

INTRODUCTION

Our children could have better childhoods. I want to see reform of the Australian school industry. In this book, I propose simple, affordable and highly productive changes. I am not alone in wanting reform; many people want better schooling, for a variety of reasons:

- (1) My primary motive is for children have a better *quality of life*. I also believe this will enable them to become happier and better adults. All of this will enable Australian culture to evolve for the better.
- (2) Some people are concerned that we are squandering our investment in schooling; that we are not getting the *best educational value* for the taxpayers' billions that are spent on the industry. That is certainly true. The reforms that I propose would greatly right this wrong.
- (3) Then there are those who are frustrated that lower-income children receive an unnecessarily inferior standard of schooling to that enjoyed by higher-income children. A *social justice* issue. My proposals go a long way to restoring equity in schooling too.
- (4) Yet others are worried that *Australia's educational standards* have fallen to levels that are embarrassing for a first-world country, and that we are staring at a future in which we become a poor suburb of increasingly-better-educated Asia. Educational standards impact on the economy. I address this problem also.
- (5) Another elephant in the educational room is the unnecessary denial of *parents' rights* to choose who will teach their children. In Australia today, while state school places are fully funded, only

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those who can afford to pay fees are free to choose from other schools operating on the same budget (or a lower one).

I am not arguing for a dramatic increase in expenditure on schooling. I am simply pointing out that since we, the taxpayers, are funding every child's place within the state school system, at least a family of average income should be free to change to another school and receive the same funding.

We need the present school industry to open up and to allow new educators, freely chosen by parents, to open their own schools, and thus ***enable schooling to evolve***. Let better ways be tailor-made to meet the varying needs of each school community.

There are hundreds of educational theories, schools of thought, doctoral theses, books, articles and research papers in the field of education. Many theories are impracticable; many have never been tried; many are not primarily about better education but are warped by a commitment to the preservation of the existing industry; many have been tried and found wanting. It is a fair question, then, to ask what credentials I have to enter the fray and make bold claims about a better kind of schooling.

My wife Faye and I have practical experience and real world results that cannot be denied. We started our own school (FCS) back in 1976. We do not select students for enrolment. We spend less on each child than the average school. FCS has been operating these 37 years. We began with a new school philosophy, and we are happily surprised by the outcomes. Over the years, we wrote to many professors and directors of education, inviting them to come and have a look for themselves.

Although we are often visited by teachers, the education hierarchy studiously ignored our ideas until recent years. What changed? It

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was the NAPLAN, the nationwide assessment of literacy and numeracy which began in 2008, strongly and bravely backed by the then federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard. I say *brave* because Julia Gillard was at the time deputy leader of the federal Labor party, representing the unions. The unions have consistently opposed public knowledge of school performance in basic skills. Ms Gillard was acting out of conviction, having seen secondary students in her electorate finish their state-schooling with poor university entrance scores and poor career prospects, as compared with students from private schools.

Many schemes have been trumpeted over the decades to raise standards, but standards were actually falling. It was time to shine a light, so that all interested parties could see where progress was needed. The NAPLAN publishes school results for all the world to see. This has stimulated action in many schools.

Our results pushed our school name into the arena of public discussion. We hadn't realised how well we were doing compared with the industry generally. People are amazed that a non-selective, modestly funded, "alternative" school is repeatedly placed among the top few percent of the nation. That's with every child participating in the tests.⁵

In fact, it was never our ambition to "top" the academic scores. But it is these results that have at last made people curious as to what we actually do with our students. Faye and I gladly share our knowledge. And in this book, I put forward our propositions for a better childhood – and a better preparation for adulthood.

⁵ Even the 2011 result, which shows 89% participation on *Myschool*, was actually based on 100% participation. We had nine Year 5 students that year, but one bright boy left the school in the week before the test. One missing out of 9 is 11%, thus apparently leaving us with 89% participation.

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At FCS, we have always aimed for the children to have a caring and sharing mentality, self-confidence, interpersonal communication skills, a positive attitude to learning, an awareness of the diverse belief systems of their fellow humans, and an outward-bound disposition to enjoy life and explore its possibilities.

This all-round achievement is not the result of education department guidance, lots of money, fancy buildings, excessive sweat or cramming, or libraries of educational theory. Our achievements have simply resulted from:

- (1) our primary commitment to the *spirit* of the young human,
- (2) our being *personally responsible* for the hidden curriculum; that is, the side-effects of our educational service on the children entrusted to us by their parents,
- (3) our being *free* to implement whatever methods worked best, and
- (4) the parent consciously assuming the *authority* to embrace or reject our school for their child.

There is a message that I have tried to get across to the Australian public for 37 years. I have written, and had published, many *Letters to the Editor* urging people to wake up to the need for reform of our school industry. These letters are very short and very clear: logically, they should have made a difference. But it has taken me many years to learn that declaring a simple truth does not break the spell of long-repeated slogans. The Australian population is being fed a constant diet of reassuring myths propping up our seriously under-performing system of schooling. Alas, if a familiar falsehood is broadcast 100 times, it will prevail

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over an easily-verified truth that is broadcast only once. I will give examples of this as we go through the book.

Faye and I found that, having chosen an independent path away from the mainstream school industry, it was a simple matter to vastly improve:

- (1) the teaching methods and outcomes,
- (2) the joy of existence for all sorts of children (and their families), and
- (3) the formation of robust, capable and caring citizens of the future.

All on a below-average school budget (per child).

But I gradually realised that no matter how good we were, no matter how great our model of schooling, the majority of children would never get the chance to experience anything like it under the entrenched Australian school system and the funding regime that has locked it in place for many decades. If new kinds of schools were allowed to exist, and parents were free to try out different kinds of schools (without financial penalties), then better ideas would quickly spread throughout the world of schooling and many children – indeed eventually a whole nation – would enjoy a more enlightened preparation for adulthood.

No one cares more about the prospects of children than their parents. Our present school industry substantially denies the very essence of accountability – the right of parents to choose schools. A huge sector of parents in Australia are denied the right to decide who will educate their children. This right partially exists for those who can afford to simply buy it themselves. I say *partially* because our system strongly deters educators from opening new

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schools outside the established system. Thus, even families willing to pay for schooling often cannot find the diversity of schooling that many talented Australian educators are willing to provide – were they allowed to open their own schools. ...