

**REGISTERED SCHOOLS BOARD
(RSB) REVIEW**

"The FCS Position on the RSB Review."

Our Open Submission.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

My wife Faye Berryman and I founded our school in 1976. We spend no more than the state sector does on each child. Our students consistently enjoy high levels of success across the various parameters of school achievement. We have developed teaching materials within this school that have been purchased by over 3000 schools in Australia. We believe we have helped save the literacy of many thousands of children and have beneficially influenced the practices of educational publishers and many teachers.

We don't want to boast, but we feel the need to do so because of the threat to the future of schooling looming in this review. Many of the proposed changes intended by this review would prevent the existence of a school like ours. Despite a chronic waiting list, we have chosen to limit our numbers to about 65. Our premises are terrace houses in Brunswick Street. We have endured bureaucratic interference from the RSB, but not in a way that has advanced the quality of the service we deliver. It gives me no pleasure to denigrate anybody's role, but when we are confronted with an increase in coercive powers, we cannot afford to mince words.

INTRODUCTION

What powers should state school system operators have over other schools? I am writing this submission because I believe that the proposed changes are intended to increase the control by this faction across the entire school industry. And I believe this would be a disaster for our society. The big operator is aiming to take control over the smaller operators. This is not merely a turf war. There is much more at stake.

THE WHOLE CHILD

We cannot afford to blinker ourselves to the full impact of schooling. Our society is under stress in many ways. We educators have to take a large part of the responsibility for that. Our institutions do, after all, dominate most of the formative years of the population.

Our society is groaning under the weight of rampant litigation, excessive regulation, decreasing personal viability, growing personal isolation, and increased mental disturbance, particularly amongst the young. Why, we even have thousands of children on indefinite courses of mood-altering drugs. We know that schooling is far from perfect.

INNOVATION

We desperately need new ideas, new answers, new experiments in schooling. And that is why we must keep the door open for new schools, new kinds of schools, and new schooling ideas in existing schools. There is no way we can circumscribe in regulations what the innovations of these schools might be. Bureaucracy cannot do that. This must be left to the vision of educators and the values of parents who seek out the services of innovative schools.

THE THINLY-DISGUISED AGENDA

This review, if left to the usual suspects, will result in an orgy of increased bureaucracy which will further obstruct the possibility of innovation in schooling. Let us not fall into the old trap of assuming that better service delivery is produced by greater central control. This is merely a fantasy of bureaucrats who assume they know better than the people they “serve”.

Established schools and systems of schools may believe they can digest new red tape without a hiccup. More consultants and more project managers can in the short term jump them through the ever growing row of hoops.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR NEW IDEAS IN SCHOOLING

It is the new schooling ideas introduced by teachers with vision, the pioneer educators, who are frustrated by the petty regulation that so undermines and diverts their energies. Indeed it is high time for a dismantling of the oppressive system that we now operate under.

A FOX IN THE HEN HOUSE

It is not appropriate that the present Department (DEET) should control the registration of non-state schools, for the very obvious reason that the Department is itself an operator of schools. Indeed it is the largest corporation in the school industry. It is naïve not to realise that a multi-billion dollar enterprise, namely the state school sector, will use its regulatory powers to discourage rivals. It is naïve not to realise that the biggest operator will try to arrest the drift of families away from its schools towards other schools.

BARRIERS TO HEALTHY COMPETITION

The existing funding system is already designed to undermine parents' rights to choose who shall teach their children. But it seems this manipulation of taxpayers' money to stack certain schools and subvert free choice is not enough. Elaborate bureaucratic barriers are also erected to discourage the emergence of schools which may attract away yet more customers in spite of the funding deterrent. It is the intention of the revamped RSB to raise further barriers against educators who would innovate in schooling and parents who would patronise them.

OWNERSHIP OF SCHOOLING

We are pitting parents' rights here against state powers. Established mainstream non-government schools may not feel directly under threat at this time, but if they fail to stand up for choice and diversity and the prior right of parents, they will in due course regret their silence.

Be warned: there is no true love between the rival ideologies. It would be a mistake for large non-government school systems to ignore this threat to school diversity. Freedoms are removed one by one: the most vulnerable are targeted first. Not only prudence, but moral integrity requires that the Catholic sector defend the principle of the primacy of the family over the state in deciding how their children shall be educated. Let no educator

acquiesce to the stifling of diversity and the freedom to evolve which we as a people so desperately need.

Our society is sinking under its own lack of vision. Let us who are involved in this review represent the future – not just vested interests with a short term goal of self-entrenchment. We who dare call ourselves educators must support democracy in schooling.

A HEALTHY STRUCTURE

There needs to be a separation between the state system operators and the government ministry which monitors schooling across the population. While it is up to the parliament to make policy on school funding, a Ministry of Education should minister even-handedly and supportively to all kinds of schools, freely chosen by the state's families.

The state system should be administered by a separate body which can then unashamedly pursue its own interests (hopefully its own students' best interests). Such a body would have a new name and its own headquarters. This would begin to end the regime we now have in which the biggest operator "reviews" its competitors.

SERVE THE FUTURE CITIZENS, NOT THE PRESENT OPERATORS

The Ministry, thus freed from empire-building concerns, should actively support innovation in schooling. It should defend the freedoms which will keep our society healthy – freedom of association, freedom of trade, and the right of parents to choose who shall teach their children.

PARTICULAR ITEMS WITHIN THE REVIEW AGENDA

I would like to comment on a number of suggestions put forward in the consultation paper.

WHO IS THE FINAL AUTHORITY OVER CHILDREN?

But first I would like to oppose a tendency throughout this paper to assume that bureaucrats in centralised offices are automatically a superior source of wisdom and care and authority as to what happens to children. I believe that parents, who care more than bureaucrats, will make better choices for the future – if their opportunity to do so is not denied them.

Indeed, it is an arrogance to stand over parents who have gone to the lengths of actually choosing an educator outside of the biggest operator, and who have paid a penalty for their choice. It is a symptom of the general deterioration of our society that citizens are being progressively denied the authority over their own lives by a burgeoning bureaucracy. In this case, the Department is intending to undermine further the authority of the parent.

THE STANDARDS FURPHY¹ (p5 of the Consultation Paper)

There is frequent reference throughout the paper and other official announcements to the need for the RSB to uphold standards in non-government schooling. This is presented as a justification for greater control over non-state schools. This is a pretty transparent posture, given the well-established fact that the non-government sector delivers generally better outcomes than the Department's own operations. If this were really about standards, the non-state sector would be commissioned to "review" the state schools!

CONTROL MANIA (p6 of the paper)

There is an unquestioning assumption that the non-government sector needs to be "directly aligned" with the Department's overall policy. This totalitarian and stagnant notion is in direct conflict with the principle of evolution through diversity and the role of citizens in a free country to steer the future of education through their choice of educators.

THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY (p7)

"It is expected the Review will lead to ... systematic improvement in the regulatory framework governing the establishment and monitoring of non-government schools ...". Chilling words. I believe the phrase systematic improvement here is code for systematic increase of control by one operator over the others. I would argue that a true improvement would be a decrease in the already excessive regulatory "framework", a greater respect for citizens' rights to live according to their own values, and a recognition that diversity is a necessary condition of the desperately needed evolution of schooling ideas.

The MINIMUM STUDENT ENROLMENTS FURPHY (p8)

Low student numbers may "impact" on "educational provision". This is code for eliminating small schools. The state sector wants to impose its notions of a good

educational environment on all educators. If they get their way, society may never discover that small community schools are a superior environment at primary level for the whole child. We started with less than 20.

The argument that a small school entails a narrower curriculum is simply false. Our curriculum is broader than many schools ten times our size. It is at the very least clumsy to inflict one sectors' limited vision onto all potential schools. It is at worst an attempt to bury examples of enlightened schooling which may cast the biggest operator in a poorer light.

THE BOTTOMLESS PIT OF BUILDING REQUIREMENTS (p9)

If the local government is happy with a school's premises, there is no justification for the RSB to keep adding to their wad of pages of requirements. Our school has for 27 years operated in terrace houses in Fitzroy. For our type of school, this is ideal accommodation. There is no educational reason for all the controls, present and threatened, which largely entail waste of time, effort and money.

THE BUSINESS ACUMEN FURPHY (p11)

Here is a never-ending search for possible areas of interference. It is up to citizens to judge which service providers to trust. It is not the place of a democratic government to think for them. If an operator proves to be a swindler or a bankrupt, then let the usual consequences flow. Pre-emptive bureaucracy to this degree is just another device to stop teachers from starting their own schools.

THE "PLANNED PROVISION" EUPHEMISM (p11)

There is no way to dress this up. The prevention of a new school, on the grounds that parents may prefer it to existing schools, is a denial of all the basic principles of a free country. It would make the mafia proud. It is business protection for existing operators, pure and simple.

OBLIGATIONS "IN RETURN FOR" FUNDING? (p11)

The only obligation regarding school accounts is to prove that they are spent on education. This funding, reluctantly and fractionally distributed to non-government schools, does not belong to Departmental officers. There is no duty to conform to Departmental ideology "in return for" the partial funding. It is the taxpayers' money. The parents involved are themselves taxpayers. It is the duty of the government to distribute it

fairly. But we are not discussing that issue in this review – the phenomenon that the biggest sector gets the biggest per capita funding and is the least accountable!

The Department is not doing parents a personal favour by granting them a part of their share of the tax collected for schooling. It is merely going some of the way towards recognising the parent's right to use their judgement in selecting a school.

THE FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FURPHY (p11)

Non-government schools are already the most fully investigated enterprises as far as accounts are concerned. There is no purpose to be served in duplicating the thorough federal system of scrutiny that is already in place. Such duplication would only create more work for accountants and bureaucrats – and more wasted time for school administrators.

CONTROL OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (p13)

It is beyond the ability of a centralised office to evaluate the merits of all new educational ideas. It is beneficial to provide the service of a state-wide test of core skills, with the results being sent to the parents, so that citizens have some independent measure of how their children are faring in relation to society as a whole. Measuring outcomes is a worthwhile centralised service, but it would defy logic to have the Department impose its methods of delivery on other operators. We have often moved ahead educationally by breaking away from state-system practices. Do not let avenues for progress be closed off by control mania.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS (p14)

This sensitive area is at the heart of a school's operation. The RSB may have a role where a crime is alleged, but each school must decide for itself what its values, practices and vision are. It is not possible for the curriculum delivery of any school to please all parents. For the RSB to intervene in such debate between parent and teacher is to take over the school.

Indeed the entire thrust of this review is a takeover bid.

SUMMARY

Allow non-government schools to operate and innovate in freedom.

Allow parents to exercise their own judgement and choose diverse types of schooling.

Let the Minister of Education transcend the sectors and minister for all .

Let non-government schools be registered and reviewed by people who do not belong to their biggest competitor.

For the sake of democracy and social evolution, minimise the Departmental controls on non-government schools. ”

¹ A FURPHY is a far-fetched account of what is going on, a rumour that is doing the rounds.