

Both sides ignore the truly disadvantaged

By Noel Pearson

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There is now bipartisan political support for school choice in Australia.

Increased school choice is an important driver of school reform as it creates a constant pressure on schools to improve or risk losing students.

However, school choice is operating to improve education mainly for the upper three-fourths or so of society. In the most disadvantaged areas, particularly in remote Australia, there is little or no choice.

Education in the most disadvantaged areas and schools is Australia's greatest challenge. Seen from this perspective, both parties are pursuing second-order policies in this election campaign.

The Coalition has pledged educational vouchers and to haul basic subjects into a national curriculum. Labor's education revolution is largely centred around computer and broadband access. These policies will undoubtedly have a positive effect, but they are marginal in the context of the education of our most disadvantaged children, not least indigenous children in remote schools.

For these children, the two most critical factors determining their educational success are school attendance and the quality of the teachers.

School attendance is of obvious importance, but in many disadvantaged areas, including remote indigenous areas, attendance rates of 50 per cent are not uncommon. The federal Government's welfare reform measures, making payments conditional on school attendance, will have a decisive effect in this area.

Once children are at school, the quality of the teacher is the factor that makes the biggest difference in terms of educational outcomes. According to research, teacher quality accounts for up to 55 per cent of the variation in learning outcomes. Australian National University research shows that a teacher who rates in the 90th percentile of performance can achieve in half a year what a 10th percentile teacher can achieve in a full year. Nothing else has such a stark effect on results.

Ensuring disadvantaged schools receive a higher proportion of the 90th percentile teachers should be the No1 policy goal. We should not be satisfied with just filling the vacancies. The appalling educational statistics speak for themselves: remote schools need the best.

The starting point for any honest talk about indigenous education must be the admission that it is – with few exceptions – a huge disaster, and it has been so for a long time. I have hung around the ridges of education policy and bureaucracy for long enough to say that I have seen too many instances of naive or disingenuous enthusiasm for educational initiatives that are only flashes in the pan, fleeting moments of energy and promise that are never sustained. You might get an excellent Year 3 teacher and you might get parental involvement of some kind or another, and you might do an extra-curricular project that excites everyone, but it doesn't add up to any kind of systemic improvement so that a child can go from Year 1 to 7 and we can say: "She has received the best possible education that can be provided to her by diligent, caring teachers."

In Cape York Peninsula we have been thinking about education disadvantage in these terms: the supply of teaching and the demand for learning. This may be too crude or simplistic, but in the absence of any more compelling framework for understanding why it is that the education system in our region fails our children, we think in terms of supply and demand. We adopted this analysis because we wondered why the schools that supply education to the most privileged classes in our society provide much higher quality education and achieve better outcomes. Private schools supply good teaching because they have a strong demand on them. That demand is fee-paying parents.

The fact that parents pay good money for their kids to get a good education, and they have the option of choosing an alternative school if they feel they are not getting their money's worth, provides the demand on private schools to supply good teaching services and facilities. The supply-demand nexus

in private schools is direct. The fee-paying parents demand and the enrolment-keen school supplies.

This market relationship between parents and the school in the private system is absent in public education. The source of demand in the public system has traditionally been government, as the guarantor of free public education to all citizens. In the public system it is governments, through their education departments, that have placed the demand on schools to supply quality teaching. Government developed mechanisms to ensure that quality education was provided and maintained.

School inspections, universal tests and other devices were developed to ensure standards and to make suppliers accountable. The Government, in the case of public schools, was the de facto parent that looked after the interests of parents and communities in ensuring that quality education was available for their children.

The traditional mechanisms of accountability in the public education system have been eroded. Chances are that the premier, cabinet ministers and senior departmental officials in your state are sending their children to the best private schools while presiding over a public system that provides a teaching disservice to the lowest classes.

If you truly want an education revolution, you have to tackle the entrenched and unyielding problems faced by disadvantaged schools and by disadvantaged students within otherwise good schools. No government has yet solved the problems of educational disadvantage. We have to fix the supply of high-quality, high-expectation teaching to those schools that stand in the greatest need of them.

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