That the Liberal government's policy of 'independent public schools' will raise education standards in Australia: The negative case.

Clarifying Terms: Establishing a benchmark for the debate

Alan Reid

Thanks to ACSA for inviting me to participate in this debate, and to Kevin Donnelly for agreeing to debate someone whom he has previously described as a member of ‘Australia’s cultural left educational establishment’ – whatever that means.

A key aspect of the debate topic is the idea of ‘raising education standards’ which I take to mean improving the quality of education. Of course we both want to do that, so it is the understanding of what constitutes ‘quality education’ that is crucial. I don’t have time to set out my view in this opening statement, but you will be able to discern it from what I say, and I would be happy to expand on it during question time. But it is important to observe that our starting points are poles apart.

Kevin Donnelly has spent much of the past twenty years arguing that standards in public education are low, discipline is lax and corporal punishment (properly administered) is needed, the curriculum is dumbed down and needs to focus on the basics, teaching is dominated by ‘new-age’ fads, and equity issues (if they exist at all) can be simply explained by innate cognitive ability and good or bad teaching. He argues that IPS will help to remedy these problems.

I believe on the other hand that we already enjoy a high quality public education system, although as with any complex activity there is always room for improvement, and there is particularly a need to address the fact that young people from backgrounds of educational disadvantage lag significantly behind their more advantaged peers in terms of educational achievement. We should be constantly trying to raise education standards but to do so in a way which doesn’t take us backwards, and which benefits all, not some. My argument is that Kevin’s diagnosis is wrong and that IPS will actually lower
educational standards and exacerbate educational inequality. I will use a philosophical and an empirical argument to make my case.

The federal government’s policy of ‘independent public schools’: Philosophical objections.

In this section I will argue that the idea of public schools being ‘independent’ is philosophically at odds with what lies at the core of public education.

For me, the key word in the concept of Independent Public Schools (IPS) is that of ‘public’. Public schools are the cornerstone of our education system. At their core are a unique set of characteristics, such as being available to all – they exist in every community in Australia and take all-comers. They are state-owned and funded from the taxes we pay, so they belong to all of us, helping to develop our young as individuals, community members, workers and citizens. Public schools are microcosms of the community at large, with students coming from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds. In this melting pot students are able to learn from and with one another about diversity and difference, and learn tolerance and empathy. In short, public schools promote the common good. Not to recognise this dimension of public schools is to miss the essence of public education\(^1\).

For Kevin Donnelly the key word in the concept of IPS is ‘independent’. What is meant by this? It seems that the central attribute of independent schools is autonomy. From the case put by Kevin and from the literature on IPS, it is clear that autonomy can range from approaches which seek to fully privatise public schools, turning them into for-profit institutions run by companies, community bodies or individuals (Kevin appears to be a great supporter of this notion of autonomy); to those which seek to maximise the ‘autonomy’ of the principal and the School Board to manage finances, allocate resources, appoint staff and maintain buildings and facilities, while remaining within a public system (this is Minister Pyne’s version).

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\(^1\) It is important to note that my argument against IPS is not an argument against private schools. It is an argument for maintaining the essence of public education. Unlike Minister Pyne, I do not want public schools to be more like private schools. I want public schools to be more like what it means to be a public school. In the diverse system of education we enjoy in Australia, it is important that we differentiate the mission of school systems. I would have thought that advocates of choice would celebrate that, not seek to create uniformity.
What is common to both versions are the values of choice and competition. Parents and students are understood to be consumers making educational choices in a free-market. Principals and School Boards are charged with the task of maintaining and increasing market share. It is claimed that this fosters competition between schools as they vie for custom, so promoting educational quality. In my view, IPS is contrary to the common good philosophy, will cause real damage to our system of public education, and lower educational standards for the following reasons.

First, it establishes public schools as businesses. The purpose is to compete to advance the interests of the school regardless of the impact on other schools. The fact is that public schools are not businesses. They are community goods serving public purposes. When they operate as full or quasi-businesses, the most successful are rewarded, and the least successful - invariably those with the least cultural and financial resources - go to the wall. In this way, an IPS agenda confirms and exacerbates inequalities between schools. In an open market, ‘disadvantaged’ school communities can’t raise as much money, or attract the same level of resources as more affluent schools. Abandoning to the vagaries of the market the role systems can play in the fair allocation of resources can only entrench inequality, and therefore lower standards overall.

In addition, a lot of time and money is spent on publicity and marketing at the expense of educational outcomes. This sets up principals as employers, marketers and business managers, rather than as educational leaders seeking to involve teachers and the wider school community in educational discussions. Inevitably, Principals focus less on educational leadership activities as they become more entrepreunerial.

Second, it allows governments to escape their responsibilities by placing greater burdens on schools, often reducing resources while setting performance targets, and then blaming schools if they are not achieved. It also exponentially raises workload as things previously done centrally or by regions (especially HR) are done by Principals and teachers.

Third, it destroys the sense of local community engagement with each school. By this I mean more than the parent community, important as that engagement is. I also mean connection with the local community where the
school uses the community as a learning resource, and the community uses the school for community activities. When parents choose schools far away from the local community in which they reside, two things happen. It weakens the link between public schools and their local communities. And it encourages parents to simply leave a school when there are perceived issues, rather than stay, work through the issues, and help to build the school.

Finally, it promotes schools as stand-alone entities rather than as belonging to a system. True public schools aren’t independent, they are networked; and they cooperate to build a quality public system overall, not compete to create a system where there are shining beacons of success sitting alongside schools which are struggling or failing. True public schools are fuelled by a sense of mutual obligation, not self-interest.

In summary the philosophy of IPS is at odds with all the fundamental characteristics of public education as a public good, and for me that can only lower educational standards.

Rather than a cohesive public education system, autonomy as represented in the policy of IPS, creates a system of thousands of stand-alone and competing public schools. Individual self-interest reigns supreme. The term public is retained but its essence is destroyed. In this sense, the term ‘independent public school’ is an oxymoron.

This is not an argument for tight centralised control of public schools, as Kevin suggests. Neoliberals don’t own the concept of ‘autonomy’. I would support autonomy where it means providing greater flexibility for schools (e.g., greater curriculum freedom), but within a set of values which are consistent with a public system which fosters the common good. Here, flexibility is used by each school to maximise educational quality in the school, but also to collaborate across schools to make better schools and a better system for all.

In the next section I will show that the claim that IPS will raise educational standards doesn’t stack up empirically.
The federal government’s policy of ‘independent public schools’: The empirical evidence

What happens in practice? What does the research say? Well, I am afraid that IPS is a policy in search of evidence. Before I substantiate this claim, I want to focus on a number of the significant issues associated with the research methodology used by those promoting IPS. It is important to do this so that the debate does not simply become an exercise in trading ‘research’ studies. It is not sufficient to google a few studies which appear to support a pre-determined position, without evaluating the rigour of that research and the ways in which it is used.

Problems with the research methodology

I make the following points about the evidence that Kevin Donnelly has proffered here and in his writing:

- Kevin doesn’t bother to differentiate between different forms of autonomy. He simply draws from and generalises across the autonomy continuum, randomly using examples from fully privatised public school models to quasi-private models. This is problematic, to say the least.
- Kevin generalises from research conducted in a range of countries and cultures assuming that if it works in one context it will work in another. This of course is a basic research error. There are real problems in taking research findings from one cultural setting and transferring them to a completely different policy approach in another cultural setting, as though the findings are tablets of undeniable wisdom which are universally applicable.
- Most of the researchers that Kevin quotes (eg Hanushek, Woessmann, Hoxby, Fuchs) are not educators – they are Professors of Economics. Invariably the research is statistical where the sole measure of education quality is narrow standardised test results - it tells us nothing about key aspects of education quality such as the nature of relationships, school environment or community engagement, let alone learning areas such as the arts and technology.
- The most damning flaw is that Kevin assumes correlation implies causation. He seems to think that wherever there is a ‘good’ educational
outcome in the presence of school autonomy, then there is a causal relationship, even if that has not been the focus of the research. This is a grievous research error.

These research flaws are significant issues for public policy claiming to be ‘evidence-based’. However, for the sake of the debate, let’s assume that such research does tell us something about the effects of autonomy that can be applied in Australia. Even then the evidence doesn’t stack-up.

*International evidence*

When announcing the IPS policy, Minister Pyne claimed that there was international evidence, based on PISA data, which supports greater autonomy for schools. In fact, that research actually shows that:

> ....school systems that grant more autonomy to schools to define and elaborate their curricula and assessments tend to perform better than systems that don’t grant such autonomy.... In contrast, greater responsibility in managing resources appears to be unrelated to a school system’s overall performance’ (PISA 2009 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? – Resources, Policies and Practices, Vol. 4: 52).

This of course is the complete opposite to what Minister Pyne is proposing. In his policy the focus is on managing budgets and resources. Far from giving more curriculum freedom as the PISA research suggest should happen, schools must conform to state and national system-wide curriculum guidelines.

Clearly the PISA research won’t help the IPS case. So what other international evidence is there? Kevin uses overseas examples of school ‘autonomy’ in places as varied as the United States, UK, and Africa. In the main, this evidence comes from the extreme ‘privatising public education’ end of the autonomy continuum. This includes models like Charter schools in the United States and Free Schools in England and Sweden, where governments have outsourced the operation of public schools to private corporations, individuals, community organisations, and so on. These schools seek to attract students from traditional public schools across large areas of cities, promising miraculous results.
Well, at best there is mixed evidence that these schools improve educational outcomes; and a lot of evidence about a number of troubling long term effects of unbridled autonomy, not the least of which is that it tends to exacerbate educational inequality. I can give you examples from each of the countries Kevin has named, but in this opening statement I will largely confine myself to Charter schools in the US.

**United States: Charter Schools**

Charter schools in the US receive public funding but are bound by an individual school charter and not by government regulations that apply to state schools. Started about 25 years ago, they are run by education management organisations and not-for-profit groups. They have sought to reduce costs by hiring less experienced teachers; paying teachers and staff less, increasing class sizes, and standardising curriculum. Many pride themselves as having a ‘back to basics’ approach, with constant assessment and performance pay for teachers. By 2012, there were approximately 6000 charter schools with over 2 million students in the US.

It is precisely because the charter sector is comprised of thousands of different entities, it is difficult to generalise about them. They range from schools which run like boot camps, to those which boast progressive pedagogies of the sort despised by Kevin.

As usual, the studies rely on standardised test results. In terms of student learning outcomes, the best that can be said about Charter schools is that the results are very mixed. Most studies conclude that on average the scores on standardised tests are no different if charter schools and public schools enrol the same kinds of children. For example, the US Centre for Reinventing Public Education did a meta-analysis in 2011 of 25 studies of charter school performance and found ‘compelling evidence that charters under-perform traditional public schools in some locations, grades and subjects, and out-perform traditional public schools in other locations, grades and subjects’ (p. 1 quoted in SOS submission).

In 2009, the performance of Charter Schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia was assessed by researchers at the Centre for Research on Educational Outcomes (Credo). They found that:
..a decent fraction of charter schools, 17%, provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the Charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options, and over a third, 37%, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their students would have realised had they remained in traditional public schools (CREDO, 2009: 1).

This report was consistent with the results of five independent government reports completed between 2003 and 2007. It is possible to find studies which show that Charter schools have improved educational outcomes, such as research by Caroline Hoxby in New York, and the most recent CREDO report (2013), but the research methods used by both have come under strong criticism. However, for every piece of research that Kevin cites, I can produce research which shows the opposite. For these reasons it is pointless to cherry pick research to make the case one way or the other, without looking at the rigour of the research. You can’t just google and quote.

But the jury is not out of the adverse effects of Charter schools which have become big business in the US. A number of Charter schools have started up for-profit chains (KIPP, GULEN, EDISON), franchising education like Kentucky Fried Chicken. This may not worry Kevin, but it truly worries me, not least because the research tells us that in order to turn a profit many Charter schools engage in practices which would not be tolerated in a public education system serving the common good. For example:

- In order to attract custom and improve results, many exclude the weakest students, and enrol lower proportions of disability students and English language learners than traditional public schools. One Charter school in Washington DC had an expulsion rate 28 times as high as the local public schools.
- Many hire unqualified teachers, and spend more on administration and less on teaching than traditional public schools.
- A number have been mixed up in shady real estate deals, and been closed down because of corruption, embezzlement or bankruptcy.

More than this, a number of research studies demonstrate that Charter schools diminish three of the most powerful characteristics of public
education: diversity, community and collaboration. First, they tend to segregate by race and class. For example, Frankenberg et al (2011) found that charter schools are more racially segregated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the US. In some areas white students are overrepresented in charter schools while in other charter schools Black and Hispanic students have little exposure to white students.

Second, they destroy local community involvement in public schools as children travel across cities to get to their school of choice. Third, they have severed any sense of a supportive public system. In an era of high stakes testing, Charter Schools compete, not collaborate with, their public school peers. As Dianne Ravitch observes:

‘Some children have gained; most have not. And the public schools, an essential element in our democracy for many generations, have suffered damage that may be irreparable’. (2013, p. 179)

And this raises education standards?!!

Finally, and as an aside I feel obliged to tell Kevin, now working for the Australian Catholic University as we heard, that the sector which has been hardest hit by the growth of Charter schools is the Catholic sector. For example, many Catholic schools in New York have declined in numbers and quite a few have closed – largely as a result of the growth of Charter schools. Abraham Lackman’s research (2013) showed that from 2000 – 2010 Catholic student numbers fell by a staggering 43% and 89 Catholic schools closed. I guess Kevin would say that is the benefit of choice in an open education market: parents have simply voted with their feet. But I am just letting him know in case the Archbishop gets wind of the fact that he is championing ideas which could result in the collapse of Catholic education in Australia.

Similar models in other countries have fared just as badly. For example:

**Sweden**: Sweden was an early convert to the idea of outsourcing education to private equity firms in the 1990s. In a lax regulatory environment and with companies with an eye on profits, it was not long before things began to go wrong. Soon the schools (which comprise about a quarter of Sweden’s secondary schools) were being criticised for poor educational practices and
deteriorating results. The 2012 PISA results showed Sweden’s results in sharp decline. As with the Charter schools, advertising and marketing has diverted attention from education; and the local community has felt alienated.

And then just this year, the biggest company, JB education, went bankrupt and immediately closed its schools, sacking staff, leaving 11,000 students in the lurch, and owing millions in debt. Many other Free schools are in financial trouble. The approach has been an abject failure.

*United Kingdom:* Three years ago the UK Minister of Education, Michael Gove, followed Sweden’s lead and established hundreds of Free Schools citing the usual claims that giving principals the power to hire and fire staff, would cause standards to rise. In fact, it seems to be going the other way. A recent OFSTED report shows that the failure rate of free schools is running at three times the national average for state-funded schools. Overall about 78% of state schools are rated as good or outstanding by OFSTED, compared with 68% of Free Schools.

*New Zealand:* Kevin cites the highly devolved New Zealand model – Tomorrow’s Schools - as a success. I recommend to him the book *Vital Connections: Why we need more than self-managing schools*, written by leading New Zealand researcher Dr Cathy Wylie (the Head of Research at the NZCER). In it she argues that Tomorrows Schools have not resulted in any significant gains in student achievement, new approaches to learning, or greater equality of opportunity since they started in 1989. Instead it has had a number of predictable deleterious effects, such as:

- creating a system of fragmented schools, where self-interest is dominant;
- creating competition between schools making it harder for those schools at the bottom of the local competition market;
- Making the principal largely a business leader rather than an educational leader managing property and finances, and marketing;
- Maintaining and widening large gaps in student achievement between rich and poor, with no gains in student achievement overall.

Wiley argues that New Zealand needs to totally rethink the model to encourage stronger connections and collaboration across the system. She suggests a return to more central and regional support for schools.
Africa and India: Kevin uses James Tooley’s work in some of the poorest areas of the world to support his case. In his book The Beautiful Tree, Tooley – a long–time champion of the free market in education who believes that government has no place in education at all, and is even opposed to Charter Schools and Free schools because they are still public – describes the growth of low fee private schools operating in India and Africa. (It should be noted that Tooley himself has set up a company to build a chain of private schools in Ghana, and Pearson - the world’s biggest educational publisher and owner of the Financial Times - has bought in. No conflict of interest there for a researcher exploring the impact of privatised education!!).

Tooley claims that wherever they have sprung up, these low-fee private schools outperform public schools. Now, I am not going to contest the evidence – other than to say that as Claire McLoughlin from Birmingham Uni points out, other studies find the opposite. The evidence is inconclusive. But it is important to recognise that once again, we find Kevin generalising from very different contexts and about totally different phenomena! Even those whom Kevin cites to support his case warn about the dangers of this path:

"Our results indicate that the impact of school autonomy on student achievement is highly heterogeneous, varying by the level of development of a country... It suggests that lessons from educational policies in developed countries may not translate directly into advice for developing countries, and vice versa" (Hanushek, Woessmann and Link, 2012).

Australian Evidence

What of the Australian research evidence? The Grattan Institute whose previous reports Minister Pyne has quoted enthusiastically, has published a research report which explores the claims about school autonomy and concludes that:

"On autonomy, Australia and other countries have the wrong strategy. The world’s best systems have varying levels of autonomy. But it is not central to their reforms. .....Autonomous schools in Australia and other countries are no better at implementing these programs than are centralised schools" (from Myth of Markets).
The same conclusion has been reached in a number of other Australian studies. The Productivity Commission’s 2013 report reviewed the literature on autonomy and found ‘... mixed impacts from delegating decision-making authority to schools’; and that greater autonomy for schools is associated with an exacerbation of inequalities.

Of course you heard today another angle on the Australian evidence – the claim that private schools perform better in terms of student outcomes than public schools, and that this can be put down to their greater level of ‘autonomy’. Leaving aside the fact that once again without any evidence, Kevin has simply correlated educational outcomes with autonomy and assumed causation, the evidence on outcomes does not stack up

Recent Australian studies contest the premise. Chris Ryan for example in a research study published last year in the Economics of Education Review (2013, vol. 37) examines the decline in student achievement as measured by PISA results over the last decade, and found that declines in maths and reading literacy were more apparent in private schools than in state schools.

Other studies – such as Luke Connolly’s research using the 2008 and 2010 NAPLAN results of 15,000 year 5 students and 11,000 year 3 students have found that the NAPLAN scores of students from Catholic and other private schools did not statistically differ from those in public schools – after controlling for factors like household income, health indicators and parent education levels. However, unlike Kevin, he did not jump to linking NAPLAN results with some variable (like the extent of school autonomy) which he had not researched. On the contrary, he pointed out the limitations of the research saying that NAPLAN is just one measure of school performance. It is not indicative of the overall value of the school experience for kids and parents.

The most recent attempts to extract some evidential support for IPS relates to West Australia’s model of ‘independent public schools’. At first, Minister Pyne began to claim that IPS had improved student outcomes. Unfortunately he was stymied when a team from Melbourne University was commissioned last year to conduct an evaluation of the early years of the IPS reform. Their report stated very clearly that up to now ‘... there is little evidence of changes to students outcomes ...’ (and indeed they reported many teachers saying that
there had been ‘no change in teaching practice’ since their school had become ‘independent’).

Undeterred by this set-back, Minister Pyne recently turned to his latest evidential life-boat – the small increase in the proportion of students attending public schools in Western Australia which he claims points to the success of IPS. But once again the evidence fails him. The fact is that over the past three years the mining boom in WA has produced an estimated increase in the population of about 1500 per week, with a consequent increase in the school population of about 10,000 per year. It is this increase which has produced the growth in numbers in public schools, not IPS. And the increase has been across the board in schools which are non-IPS and IPS. Grasping at disconnected fragments of evidence to justify already-determined policy is not the way educational policy should be made.

**Conclusion**

Treating public education as though it is a business designed to make profits rather than a public good which benefits the entire community is to betray its essence. The strength of our public schools depends on their collectivity, cohesion, connection to community, collaboration, and diversity. Destroying these characteristics will not raise standards, it must lower them and widen the inequalities which currently exist in our schools and the wider society. The policy of IPS could irreparably harm our public education system which is so central to the development of Australian society and its democracy.

Alan Reid

This is the text of the negative case made by Alan Reid in his debate with Kevin Donnelly held at the ACSA Symposium in Canberra on Friday August 1, 2014.