schools, it was about sustaining them to the extent that they met standards that served Australian productivity.

Is the previous paragraph unfair to a government that has bankrolled the largest-ever capital works program in Australian schools, the \$14.7 billion Building the Education Revolution? I don't believe so. Alan Reid, Emeritus Professor of the School of Education at the University of South Australia puts it quite bluntly: “The BER is a strategy to address the global financial crisis – it is not an education strategy”⁵. This is not to deny the grateful welcome for such spending in schools that have seen no capital improvements for decades. Even the superbly provided for exclusive Anglican girls school past which I drive to work every day flaunts its BER signboard, acknowledging the gift of public money taken from every Australian taxpayer to a school whose fee structure would exclude the vast majority from enrolment of their children.

Prior to his election, Rudd had met with Rupert Murdoch in New York. Now, I'm not necessarily suggesting that Murdoch recommended the New York Schools Chancellor Joel Klein and his aggressive “reform” agenda to Rudd, but there is certainly a link between the two Americans in so far as Murdoch's wife, Wendi Deng is an active member with Klein of the New York Fund for Public Schools, an organisation that solicits private investment in public school reform. And Murdoch has never been a shrinking violet when it comes to offering his views on the “failings” of Australian public education, whether its through the editors and sub-editors of his Australian media empire, or in person as we found out in last November's Boyer Lecture when he scathingly described public education here as a “disgrace”.⁶ In any case, one of the first tasks given to Gillard on her assumption of the Deputy Prime Ministership, with responsibility for education among other things, was to meet Klein and be briefed by him on how he was changing things in education.

Implementing Stage 1

Klein's message to Gillard was that before she could begin implementing any sort of changes to schooling she had to create a system that made school results public. He told the ABC's Monica Attard “The first part of the system and in my view the critical part and the part that the Deputy

⁴ Kevin Rudd as reported in the *Weekend Australian*, 6-7 October 2007.

⁵ Reid, A (2009) *'Is this really a revolution? A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda' in Curriculum Perspectives, Vol. 9. No. 3. pp 1-13*

⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/2008/2397947.htm>

Prime Minister and I focussed on was to get the information publicly available...That becomes the basis for all the other things...without the information you can't get from here to there.”⁷

The key point is the *public* identification of schools with poor results. Gillard has stated on numerous occasions that she could not find out from her federal department of education which schools were disadvantaged. She stated that again as recently as October 27 2009 in Parliament. However, she did admit in August 2008 that “I have a database which gives me the socioeconomic status of private schools”⁸, so clearly the issue was a socioeconomic database of public schools. That information is of course held by State and Territory education departments for they are the bodies Constitutionally responsible for public education. Surely a simple request would have delivered the data to the Federal Minister for whatever purpose she needed it, and failing that it could have been extracted through the COAG process. However, it may have come with a caveat: not to be publicly disclosed, for most if not all State and Territory departments compile and use the data, but, very decently, do not publish it because doing so would not improve learning outcomes (a point made, much to Gillard’s displeasure by Peter Hill, the ACARA Chief Executive)⁹ and could shame and embarrass particular schools and their communities.

Hence Gillard needed a mechanism and a rationale for generating through her own department data that could be put on public display. She has acknowledged without apology that this “makes teachers and principals uncomfortable”¹⁰, that it “may cause painful moments”¹¹. We almost need to go back to the era of Joh Bjelke-Peterson to find examples of arrogance and tunnel vision to match those displayed currently by the Deputy Prime Minister:

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: ... Principals are saying they don't want this to be a name and shame situation and you say it won't be but when we listen to what you're saying this morning that's pretty much going to be the outcome of this.

You say you want to use it just to lift all the standards, that's fine. But the outcome is that you are going to get an embarrassing and I guess somewhat shameful comparison between those schools and that will have adverse consequences, of course it has to, for the principal and also for the school teachers won't it?

JULIA GILLARD: Well, I'm unapologetic about that. ¹²

⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2008/08/28/2348955.htm>

⁸ <http://www.pm.gov.au/node/5646>

⁹ http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/maralynparker/index.php/dailytelegraph/comments/forum_not_ready

¹⁰ <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2009/s2744670.htm>

¹¹ http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_091113_093343.aspx

¹² http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Transcripts/Pages/Article_091111_113125.aspx

Klein had been publishing what he called “rich data” on each of the schools in the New York schools district under a “transparency agenda”. He provided Gillard with what appeared to be compelling evidence of school improvement and some of that will be questioned a bit further on. (Among the measures that were bound to show an improvement in student results was one that was almost a form of cheating, namely ending “social promotion”. Put simply, “if they don’t reach a minimum standard...we don’t promote them”.¹³ With “failing kids” held back a year, and this starts as early as third grade, the cohort going into the following year’s testing regime is bound to show an improvement. This is quite apart from the crippling of the curriculum through “teaching to the test” which is also a form of cheating your way into showing improved results.)

Gillard has taken on board Klein’s “transparency agenda” hook, line and almost down to the sinker. Thankfully, she has not adopted Klein’s use of grades which are now, in any case, “utterly discredited”¹⁴. These are grades for schools, not for kids, which use A-D, skip E, and end with F. There are consequences and rewards attached to each grade level. (On reflection perhaps I should have said, “has not yet adopted” ...)

The issue of schools league tables is an inevitable consequence of Gillard’s “transparency agenda”. Gillard claims that the new MySchool website can not be used to create league tables. However, she has refused AEU requests to use administrative measures like copyright control on data or restrictions on the scope of Freedom of Information requests, saying that “Limiting access to information would be inconsistent with government policy”.¹⁵ In a speech to the Eidos Institute on November 12, 2009, she dismissed calls to prevent the publication of schools league tables under the heading of “Censorship”¹⁶, saying that she “fundamentally disagreed” with such restrictions. “Trying to restrict the publication by third parties of information in this way is like trying to hold back the sea”, she said, “...it fundamentally misses the point of our reforms”.

On November 12, and in response to NSW legislation prohibiting the print media from publishing schools league tables, the Sydney Morning Herald declared that it was “breaching the law today, risking a \$55,000 fine, by comparing the test results of three schools”.¹⁷ The

¹³ <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2008/08/28/2348955.htm>

¹⁴ These are the words of conservative education academic Professor Brian Caldwell who gave a “failing grade” for the Education Revolution. See: <http://www.educationaltransformations.com.au/files/SCOPE%202.pdf> . See also: <http://www.saveourschools.com.au/league-tables/gillards-favourite-school-reporting-model-is-totally-discredited>

¹⁵ Julia Gillard letter to AEU Federal President, 20 October 2009

¹⁶ http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_091113_093343.aspx

¹⁷ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/breaking-the-law-the-exam-results-they-dont-want-you-to-see-20091111-i9zt.html>

following day, it added “In January this newspaper and others will be able to compare many schools' results after the publication by the federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard, of national school-by-school results on a government website.”¹⁸ The fight is certainly on.

It would be nice to say, as Gillard does, that the government itself will not be compiling league tables, yet it will almost certainly be doing so through its identification of 20 schools “local” to the one being examined, with links to their NAPLAN results.

As we are driven for the sake of improved productivity towards the great harm of schools league tables, it is noteworthy that the biggest investigation into English primary education since 1967, a three-year independent study undertaken by Cambridge University has called for league tables to be scrapped and for education to be reclaimed from politicians¹⁹. The Alexander review, released in October, vindicates the call by former South Australian and NSW education departments CEO Dr Ken Boston to scrap league tables. Boston toured Australia in August at the invitation of the Australian Primary Principals Association following a 7-year stint in England as Chief Executive of the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Boston said that data similar to NAPLAN that was “unfit for purpose” had been used to construct league tables. “The school curriculum is narrower and poorer than it was when the tests were introduced in 1997”²⁰

Options for Stage 2

This brings us back to the questions raised at the beginning: Why would a government go to such extraordinary lengths to compile performance information on schools without obliging itself to *act* on the shortcomings and weaknesses (or underperformance and failure) that such data will reveal? And what are some of the options for action?

One of the options is that new resources will be made available to improve student performance. Yeah, right....Governments want to provide us with smaller classes just like they want to provide airports for pigs. “New resources” will be part of the rhetoric because it’s what the profession and the public want to hear, but Gillard is always now adding the words “new reforms” and it is this latter component of the phrase that needs to be watched closely. In the US, and to a lesser extent UK, structural change has replaced funding in the shaping of contemporary schooling. Its appeal is three-fold to a government wanting to withhold the “blank cheques”: it’s either not going to cost much, or the cost can be partly covered by corporate donations and sponsorship, or the cost is worth it to politicians because it results in the weakening of the influence of organised educators.

¹⁸ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/clamour-for-action-on-league-tables-row-20091112-icfv.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6025096>

²⁰ <http://is.gd/2Kig4>

Perhaps the first “reform” we should look at since it’s already being implemented in Victoria, is **Teach for Australia**. The first serious proposal for an Australian variant of Teach for America and the UK’s Teach First surfaced in January 2008 courtesy of Noel Pearson as a panacea for disadvantage in remote Aboriginal schools. The first Teach for Australia appointees will be given school placements in Victoria in 2010. These are the “best and brightest” who with six weeks training are meant to be placed in difficult schools where they will work their wonder for a couple of years, developing survival, planning and communication skills for their eventual employment in the corporate world. (Reports from Victoria indicate that they may in fact be placed in schools “willing to take them” and not necessarily in those with disadvantage.) Despite what Gillard says, there is no credible evidence that Teach for America graduates produce any better student results than experienced and qualified teachers working with the same students. Indeed the research indicates the opposite, as I pointed out last year in *Kevin Rudd’s Revolution* on the On Line Opinion website.²¹

However, Teach for Australia now has its foot in the educational door and the search will be on for evidence to “prove” that disadvantaged schools do not need extra resources as it is “teacher quality” alone that matters. One can expect an expansion in the employment of “best and brightest” who will enter and leave teaching without reaching the top step of incremental salary ladders - a constant turnover of low cost whiz kids who may or may not be able to engage disaffected and disadvantaged students in learning.

In relation to the “teacher quality” factor, Gillard is correct to quote it as “the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and influence”²², citing the work of New Zealander Prof. John Hattie. What she doesn’t point out is his important caveat that there may be more important out-of-school influences that he chose not to look at in his study: his book isn't about "what cannot be influenced in schools - thus critical discussions about class, poverty, resources in families, health in families, and nutrition are not included - this is NOT because they are unimportant, indeed they may be more important than many of the issues discussed in this book. It is just that I have not included these topics in my orbit."²³ Keep this in mind when we discuss “no excuses” schooling later on.

As an organisation, Teach for Australia already has some significant corporate partners contributing funding and advice on the mentoring and development of Teach for Australia appointees. The partners to date include, besides the household names of Google and Microsoft, the following:

²¹ <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=7833&page=0>

²² http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_091117_171753.aspx

²³ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/maori/news/article.cfm?c_id=252&objectid=10582708

- The Business Council of Australia, arguably the most powerful and reactionary voice of corporate Australia
- Stockland, one of the largest property investors in Australia and one of the top 50 firms of the Australian Stock Exchange
- McKinsey and Company, the US-based top management consultancy company in the world. From Wikipedia: “McKinsey operates under a practice of “[up or out](#),” in which consultants must either advance in their consulting careers within a pre-defined time-frame, or else be fired.” Sounds like another Gillard reform coming to a principal near you....
- Boston Consulting Group, another US-based multinational and second-ranked in the area of management consulting after McKinsey.
- Corrs Chambers Westgarth, corporate lawyers
- Freehills, commercial lawyers

OK, so we know about Teach for Australia, so what else is in the pipeline?

Let’s start by going back to “**up or out**”. This is our Prime Minister speaking at the National Press Club on 27 August 2008: “...where despite best efforts, these schools are not lifting their performance, the Commonwealth expects education authorities to take serious action – such as replacing the school principal, replacing senior staff, reorganising the school or even merging that with other more effective schools.”²⁴ The mechanism for setting goals for improved student outcomes will be “a **whole school improvement plan**. It’ll have to be worked through locally, it will need local input, and people will also be held accountable for delivering against it.”²⁵ That was Julia Gillard speaking with local education authority Leon Byner on his 5AA radio show on Remembrance Day. Six days earlier, at the Melbourne Institute she had prepared the way for the school improvement plan by declaring “Underperformance and failure will no longer be hidden and tolerated”.²⁶

This is the “new reform” at Stage 2 of the education “revolution”: principals and senior staff, get those student results up, or we move you out. Uncompromising. Unforgiving. Tough. “Hard reform for a better future” (the title of Gillard’s speech at the Melbourne Institute).

And where else have we seen “up or out”? Let’s look again at Gillard’s mentor Joel Klein. In the same Monica Attard interview on the ABC, he remarked “In New York City, all of our principals

²⁴ <http://www.pm.gov.au/node/5622>

²⁵ http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Transcripts/Pages/Article_091111_154144.aspx

²⁶ http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_091105_145747.aspx

sign an agreement with us saying if their school gets a D or an F two years in a row or three C's in a row we can remove them. In fact we can remove them sooner if we think there is a real reason for quick removal. We are trying to build in some of the same accountability into our teachers...". Under Klein's regime, principals and teachers have been sacked and schools closed or handed over to charter school operators, private outfits that still get public funding.

Michelle Rhee²⁷, by Klein out of Teach for America, is his opposite number in Washington. She has an openly-stated agenda for busting the teachers' union and **ending tenured appointment**. She has offered permanent teachers on \$65,000 per year almost twice that amount to forego tenure and accept the risk of being sacked based on students' results. Donations from private foundations are bank-rolling the scheme. The financial crisis has shown that there are no guarantees behind this money. Almost a third of Washington DC's principals have been fired or forced into retirement since she took over in June 2007 and there has been a major expansion of charter schools.²⁸

In Chicago, the man who now runs education for Barak Obama, Arne Duncan, implemented his Renaissance 2010 plan which saw public schools closed and charters opened with a new city-wide regime of high-stakes testing. Duncan has promoted within his Renaissance 2010 plan the concepts of **"no excuses schools"** and **"turnaround schools"**. In the United States, there are four options for accelerating turnaround efforts:

- Close chronically underperforming schools and reopen them as Charter schools (England's equivalent is the privately operated Academy schools)
- Close the school and send the students to higher-performing ones elsewhere in the District ("merging")
- Enforce the "turnaround model" i.e. replace the principal and half the staff and implement new governance structures and a new or revised curriculum
- Enforce the "transformational model" i.e. use student progress data to determine when to reward and dismiss teachers, extend learning and planning time, revamp curriculum and instruction and similar changes.

Duncan relied mainly on the first option following on his appointment to run Chicago's school system in 2001. It was a windfall for charter school operators, but did little for students, most

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelle_Rhee

²⁸ <http://prorev.com/2008/11/michelle-that-obama-should-avoid.html> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/13/education/13tenure.html>

of whom ended up in “low performing schools, just like those they left behind”.²⁹ From 2005 Duncan moved to combine schools closures and mergers with replacement of principals and teachers, concentrating on purging “the majority of veteran teachers”³⁰. This has had tragically fatal consequences which preceded and was held partly responsible for the vote that denied Chicago host rights to the 2016 Olympic Games. The Chicago Public School (CPS) system decided to nominate Fenger High School, on Chicago’s south side as a “turnaround school”. All existing staff were removed as the school reopened after the summer break. But forced to enrol there were students from several other struggling public schools that were closed. The effect of this was to bring together disaffected and underprivileged youths from different gang memberships and different local communities. Armed police kept them apart in the corridors and the yard during school hours. None of the staff had known any of these kids for more than three weeks when one, Derrion Albert, an honour roll student at the school, was murdered by others just outside the school. His bashing was captured by students on their mobile phones and put up on YouTube. Fenger is not an isolated case and Albert not the only victim.

“Since 2005, dozens of Chicago's public schools have been closed and thousands of students reassigned to campuses outside their neighborhoods – and often across gang lines – as part of Renaissance 2010...Before the 2006 school year, an average of 10-15 public school students were fatally shot each year. That soared to 24 deadly shootings in the 2006-07 school year, 23 deaths and 211 shootings in the 2007-08 school year and 34 deaths and 290 shootings last school year. Few deaths have occurred on school grounds, but activists say it's no coincidence that violence spiked after the school closures.”³¹

“Turnaround” is a common word and certainly not out of place in scenarios where change is discussed. However, Rudd and Gillard use the word in ways that echo the US experience. Replying to questions at the National Press Club on 27 August 2008, Kevin Rudd stated that “if there hasn’t been any real turnaround (in really badly performing schools) we’ve got to look at some practical hard disciplines at the end of the day about what you’re going to do about it.” On 24 November, 2008, Julia Gillard addressed an Education Forum in Melbourne on the topic of *Leading Transformational Change in Schools*. Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education Joel Klein was a special guest. In her speech, Gillard declared “I want nothing short of transformational change in Australia’s schools”. She also used the phrase “turn around” twice: “Turning this (school failure) around won’t be easy”, and “Chris Sarra, Brett New and Michael

29

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/28/10chicago.h29.html?tkn=SXWFQX%2FwsDDVW%2Fqu%2ByYwiefTbPsBARgn3RhA>

³⁰ <http://www.substancenews.net/articles.php?page=914§ion=Article>

³¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/06/chicago-teen-deaths-viole_n_311877.html and <http://www.pdailinois.org/site/?q=node/397>

O'Brien from Debney Park Secondary College here in Melbourne have proved that schools can be turned around."

On November 17, 2009, Gillard was questioned by journalists who had identified an obvious problem: would parents keep their children in schools identified as needing to be turned around. What followed was a classic case of not answering the question:

JOURNALIST: You talk about lifting the performance in the poor performing schools, are you worried that parents might actually leave the school before you've actually had a chance to turn it around?

JULIA GILLARD: I'm actually wanting to lift performance everywhere. If a school today is a good school I want it to be a great school, if a school today is falling behind I want to lift that school up. And what we know in the most disadvantaged parts of our country is that there are schools that have struggled. They've struggled because they haven't been the focus of national attention. We're going to make them the focus of national attention.

I'm obviously a supporter of parent choice. Parents should have the ability to choose which school they want their child to go to. But in the absence of genuine information about the performance of schools, choice is actually just another word for guessing.

Some parents have gone to hell and back to make sure that they've got information about the best school for their child. We want to make that easier. We will be focusing on those schools that need a focus on being lifted up to ensure that they are offering a great quality education.

And I'd say to parents who are perhaps anxious about this, the worst thing in the world is to never know that your child is in an underperforming school. It might be uncomfortable to learn your child is in an underperforming school, but then we're going to be ready to work to lift the performance of that school.

JOURNALIST: How long should they keep their child in an underperforming school before they expect to see a turnaround?

JULIA GILLARD: We are there already investing to get turnarounds. We are already investing through our Smarter Schools partnerships in schools in disadvantaged community, in teacher quality, in national curriculum, in literacy and numeracy. Already those reforms and new investments are hitting the ground.

JOURNALIST: Like a semester or year or two years?

JULIA GILLARD: Our transparency measures and our new reforms are rolling out together, side by side to make a difference to the quality of education.³²

We can expect more of the same as Stage 2 of the education revolution is rolled out.

A key component of the US school reform agenda is the concept of “**no excuses**” schooling. Once again, the prestige of Noel Pearson as a prominent Aboriginal lawyer, has been used to fly this kite in Australian skies. In October he published a long essay entitled “Radical Hope” in which he foreshadowed further changes to the curriculum and the structures for the education of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Speaking about the essay with Kerry O’Brien on the 7.30 Report, Pearson called for “an extended day. So our proposal proposes to start school at eight and finish at five.”³³ Asked where this idea had come from, Pearson replied, “Well the model that we are looking at is what Barack Obama calls the “No excuses Schools”. These are a set of public schools and charter schools that have a philosophy of no excuses. They believe that cultural background, socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, these are not educational destiny, they do not prescribe a destiny.” (Remember Prof. John Hattie’s important caveat on these matters?)

Speaking at the Melbourne Institute and the *Australian* joint Economic and Social outlook Conference on November 5, 2009, Gillard ran with Pearson’s US-derived structural reform of the school day, saying she supported “New reforms and resources for disadvantaged schools to improve, for example through extended school hours models like the one proposed by Noel Pearson in Cape York.”³⁴

Gillard went to Washington in October where she signed a deal on greater educational policy collaboration between the US and Australia with Arne Duncan. She also met with Michelle Rhee and obviously found her own reflection in Rhee’s personality, saying “I’m full of admiration for her...single-minded, relentless focus”.³⁵ This focus has been so single-minded that in “her first 18 months in the job she has shut down 21 schools (15 per cent of the city’s total) and sacked 270 teachers, 100 bureaucrats and 36 principals, including the head of the high-performing primary school her daughters attend. It’s all in the name of lifting teacher quality.” Gillard picked up the “no excuses” mantra: “They drill into those kids that the aim is excellence. No excuses for failure. And they drill it into the teachers too.”

³² http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Transcripts/Pages/Article_091117_143301.aspx

³³ <http://www.abc.net.au/7,30/content/2009/s2702544.htm>

³⁴ http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_091105_145747.aspx

³⁵ <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/ms-gillard-goes-to-washington-20091016-h0wx.html>

“No excuses” schooling was developed by the operators of KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Academies charter schools back in the mid-nineties. They pioneered the extended school day and year that Obama believes will help the US raise its PISA test scores. They have longer school days (7am to 5pm), hold classes two Saturdays each month and have a longer school year.³⁶ A 2003 *San Francisco Chronicle* article praising the ethos of KIPP “no excuses” schooling reported: “At every KIPP school, students wear uniforms. They must walk in quiet, single-file lines at all times, and candy is absolutely forbidden... All KIPP kids learn chants and hand signals that teachers use for everything from teaching multiplication tables to getting them to recite their college ambitions... teachers would give every child their cell phone number for homework help...."KIPPsters" everywhere earn or lose weekly "paychecks," based on behavior, that can be spent in the student store. Miscreants are placed on the bench, must wear signs around their neck that say "BENCH," eat at a quiet table and write letters of apology to each student before explaining to the class how they will change their behavior. Tony got on the bench once last year for forgetting to wear his belt. His classmate Courtney Nicholson, did, too, for skipping homework. "It helps children who make mistakes not to make mistakes again. It's easy to get on the bench, but it's not easy to get off," she said.”³⁷

KIPP “no excuses” schools are loved by the corporate dollar. Doris and Don Fisher of the GAP clothing stores provided \$25 million for a schools expansion in 2003, and companies as diverse as the Walton Foundation and the National Geographic Society have all kicked in. In Houston, Texas, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation this month pledged \$10 million to help KIPP secure a \$62 million bond, helping the charter system start construction that will more than double enrolment from 11,500 students in five years. KIPP hopes to reach 21,000 students at 42 schools in Houston over the next decade.³⁸

Behind all of these possibilities for Stage 2 lies the belief in turning education over to **market forces**. Addressing the National Press Club in August 2008, Rudd stated that “it’s time to move beyond the outdated divisions between Commonwealth and State responsibilities and between public and private provision.” But it was in his post-address session with reporters that Rudd elaborated on what his “transparency agenda”, putting “readily comparable data” on schools for parents on the ACARA website, would really mean: “if some walk with their feet that’s exactly what the system is designed to do.”³⁹ If choice is predicated on competition, then competition is enhanced by a diversity of traders in the market place. The phenomenon of low-fee faith-based private schools has been driven by market fundamentalists. It has expanded

³⁶ <http://www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed091503b.cfm>

³⁷ <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/12/29/MNG7V3VRBU1.DTL&type=printable>

³⁸ <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6716027.html>

³⁹ <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0808/pcpm270.php>

the range of choices between public and private systems. But what about choice *within* a system? That's where the charter school operators of the US and the Academy operators of the UK add a new dimension to choice and allow a further retreat by governments from their responsibility to provide quality public education within easy access of local communities. The characteristic of both charters and Academies is publicly funded privatisation: the closing of "failing" public schools and their operational transfer to any range of corporate "charities" or for-profit educational providers. Despite research⁴⁰ showing that claims of improved standards achieved in charters and Academies hold about as much water as claims of Teach for America appointees getting better results than certified permanent teachers, there is a huge push for the expansion of both these approaches by Obama and Brown respectively. Maybe this is why Rudd described Commonwealth and State responsibilities for education as "outdated" as the public-private school divide: he possibly sees room for further leverage through COAG towards providing parents with choice, not just between public and private systems, but within the public system itself. The whole logic of his and Gillard's approach points in the direction of introducing operational competition within the public system and at publicly funded expense.

Conclusion

Forewarned is forearmed. I guess that's the whole point of this paper. Not every "new reform" in Stage 2 will be a carbon copy of neo-liberal initiatives from the US or the UK. But the evangelical passion behind Rudd's and Gillard's embrace of Teach for Australia suggests that they won't be much too different.

There is a basis for a broad united front against league tables. We need the moral authority of a public denunciation of league tables signed by opponents across the systems and across the political spectrum. The AEU already has the support of peak parent and principal bodies, as well as the Independent Education Union⁴¹. Public school teachers will probably be the only ones to go into battle, but they can do so more effectively with supporters cheering from the sidelines. To force the government into wholesale or partial retreat on the issue where their credibility is weakest will put public education advocates in a better position to question and oppose "new reforms" that might have broader public appeal, like replacing principals and senior teachers, and merging schools under "turnaround" or "no excuses" mandates, lengthening the school day, or allowing private operators to run public schools.

In relation to those "new reforms" arising from market fundamentalism, it is important that advocates of public education join hands with other opponents of surrendering to market

⁴⁰ http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/National_Release.pdf and http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2009/09/16/charter_schools_see_more_attrition_union_study_finds/

⁴¹ <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/LT/LTlet171109.pdf>

forces. We are all bits of a jigsaw that can be slotted together for mutual reinforcement. It is as much in our interests to oppose market solutions to carbon emissions, like the CPRS, as it is to oppose market solutions to educational inequality. The same applies to the surrender of our water resources to a national water market and to the continued free exercise of speculative trading in a market-driven financial sector or the privatisation of transport or health or energy provision. The list goes on. In each of these areas of struggle there are potential allies for opposition to elements of the Stage 2 agenda.

With Julia Dullard looking more and more like the love-child of Charles Montgomery Burns with her own “single-minded, relentless focus” it is essential that we embody a proudly independent Australian path towards educational improvement. The sycophantic admiration of failed US policies is a major Achilles heel for politicians who ape American trends. We can create a progressive Australian roadmap towards the improvement of public education and beat Rudd and Gillard at their own game.

Mike Williss

November 19 2009