

## **Education reform lies buried under the morass**

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Controversy over Education Minister Julia Gillard's Building the Education Revolution program has been growing for many months.

Debate has centred on whether the sheer scale of the \$16 billion program was a justified economic stimulus response to the financial crisis. The debate between the neo-Keynesians and the neo-liberals about the benefits of stimuli in the face of such crises was not as pronounced in this country as in the US, where the Republicans have indulged in a Coolidge-esque insistence that creative destruction is part and parcel of capitalism and threatened firms should be allowed to fail. No matter that the Troubled Asset Relief Program rescue package was instituted by former president George W. Bush; the Republicans insist bailouts are for socialists.

I can say little of worth in relation to the debate about governmental intervention via stimulus spending. There is legitimate debate to be had about whether "timely, targeted, temporary" should not turn into too much, too long, but it is not this facet of the BER with which I am concerned.

The second focus of the BER debate is the roting and waste in the administration of the program. A project of this size supervised by bureaucrats was always going to turn into a pig trough. But although this dimension is important, there is a third issue: the question of the education reform value of the BER.

There will be little, if any, education value from this colossal investment. The program has been inaccurately and unfortunately named. It should have been called the Building Revolution Program or the Construction Employment Program. It is wrong to place this investment in the nation's education accounts because it will not yield educational reform.

For those concerned with supporting national investment in education reform, it would be a shame if the public ends up thinking "we've done the big educational investments" of this era.

It seems a particular policy idea and a particular political consideration came together to form the basis of the BER.

The policy idea is that investment in physical facilities can be a decisive contributor to school reform. In Britain, Tony Blair developed a program for the comprehensive overhaul of failing schools where the facilities were dilapidated and substandard. The thinking was that ghetto schools could not be helped with education reform as long as they felt and looked like ghetto schools.

The policy idea has merit. There is a strong case for failing schools in Australia to receive investment in their physical facilities. Students from distressed communities need to study in schools that transcend their backgrounds and neighbourhoods; schools that tell them they are worthy of backing and that there are high hopes for their future.

With the kind of money available under the BER, the country's most disadvantaged schools requiring large capital investments could have found the solution they needed. Alas, \$16bn later and these neediest schools still don't have the comprehensive infrastructure they require.

This is because the policy idea was met with a political consideration. The BER was not premised on the principle of need. Electorally wedged by the Howard government over the private-public debate, and the drift from public to private schools by the aspirational lower middle classes, federal Labor's response has been to move from a sectarian to an ecumenical approach. Kevin Rudd made Labor's shift clear on his election in 2007. He underscored Labor's pledge to fund education regardless of the choice made by parents about public or private education: "We are blind to these matters because we want the best government schools in the world and the best non-government schools in the world - we want a world-class education system while preserving parental choice."

The federal Labor government does not want to alienate the legions of aspirational families who have drifted to the private system. It does not want to open itself up to the kind of accusation recently made by Tony Abbott: "You just can't trust these people. They don't like private education. They will, after the election, if they're re-elected, as sure as night follows day, they will try to cut private schools funding."

This means there is no willingness to discriminate between public and private schools when it comes to federal government investment. And the problem is that needs-based funding automatically invokes the public-private dichotomy, even though there are needy private schools as well.

So the BER sought to spread the largesse across public and private schools regardless of need.

A program that was large enough to provide a revolutionary change in the circumstances of the neediest schools ended up having more limited effect across the full range of schools.

Schools requiring new facilities have surely benefited from the program, but schools also have ended up with facilities without any strong rationale.

Frankly, the most privileged schools have ended up with a windfall they didn't need and should not have received.

While controversy rages on the first two dimensions of the BER policy - its role in economic stimulus and its administration - there is near silence on this third dimension. The federal opposition has no interest in championing an educational investment policy based on need, and the Rudd government does not want to expose itself to the electoral accusation it is the party of public schools.

While the position of the conservatives is understandable at the level of politics, it is highly unfortunate from a policy viewpoint. They should consider at least two arguments against their approach.

First, why spend public funds in redundant ways? The most privileged schools do not need this kind of government spending. Second, focused investment in revolutionising Australia's neediest schools will benefit all Australians. Failing schools are a cost to the whole country, not the least to liberals and conservatives. Lifting the productivity of young Australians whose fate is to end up in our neediest schools is an interest shared by everybody. Why make the defence of privileged schools the singular priority?

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