The following is an edited and expanded version of Kevin Donnelly’s presentation at the debate.

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

Kevin Donnelly

While the title of this debate describes Independent Public Schools as a Liberal Government initiative it is important to acknowledge that the desire to give government schools increased autonomy and flexibility has the support of both major political parties.

Julia Gillard, when Prime Minister, championed the then ALP Commonwealth Government’s Empowering Local Schools Reform and in a 2010 speech she argued:

“A key element of this reform is empowering local school communities to make decisions about what is best for their schools and their students rather than a centralised system run by State bureaucracies dictating staffing mix and resource allocations.”

The then PM went on to argue that the purpose of the reform was “to ensure the core decisions that make the most difference to student outcomes are devolved to schools”.

Secondly, while recent initiatives like the Western Australian Government’s Independent Public Schools (IPS) are in the news, it is also important to understand that school autonomy has a relatively long history in Australia.

In the 60s and 70s many government schools in and around Melbourne chose their own staff, developed their own curriculum and were free from centralised management and control.

Such schools were supported by the left-of-centre teacher union, the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA), and were considered at the ‘leading edge’ of educational reform. Often described as community schools, they included: Sydney Road, Moreland Annexe and Swinburne Annexe.

Innovations included: alternative year 12 pathways and school-based certificates, general studies, non-competitive assessment and a curriculum based on local needs. The pedagogical and curriculum approaches, at a time when the traditional, competitive, academic curriculum reigned supreme, drew on radical educators like Neil Postman, Paulo Freire and the de-schooling movement.

The Victorian Government’s decision, during the mid-80s, to open a new style of government secondary school blending the technical and the high school traditions provides a second example of school autonomy predating Independent Public Schools.

These government post-primary schools, such as St Helena Secondary College, were given the power to appoint their own staff, design their own buildings and determine their own curriculum.
As one of the first group of teachers appointed to the St Helena I can attest to the excitement, motivation and sense of collegiality that developed as we were freed from external constraints.

I should also like to point out that Australia is not alone in giving government schools increased autonomy and around the world other examples include:

• Charter schools in 42 US states including Florida, Milwaukee and Washington State

• City Academies and Free Schools in England – supported by both the Tony Blair Labour Government and the current Conservative Government led by Prime Minister David Cameron

• Privately managed schools in disadvantaged slum areas in Indian cities like Calcutta and Bombay (see James Tooley’s book The Beautiful Tree: a personal journey into how the world’s poorest people are educating themselves).

Before addressing the question of whether giving government schools increased autonomy will raise standards, I’d like to make a number of observations.

Firstly, and as noted by a report by the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, titled Making the Grade: Autonomy and Accountability in Victorian Schools, autonomy has a range of benefits in addition to whether standards, as measured by tests such as NAPLAN, improve or not. Possible benefits include: strengthening the ability of principals and school leaders to better manage their schools, thus, improving teacher quality and effectiveness; promoting increased transparency and innovation and using resources more efficiently.

Secondly, giving schools and their communities greater control and reducing the power of governments and their bureaucracies based on the concept of subsidiarity, according to Catholic social theory, is an inherent good.

The principle that ‘decisions are far as practicable are made by those most affected’ is empowering as it acknowledges that teachers, students, school leaders and parents, generally speaking, have a far more realistic and credible understanding on what it is that makes their school unique.

Providing greater flexibility and control at the local level is also more efficient. Illustrated by the roll out of the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program non-government schools, because of their autonomy and because they were not controlled by head office, achieved better outcomes for students and school communities when compared to government schools.

And, thirdly, based on the example of Catholic and independent schools, that are able to achieve stronger educational outcomes compared to many government schools even after adjusting for students’ socioeconomic background, it is possible to argue that autonomy is beneficial.

Non-government schools, by their very nature, are able to select staff, manage their own budgets and set their own curriculum focus – within general guidelines.

While not all agree that autonomy will lead to stronger outcomes there is increasing evidence, if done properly and recognising that not all schools or schools systems both here and overseas have the same potential to benefit, that autonomy raises standards.
In a 2010 paper titled, How much do educational outcomes matter in OECD countries? E Hanushek and L Woessmann conclude, “In particular, evidence from both within and across countries points to the positive impact of competition among schools, of accountability and student testing, and of local school autonomy in decision making”.

The OCED’s PISA In Focus No 9, dated October 2011, states, “In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better”.

A research paper titled Does school autonomy make sense everywhere? Panel estimates from PISA by E Hanushek, S Link and L Woessmann, in relation to developed countries, is also optimistic when it states,

“Our central findings are consistent with the interpretation that autonomy reforms improve student achievement…” and “…in high-income countries, increased autonomy over academic content, personal, and budgets exerts positive effects on student achievement”.

Research by Caroline Hoxby in the US and Patrick Wolfe’s evaluation of the Milwaukee and Washington DC school voucher programs (of which school autonomy is an important element) also suggest that school autonomy is beneficial.

The fact that school autonomy, when implemented in a considered and balanced way and sensitive to the ability of schools to take up the challenge, is worthwhile is recognized by the Making the Grade report referred to earlier.

It concludes, “…notwithstanding the evidential uncertainties (chapter 3), the debate is not in fact about whether their should be devolved decision making. Rather it is about how it should extend, through what means it should be given effect, and what accountabilities are required”.

And now, to return to the topic of today’s debate: “That the Liberal Government’s policy of independent public schools will raise education standards in Australia”. Based on the example of the Western Australia’s Independent Public Schools, it is too early to tell.

As noted by the evaluation carried out by the Centre for Program Evaluation at the University of Melbourne, “In this early phase of the IPS development there is little evidence of changes to student outcomes”.

The evaluation does note, though, that principals and teachers involved in the IPS program are positive and optimistic. IPS teachers, in particular, feel more professional, accountable and in control of their careers – leading to an increased sense of self-worth.

At a time when many teachers feel devalued and beginning teachers, in particular, express concerns about teaching as a career anything that can be done, such as increasing school autonomy, that is considered positively should be welcomed.

Some rebuttals related to arguments put by Professor Alan Reid – in no particular order.

• Contrary to what Reid argues I do not support privatising government schools and running schools as profit/loss commercial enterprises.
• Government schools are not open to all – selective schools enrol only those students who pass the entrance test and not all parents are wealthy enough to buy expensive homes in the enrolment zones of much sought after government schools.

• Catholic and independent schools, and not just government schools, contribute to the common good. In fact, research both here and overseas suggests that Catholic schools, in particular, are effective at strengthening social capital and students from such schools experience less racism and are more likely to volunteer.

• I have previously acknowledged that autonomy is not a universal panacea – in a newspaper comment piece in the Fairfax Press, dated August 2, 2013, I state, “Of course, to argue for autonomy, diversity and choice doesn’t mean all schools and their communities are ready to take on the challenge”.

• In my ACSA speech I referred to the very recently implemented New Zealand school autonomy initiative involving Partnership Schools. Professor Reid, when criticizing me, confuses this new initiative with the older Tomorrow’s Schools initiative.

• In answer to the argument that school autonomy leads to greater inequity and disadvantage the report School Accountability, Autonomy, Choice, and the Equity of Student Achievement: International Evidence from PISA 2003 suggests the opposite is the case. It states, “The main empirical result is that rather than harming disadvantaged students, accountability, autonomy, and school choice appear to be a tides that lift all boats”.

• Finally, and contrary to Reid’s argument that advocates of schools autonomy are mainly economists, as published in the Courier Mail the day before the ACSA debate, a survey of 804 Australian principals concluded that there is “an appetite” for more autonomy.