

Background Summary

In his new book Dean Ashenden argues that the whale of schooling – 9500 schools, tens of thousands of classrooms, 300 000 teachers and four million students – is beached. Problems old and new are widely acknowledged, but ceaseless ‘reform’ has produced very little progress.

Unbeaching the Whale: Can Australia’s schooling be reformed? suggests a framework for thinking, policy and practice that could deliver 12 safe, happy and worthwhile years for every child and young person, within a generation.

“The most penetrating analysis of the failure of Australian schooling so far” – Ken Boston

UNBEACHING THE WHALE

Can Australia’s
schooling be
reformed?



Dean Ashenden

*“Takes us from powerful critique to compelling agenda”
– Anthony Mackay*

What to do about schooling?

What to do about schooling is a question to which there is, as yet, no good answer.

Fix-lists

One kind of answer is the **fix list** - if we just fix this, that and the other, we'll be right. For example: CEO of the Australian Council for Education Research, Geoff Masters, suggests five focuses for reform:

1. Increase the status of the teaching profession
2. Reduce disparities between schools
3. Design a 21st century curriculum
4. Promote flexible learning arrangements focused on growth
5. Give every child a positive start in learning

But even this, the most thoughtful, grounded and coherent of many such lists, begs many questions: why these five? Why not, for example 'diffusion of evidence-based practices', 'better use of support staff', 'schools that stay open longer', 'untimed syllabuses', and perhaps charter schools/academies - the Productivity Commission's list? Or: 'restructure federal funding', abolish Canberra's education department, remove mandatory class sizes, and charge parents who can afford to pay to use public schools, as proposed by the CIS (Centre for Independent Studies)? Or why not any one of many other fix lists?

Every list is, by intention or otherwise, a selection; what is left out, and why? Do the items on any given list reinforce or complement each other, or are they free-standing? Contradictory? Are they to be pursued simultaneously or sequenced? And if sequenced, in what order and why?

And what about an item missing from just about every fix list: who will - who could - turn the recommended items into policy and policy into practice? Is there anyone there to hear and to act? The fate of the Masters five is instructive: they have been widely read and discussed by system authorities and 'policy-makers' among many others, but nearly a decade after their first publication only one (early childhood education) has made any progress; the rest are still 'challenging'; some are even more of a 'challenge' now than when first proposed, in 2015.

The Rudd/Gillard 'education revolution'

The Rudd/Gillard '**education revolution**' offered answers to several of these questions. Arguing that the problem was both system-wide and systemic it proposed a systemic solution focused on what it took to be the nub of the problem: 'outcomes' in the 'foundational' areas of learning, literacy, numeracy and science. These (the argument went) were crucial in and of themselves but also offered both leverage and wider insight. Good outcomes (it was suggested) were a proxy measure for a good school; and solving the outcomes problem would solve others, rippling out across the curriculum, the schools and the system.

Moreover, the revolution's proponents could follow through - they were prime minister and deputy prime minister in the national government which, in turn, was the only government of Australia's nine to be involved in all three sectors of schooling in all eight states and territories, and was schooling's biggest funder to boot.

In the revolution's scheme this uniquely powerful position would be bolstered by a muscled-up 'national approach': national goals, a national curriculum, national and international testing, two new national agencies and a much-expanded federal department of education, full disclosure of the 'performance' of every school in the country in the interests of 'transparency', 'accountability' and of 'lifting performance', national programs to boost the 'quality' of those key actors, the teachers, lifting standards of entry to and the standing of the profession, offering better pay and prospects, and driving a national plan to cut admin and increase time in the classroom.

This apparently comprehensive and national plan to reach down into the workings of 20+ systems, 9500 schools and tens of thousands of classrooms in which worked more than 250 000 teachers and 4 million students, was driven with unprecedented energy by Julia Gillard, first as deputy and then as prime minister. So confident was she that she enshrined in legislation the revolution's central goal: to have Australia among the 'top five' in the OECD's league tables by 2025.

But 'outcomes' have not risen or have declined, depending on the test used; there is more not less distance between the 'best' and 'worst' performing individuals and groups; teacher workloads have increased and their pay, standing and morale have declined along with standards of entry into teacher education courses; social segregation - the concentration of both 'disadvantaged' and 'advantaged' groups within schools - has increased.



Australia is no closer to joining the 'top five' now than it was in 2012 and is in some respects further away. We approach the deadline with a quietly modified goal: 'for students to improve academic achievement and excel by international standards'.

The revolution's legacy is as important as its failure. An ineffectual machinery of governance within states and territories has been replicated and compounded by 'national' institutions and processes. An obsolete way of organising learning and growth has been reinforced. New problems of a behavioural and emotional kind - as opposed to the cognitive concerns of the revolution - have risen, at first unnoticed then un-addressed. A particularly crimped way of thinking about schools, teachers and students has been turned into an orthodoxy.

The historian Manning Clark thought that Australia's political leaders fell into one of two groups, they were either 'straighteners and prohibitors' or they were 'enlargers of life'. So too, ways of thinking about schooling. The revolution was a straightener; it expressed an agribusiness vision, of students and teachers and schools sitting up straight and doing as they're told. It was a misplaced and demeaning mindset in 2007 and is more so now that schools urgently need to move on from the revolution's cognitive preoccupations to embrace, on equal terms, the experience of school and the way students feel about it.

Campaigning for public education

Campaigning is on the way back. Its necessary focus: Gonski (at last!) and, therefore, the money. Money does matter, as the findings of an OECD survey of principals

illustrate:

AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON HINDRANCES TO PROVIDING INSTRUCTION

Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that the school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by...

	Disadvantaged schools	Advantaged schools
	%	%
Lack of teaching staff	34	3
Inadequate/poorly qualified teaching staff	21	0.3
Teacher absenteeism	28	5
Teachers not well prepared	18	5
Lack of educational material	21	1
Inadequate or poor educational material	21	0.3
Lack of physical infrastructure	45	6
Lack of student respect for teachers	16	0.3

Source: Thomson (2021)

But is decent funding for public schools enough? Do big problems demand big reform?

Teacher organisations, among others, are increasingly of the view that they do. As the president of Australia's most powerful single teacher organisation put it recently, his state's system needs a 'comprehensive overhaul'. The 'rebuilding' of NSW public education (he continued) 'must be systemic', and must give life to a fundamental value: education is a public good.

But here again an answer is quickly followed by questions: what does a 'comprehensive overhaul' include? Who will conceive, plan and direct it? Where to start? How long will it take? How will we know if and when we're getting there?

Questions of this kind are the starting point of *Unbeaching the Whale: Can Australia's schooling be reformed?*

Big reform


Is big reform an option? Only twice has Australian schooling been the target of big reform, first within each of the six Australian colonies in the decades that followed Victoria's 1871 Education Act and then again a century later in the Whitlam/Karmel restructuring of the 1970s.

Big change is as hard to direct as it is hard to get. The upheavals of the late 19th century and the 1970s bequeathed several of the big problems that now require big reform: the sector system; a complex, ineffectual, two-layer system of governance; and a way of organising the work of students and teachers successful in its time but unworkable for extended secondary schooling and not capable of providing the very different experience of school that is now required.

Unbeaching the Whale addresses these problems. Rather than pretend to have answers it offers a framework for collective thinking, discussion and debate about what the answers could be.

The framework, in brief:

1. Rethink some of schooling's taken-for-granted, on 'choice', the economic role of schools, 'equality', and 'effectiveness'
2. Develop a big, appealing goal for schooling and school reform, for example: "12 safe, happy and worthwhile years, for all, within a generation."
3. Understand 'reform' as, simply, changing whatever needs to be changed to deliver the goal. Specifically, reshape the three big structures of Australian schooling:
 - shift the 'grammar' of schooling away from the organising students' work around a cognitive speed competition and toward shaping each student's work around their intellectual progress and personal/social development
 - move the sector system toward broadly common funding, and the broadly common regulation of choice and selection
 - shift governance away from Canberra; develop within each state/territory cross-sector, arm's length agencies/approaches capable of leading the restructuring the grammar and of the sector system

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4. How to do it? Design incremental reforms within a long-term strategy so that they contribute to structural change – that is, combine ‘gardening’ with ‘engineering’. [For example: regard the delivery of ‘Gonski’ not as mission accomplished but as a first step, to be followed by similarly substantial reviews/policy on the regulation of choice and selection; on the interaction between school funding and the housing market; and on whether needs-based school funding might shift over time toward equality of total educational effort for every student.]
 5. How to drive it? Remember that governments don’t like changing themselves and mostly do only what they have to; and that top-down reform has its limitations. Take the ‘I give a Gonski’ campaign as a model of leadership-grassroots collaboration, of the crucial role of teachers and teacher orgs, and of quiet collaboration across the industrial divide.

Unbeaching the Whale hopes to prompt questions as well as suggest a starting point for the development of answers.

Unbeaching the Whale: Can Australia’s schooling be reformed? is available in e-book and paperback formats from the Centre for Strategic Education:

<https://www.cse.edu.au/unbeaching-the-whale/>