The Public Comprehensive High School in New South Wales

Past, Present and Future

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This paper is a response to the difficult circumstances that government comprehensive high schools find themselves in the beginning of the twenty-first century. While the focus of the paper is on New South Wales (Australia) the issues under discussion are also familiar in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The authors contextualise the problems of the present in the history of the comprehensive high school. They show that this form of schooling had a chequered history from its main origins after World War II, but more importantly that where there was relative isolation from a ‘market’ in secondary school choice, such schools were more likely to meet the expectations of local communities. The paper discusses the preliminary results of a large interviewing project in which government comprehensive high school principals reflected on the aims, successes and failures of their schools. The paper provides a list of factors which may affect the fortunes of such schools, but finds that it is difficult to generalise too far. Such schools are subject to very different pressures, say in the inner city compared with relatively isolated country towns. Nevertheless where educational markets are strong, where state-subsidised non-government schools, and different kinds of state schools compete for enrolments, the comprehensive government high schools suffer considerable disadvantage.

The ordinary comprehensive government high school is in considerable difficulty, not only in Australia, but in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This is a real problem for families in those countries which have neither the wealth nor the kinds
of social capital necessary to operate in emergent and vigorous educational markets. The fact that such markets have often been artificially created through peculiar uses of public taxation revenues does not subtract from their growing influence and strength. Because comprehensive government high schools have a very broad set of social and citizenship-making responsibilities, because such schools are deliberately committed to offering broad curriculum opportunities and because they exclude virtually no-one, despite the impacts particular problematic sub-populations of students may bring with them, such schools are more likely to have substantial difficulties competing for enrolments. In the worst of such circumstances, comprehensive schools may have their capacity to offer a broad and comprehensive curriculum substantially impaired.

Nevertheless in Australia these are the schools upon which the great majority of young people remain dependent for their secondary education, this despite the steady evisceration of enrolments in comparison with the non-government sector for over twenty years. (See Table 1 which shows the pattern for New South Wales).

Table 1: Students in the secondary schools of New South Wales by school category, including the shift toward the non-government sector (%): 1984 - 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Government schools</th>
<th>Non-government schools</th>
<th>% shift to non-government schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>+1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>+1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>+1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>+1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total shift 1984-2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+8.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Schools (4221.0)

While Table 1 is representative of similar patterns in other states of Australia, it masks the unusual feature of government secondary schooling in New South Wales, that is the presence of a large set of academically selective high schools. These schools do not share the same burden of enrolment loss, indeed most are over-subscribed. The comprehensive government schools suffer the losses disproportionately.

This pattern of enrolment loss in New South Wales would not be unfamiliar to observers of the comprehensive school in the United Kingdom and the United States. This is despite some very basic differences in the structure and history of public
schooling. In the United States for example a series of historic Supreme Court decisions have interpreted the Constitution to deny any public funding to church/religious schools. As a consequence the proportion of students in public schools is very much greater than in Australia. These proportions are higher in the United Kingdom as well, but various church/religious schools have long been incorporated into the public system given the established status of the Church of England.

Nevertheless in the United Kingdom and the United States and unlike Australia, there is a further factor which produces a greater diversity of schools within the systems of public education. The decentralised character of public education in both countries allows such diversity, and while the pull towards centralised approaches has been stronger in the United Kingdom since the 1980s, there are a great variety of schools which are more or less organised differently according to the character of local education authorities. Such diversity has increased with a number of schools becoming more autonomous of either local and central supervision depending on the character of the various forms of grants from which they are maintained. In the United States, public comprehensive schools can be well or poorly resourced, according to the wealth and taxation arrangements not only of various States, but of city and county governments as well.

Such differences would appear to diminish the possibility of comparability between the different systems. These things are common in each country however:

- a growing disaffection with the educational and social efficacy of ordinary public comprehensive high schools
- the public policy shifts toward valuing the establishment of diverse schools
- the growth of educational markets allowing parents to choose what they consider to be effective schools
- encouraging the growth of specialist schools catering to specific communities (including ethnic and ‘faith’ schools)
- changing funding and supervision arrangements to develop more autonomous public schools (part of the ‘devolution’ movement).

An extreme example of the first point in the United Kingdom may be the land-mark controversy surrounding the description by one Secretary of Education, of many inner-city comprehensives as ‘sink’ schools, not to be touched with a ‘barge-pole’ (Morris, 2002, p. 27). This condemnation of some inner-city comprehensive secondary schools crystallised a debate which had been emerging for some time. Its particular sting lay in the fact that a minister in a Labour government made the criticism. Comprehensive schooling had usually been seen by Labour as an important vehicle for producing equal educational opportunities.

An example of the second surrounds the various attempts in the United States to produce ‘voucher’ and other schemes by which parents are to be empowered in an
educational market to choose effective schools for their children. Such schemes often coexist with attempts to give students opportunities in failing (mainly black) inner city schools to attend county (mainly white) suburban schools (see for example, Wells, 1996; Viteritti, 1999).

An example of the third, again in the United States is the development of ‘charter schools’ which are special purpose schools established by particular communities with public funding, but not necessarily subject to the supervision of the large public school systems. The charter schooling movement in some states has even allowed religious groups which are adept in the production of their proposals, to receive public funding. In the United Kingdom many schools have been able to detach themselves from Local Education Authority systems and supervision to become largely autonomous but grant-maintained or publicly funded schools.

The comparability with Australia becomes clear if we put to one side our traditional definitions of what constitutes ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘government’ and ‘non-government’ schools. In Australia nearly all ‘private’ or ‘non-government’ schools are in fact in receipt of government tax-produced support. They are also required to conform to a regulatory framework which may include requirements for a minimal curriculum offering, teacher qualifications and certain infrastructure for such schools (Grimshaw, 2002). In New South Wales, they are also organised by a state supported and controlled credentialling and examining authority in the Board of Studies. Genuinely private schools are rare in Australia. More of them exist in the United States and the United Kingdom.

In this discussion we can see the beginnings of an argument for why the ordinary government comprehensive high school is often in difficulty at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The creation of market and funding regimes which favour schools which target particular populations based on social class background (and wealth), ethnic or religious affiliation, or curriculum specialisation are unlikely to favour the schools whose reason is to provide for all students in a geographical area regardless of class background, religious or ethnic affiliation, and whose curriculum brief is to offer broad opportunities.

In New South Wales, the circumstances leading to problems for government comprehensive secondary schools are responsive to historical analysis. In this article we provide such a brief analysis as well as a preliminary and summary discussion of the results of an extensive interviewing project involving close to eighty principals of government comprehensive high schools in New South Wales.¹

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Thirty years ago, when government funding of schools was a national priority, the public comprehensive secondary school in Australia was described as an institution which sought to enroll all students in the surrounding ‘neighbourhood’ (McLaren, 1974, p. 66).
While this still remains a useful definition we also need to recognise that the actual establishment of the public comprehensive secondary school during the twentieth century involved a number of contradictory influences. In the United States of America the comprehensive high school ideal was closely related to the emergence of a comprehensive curriculum embracing a range of subjects and providing a progressive ideology catering for individual differences (Wraga, 2001). Indeed part of the current criticism of the American secondary school is that it has been too comprehensive in approach, often operating primarily as a custodial form for the young. In the process, it has been charged with neglecting academic and intellectual attainments (Angus & Mirel, 1999). In the United Kingdom, the growth of the comprehensive secondary school was founded as much on ideals of efficiency and meritocracy as on any overall commitment to social equality. While comprehensive school policy in the United Kingdom attempted to disrupt the early academic selection of students, the curriculum of the new schools generally remained based on the older established grammar schools (Ball, 1984; Benn & Chitty, 1997; Kerckhoff et al., 1996; Lowe 1997; McCulloch, 1998; Weeks, 1986).

In Australia the emergence of the public comprehensive secondary school drew upon these contradictory influences but was also responsive to the local tradition of state public education. The creation of public education systems was a feature of nation-building in the nineteenth century throughout Europe, Britain and North America as well in as the settler societies of the British Empire. The state sometimes subsidised the efforts of mainly church schools or created its own schools which complemented or competed with the private sector (Green, 1990; Mangan, 1994). In the Australian colonies prior to the 1870s public funds were available for religious schools. With the passage of the ‘compulsory, free and secular’ education acts such aid was withdrawn. In contrast to England and Canada, and much of Western Europe, these educational settlements in the Australian colonies denied religious and cultural pluralism in the interests of establishing a common civic culture in schools funded by the state.

Equally, public education in Australia initially shared none of the features of the ‘common’ public school of the United States where local school boards represented community interests. Rather, Australian ‘public education’ in the nineteenth century was really the outcome of a decision in each of the Australian colonies to create a government-funded education system under a centralised bureaucracy (Austin & Selleck, 1975).

While public education in Australia was systematised by the central state, secondary education was initially segmented by social class, gender and faith. Initially secondary schools in Britain, Europe and even North America, developed as quite separated from elementary education, rather than being a second stage of schooling to which all could aspire. In Australia, academic and other traditions, including the principle of single sex schools, associated with the English public and grammar school traditions were, and continue to be, influential (Sherington et al., 1987, 2004). The few public high schools which had emerged in Australia prior to the Second World War catered principally to parts of the middle class with some provision for financial and other assistance for bright
working class children (Campbell, 1995; Campbell et al., 1999; Sherington 1990). They were principally either socially or academically selective. The public high schools coexisted alongside the socially exclusive male and female corporate schools and the emerging ‘system’ of Catholic education which had developed in the wake of the colonial secular education acts and the withdrawal of public funds from Catholic schools. Under the influence of the universities, the public examination system helped to consolidate an academic curriculum in all secondary schools while also laying the basis for competition between the public and private sectors (Sherington, 2004; Teese, 1984, 1989, 2000).

In New South Wales the public high school system was particularly strong in educating many of the elite who would come to dominate the social and political life of post-war Australia (Peel & McCalman, 1992). In Sydney, the state high schools were based on academic selection at the end of primary school. In rural New South Wales, the local high school in the major regional centres was often more comprehensive in selection and also co-educational in form. Even in the 1940s the great majority of students in public primary schools did not proceed to a state high school. Rather, they went on to the various forms of ‘post-primary’ education that had emerged. This included ‘domestic science’ schools for girls, the ‘central’ and ‘intermediate’ public schools in rural areas as well as ‘continuing’ education in the technical and further education sector.

The creation of the Australian public comprehensive secondary school after the Second World War was sometimes presented as expanding educational opportunities on the basis of ‘secondary education for all’. In effect, the outcomes were more complex. By the early 1950s a model of comprehensive education had been introduced in Western Australia and New Zealand. In New South Wales, the Wyndham scheme, later recognised as a national model for the introduction of the comprehensive principle, was justified as part of the process of post-war modernisation, being socially integrative and co-educational in form. It promised new opportunities for all but in effect preserved an academic curriculum, and in its implementation, failed to secure the closure of a number of the previous academically selective high schools. Significantly the Wyndham scheme also retained the principle of external assessed examinations (Bessant & Spaull, 1976; Duffield, 1990; Hughes, 1998; Sherington, 2003). The failure to create thoroughly comprehensive secondary schools in Australia led to criticism in the 1960s and 1970s of the secondary school curriculum from the point of view of social justice (Connell et al., 1982). By the 1980s, the growing crisis in youth unemployment led to increasing numbers of students remaining in school raising again the prospect and urgency of curriculum reform (Irving et al., 1995). Twenty years later, the issue of appropriate curriculum and the question of how to retain students still confronts Australian secondary schools.

It is also clear that the introduction of the public comprehensive high school helped indirectly to alter federal-state relations in educational funding and ultimately the relationship between the public and private sectors. The growing costs of providing universal secondary education meant that both the public and private sectors in education could only survive with national federal funds. The re-introduction of ‘state
aid' in the 1960s initially saved much of the private sector but then laid the basis for a new competition between public and private schools in which each sector now drew upon national tax revenue (Anderson, 1991, 1992; Dudley & Vidovich, 1995; Lingard et al., 1993, 1997; Marginson, 1993, 1997; Reid 1998; Williams 1984).

It is within this context that the growth of the new market ideology in Australia since the mid-1980s has had so much effect. Moreover the continuing importance of examinations and educational credentials sustains the view that parents naturally should seek the best way to advantage their children (Teese et al., 1995; Teese, 2000). This phenomenon is not confined to Australia. The work of Labaree (1997) in the United States has emphasised the effect of markets and the role of credentials in creating and sustaining private educational advantages even within public educational systems. Similarly, support for single sex schools is not only associated with gender-related principles of social justice but also with the market and establishing private advantage in education (Kenway & Willis, 1998).

In the United Kingdom, Stephen Ball has researched the market strategies of middle class parents in this new age of anxiety. He points to the massive expansion of the middle class in the post-Second World War period and reinforces the argument also made for Australia that the middle class in recent decades has been de-coupled from no longer expanding public bureaucracies and public sector employment. Simultaneously, intense competition for entrance to elite educational institutions, and particularly universities, has involved a shift away from 'merit' as the main currency of access to be replaced by 'distinction', even oligarchic 'goods' (Ball, 2003; Martin, 1998; Pusey, 2003).

Recent research, including a survey of the census over forty years across the various regions in Sydney, also suggests that the Australian middle class is leading the drift from public to private schools (Campbell, 2003; Grimshaw, 2002). One local response to the rise of market forces in secondary education has been to 'rescue' public secondary education through the re-introduction of the principle of selection either on the basis of academic or other criteria. In New South Wales this renewed policy of support for differentiation and selectivity in public education began actively under the Greiner Liberal Government but quickly became part of the of the policy of the Carr Labor Government elected in 1995 (Brown, 1998; Sherington, 1995). By 2001, there were 19 selective and four agricultural high schools in New South Wales providing approximately 3000 Year 7 places. Complementing these academically selective high schools were a number of specialist schools with an emphasis on particular areas such as technology, languages, performing arts and sport. Accompanying these changes was a recognition of an apparent growing preference for girls to be in single sex schools.

Despite the growing importance of selection within public secondary education over the past decade the great majority of students still attend public comprehensive co-educational high schools. Indeed, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training asserts in its Parents' Guide to Schools 'The foundation of government secondary education in NSW is the comprehensive high school' (New South Wales
Department of Education & Training, 2001, p. 11). Yet there are signs of change. Multi-campus comprehensive high schools and senior colleges are being introduced with links to local TAFE colleges and even universities. The recent changes to the Higher School Certificate have also allowed the further growth of vocational education and training in the curriculum of the comprehensive high school. The introduction of selective academic streams into certain local comprehensive schools once again re-visits many of the issues which the Wyndham Committee confronted a half a century past (Hughes, 2003).

In the following section we report on some preliminary findings of our current research in this area.

**PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS**

For the past four years the authors have been engaged in a large ARC funded project which is examining the history of the public comprehensive high school in New South Wales over the past half century. A major aim of the project has been to examine public education within local contexts. Part of this research involves regional studies which include interviews with high school principals. These interviews have concentrated on parts of Sydney, the mid-North Coast and the Central West. What we have found so far is suggestive but may have major implications for the future of public comprehensive school education in Australia.

First, it is clear that there is tremendous diversity in the continuing development and overall state of public comprehensive high schools. In Central West New South Wales, the public high schools which universally seem to be in best shape are those which are somewhat isolated, in reasonably prosperous country towns such as Young, West Wyalong and Cootamundra. This may seem surprising in view of the current perceived crisis in rural and regional Australia. However, in many of the towns with reasonably prosperous economies the local comprehensive high schools appear to be fulfilling their original mission, which in some cases pre-dates the Wyndham report, of providing a good range of secondary options to local children. There is substantial evidence that parents and ‘community’ actively support these schools. What is also significant is the relationship with the ‘private’ sector. In some of these places there are Catholic schools which terminate at Year 10, and send most of their post-compulsory students to the local public high school, giving a boost to senior school enrolments.

In other parts of regional and rural New South Wales, the patterns of success for the local comprehensive high school are mixed. Two issues are of importance. One is the proximity of a large regional centre (especially if less than 40 kilometres away) with bigger public high schools and low-fee Catholic and Anglican schools. The second and related issue is the provision of subsidised transport for students which may enable access to a larger school. Thus Bellingen High School suffers from the proximity of Coff's Harbour while Wingham High School suffers from the proximity of Taree. In this respect, there is competition for students even within the public sector across regional boundaries. This situation is also indicative of the wider trend: a concentration and
centralisation of resources and services within parts of regional Australia. Under these circumstances, the smaller country comprehensive high schools can be vulnerable not only to competition from larger regional centres but from critical incidents within their own precincts (for example, incidents associated with drugs, violence, antagonism between local school decisions and the views of parents) thus leading to loss of students. Such losses in already small schools may dramatically affect their staffing and curriculum offering, making them 'comprehensive' schools in name only.

At the same time, there is evidence that the smaller country comprehensive high schools are now using and benefiting from a range of other educational providers. This has allowed more senior school subject choice in some circumstances. Thus where a TAFE exists in the same town or nearby, important VET courses become available. The other distance providers are more problematic in that considerable self-discipline and independent qualities are required by students to succeed with HSC subjects apart from a teacher and class being provided within the school. There is evidence that small comprehensive high schools need more staffing than their small staffing allowances provide in order to deliver comprehensive curriculum choice. Sometimes teachers are provided to small senior classes at the expense of large junior school classes. A common strategy, particularly in the elective subject area, is to join classes together vertically (for example, Years 10 and 11 will do subjects together): a practice which has existed in rural New South Wales schools for many years.

Large regional centres, such as Coffs Harbour and Dubbo, are now looking increasingly similar to parts of Sydney, with a range of public and private secondary schools. In this context, the effect of a public Senior College in Coffs Harbour sharing facilities with TAFE and a branch of Southern Cross University seems to have had both positive and negative effects on public education and comprehensive high schools in the region. The creation of the Senior College certainly hinders the shift to the private sector expected with the growth of the local low-fee Anglican Bishop Druitt College. The Senior College is very attractive to many senior secondary students across both the private and the public systems. Its existence may well have retarded the potential enrolment losses for public education in the Coffs Harbour region. On the other hand, there is no doubt that there is pressure on the 'traditional' Years 7-12 comprehensive high school in areas such as Coffs Harbour where choice has become available and a market has been created.

Nevertheless, in the Coffs Harbour region at least some local comprehensive high schools seem to be surviving well, despite the introduction of the alternative public schools such as a Senior College and the competition from the new private schools. The reasons for this seem to be the same set of crucial factors which sustain some of the successful comprehensive high schools in Sydney. These factors include the following:

- A relatively dynamic school leadership skilled in both flexible student management and public relations.

- A school history not too weighed down by the tradition of having been a 'rough' boys' technical school, for example.
• The lack of a recent critical incident (such as a school yard stabbing or of pillorying in the press for poor HSC results).

• A fair representation of employed middle and working class parents with a commitment to public education in that school.

In Sydney itself, the research so far suggests an immense diversity of relationships between public comprehensive high schools and communities. There are a very large number of issues which can affect a particular school in quite distinct ways. In summary, the following issues appear to have a major effect in Sydney on the success of public comprehensive high schools in particular regions:

• Social class background in a region associated with concomitant real estate values is undoubtedly highly significant particularly where this is associated with low fertility-based demographic change. There are already very few public high schools in the Eastern suburbs of Sydney. The decision to close Vaucluse High is a reflection of the low support for public education in that area combined with the decline of school age students in the region.

• Public transport routes and thus issues of physical access for potential pupils.

• Critical incidents.

• Proximity of selective public high schools.

• Strength of the Roman Catholic and now Anglican low fee schools.

• Residues of perceived histories of schools and their populations.

• Quality of school leadership.

There is no public comprehensive high school in Sydney which does not have a distinctive mix of the effects of these and other factors on its continuing success. In a sense these factors are real for all schools, not just comprehensive public high schools. But comprehensive schools appear more vulnerable than other schools when things go wrong. Their general well-being is subject to pressure if only a few of these issues, sometimes only one of them, develops in a negative manner.

Related to these pressures is the effect of the various forms of selective high schools. The growth in the numbers of selective high schools over the past twenty years has had a major impact on a number of comprehensive high schools. Some selective high schools seem genuinely trans-regional with students travelling across Sydney to attend such schools as James Ruse Agricultural High School or Fort Street High School. But in some areas of Sydney the density of selective high schools on accessible transport routes is very high. Thus comprehensive high schools in the inner-west of Sydney suffer from the proximity of not only the selective academic high schools such as Fort Street and Sydney Boys and Sydney Girls but also Newtown Performing Arts High School. There is little doubt that the establishment of the inner-west Sydney College resulted from the fact that
local comprehensive high schools such as Glebe, Balmain and Leichhardt had been ‘residualised’ to a greater or lesser degree as a result of demographic shift certainly, but also the competition from the selective public high schools and private schools within their area.

The current plan of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to introduce partial selective intakes to some of these comprehensive high schools in inner Sydney can in one respect be seen as an effort to rescue public comprehensive schooling. It could be that these changes will restore strong academic streams to these schools. However, this raises the question of the current meaning of ‘streaming’. The comprehensive high schools introduced in the 1950s and 1960s were usually streamed schools in respect to whole class organisation. More recently, subject setting has been a principle of organisation (thus one student can be in a low set for Maths and a high set for English). Will partial selective entrance introduce a particularly rigid form of streaming? Many of the principals of the schools surveyed so far in this research project suggest that in the elective years of the middle high school general and selective students will mix. What happens elsewhere has yet to be consolidated or to have strong models for imitation. One example, Newtown Performing Arts High School, which is a mixed comprehensive and selective (by portfolio) school, argued in 2001 to become completely selective because of problems associated with being mixed.

**SOME CONCLUSIONS**

What then do the above tentative findings suggest about the current and future status of the public comprehensive high school? There are a number of matters for concern. We would argue that the reasons for the vulnerability of the public comprehensive high school are complex but are clearly related to the operation of both a market in schooling as well as a market ideology. This market and its associated ideology is closely related to the concerns of the Australian middle class. There is no doubt that an anxiety exists amongst the Australian middle class in respect to the future of their children. This is particularly so in a society and economy where there remains relatively high youth unemployment and where ever greater sections of the labour market are responsive to credentialism. Even if some social theorists argue that cultural and social capital is primarily reproduced in the family and that schooling does not make a substantial difference to educational and social outcomes, it would seem that the many elements in the middle and working classes do not feel comfortable with the argument. Enrolment of children in the ‘right’ school is seen as critical factor in the successful education of young people.

This anxiety, identified by Pusey’s recent study of ‘middle Australia’ (2003) is also sustained by the current ideology of the ‘good citizen’ who exercises discrimination and choice in the matter of the schooling of his or her child. Within this ideology, the market in education, no matter how artificially maintained by state funding, is responded to in terms of perceived private interest and the apparent quality of the commodity offered. If
parents detect a failure in the quality of schooling offered then it is obviously in the interests of their children to exercise choice if it is available. In New South Wales, the government-supported, but independent enquiry into public education by Vinson began a process of correcting some common prejudices about public schooling, and also made the case for new resourcing in public education. At the time of writing this paper it is too early to assess the long term impacts of the report. (See Inquiry, 2002.)

In these circumstances, the importance of funding arrangements can not be denied. The re-introduction of ‘state aid’ and the federal funding of the private sector has changed the dynamics both between public and private schools and within the public sector itself. It is difficult to see a strong future for public comprehensive schooling when the overall impact of funding policies is to increase choices for parents of secondary age students. There is no doubt that the impact of federal funding in particular allows private schools to appear more attractive in a number of ways, and not only through the provision and display of physical facilities. The private sector is required to commit to fewer ‘public’ responsibilities in respect to either a broad curriculum or the nature of the student body, retaining powers of selection and expulsion. The private sector also retains a tighter control over the hiring and firing of teachers.

Even apart from the issue of funding, there is a fundamental problem for the public comprehensive high school with its tradition of serving ‘community’, ‘neighbourhood’ and its associated ideology of the importance of collective citizenship in meeting this renewed ideology of ‘market’ and choice. Indeed the research so far suggests that for a public comprehensive high school to become competitive in a market it must become specialist in some way thus deserting the older comprehensive ideal. If a school does not choose this path it may be in danger of being perceived as ‘residual’, part of the set of schools resorted to where no active choice in a market situation can or may be made. Such comprehensive schools can be seen as catering principally for the poor and disadvantaged. This can be turned into a virtue but it is likely to have a negative effect on a broad loyalty to a school where some social groups consider that other groups dominate the social life of the school. Such a perception may relate also to the issue of ethnic affiliation. Usually, public comprehensive high schools have developed a formal commitment to multiculturalism, but in the context of the market, how a school develops a loyal population and how it is perceived in a community may not have much relationship to such formal commitments.

Within these current contexts of the ‘market’ some commentators such as Teese argue that the future for many local comprehensive schools is bleak:

In comprehensive high schools, residential segregation brings together many students with multiple disadvantages – low esteem, poor basic learning, language handicaps, poverty and family breakdown. Instead of a mass of cultural and economic resources being concentrated on one advantageous site and applied to the high end of the curriculum-as happens in private schools - there is an accumulation of liabilities at the one site. This weakens the instructional effort and risks severe retribution against those students who stray into the more academic subjects. (Teese 2000, p. 189)
Despite these difficulties, there is also evidence from our research that the public comprehensive high school has survived and adapted well under certain conditions. Two features stand out. The examples from regional New South Wales certainly show that it is easier for a public comprehensive high school to prosper where the market is controlled or restricted in some ways. Here the idealised local public comprehensive high school can exist comfortably even if the future for all its students may be restrained by local economic conditions. Secondly, in the large regional centres, and particularly in Sydney, a strong future for public comprehensive high schools seems increasingly dependant upon them becoming more diverse institutions. Sometimes this diversity can occur in partnership with other schools or with other sectors in the public education system. In this respect, the current articulation with TAFE and vocational education may well be meeting the interests of many students in ways that were not possible under the previous academic curriculum that dominated the latter years of the high school. One of the major challenges for public comprehensive schools is to find ways to relate to the social and cultural diversity that now exists, particularly in many parts of Sydney. Indeed, the re-definition of public education in ways that incorporate various forms of diversity while maintaining a commitment to the education of all is undoubtedly the major challenge for public comprehensive high schools in this first decade of the new century. This can probably only come from concerted effort and co-operative partnerships across the entire public sector of education.

Comprehensive government secondary schools are the most democratic, the most inclusive of the secondary schooling forms that Australia provides. They remain, and should remain one of the essential foundations of a broad public education system. The possibility of their failure suggests a probability of a substantial diminution of opportunity for a great section of youth in Australian society.

NOTES

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1 These preliminary research findings have been derived from an analysis of semi-structured interviews with comprehensive government high school principals. The interviews were gathered in 2001 by interviewers Geoffrey Sherington, John P. Hughes and Craig Campbell. The topics for discussion included the social and economic backgrounds of students and their communities, the experience of the Principal in the government high school system, descriptions of the curriculum and its delivery in their schools, the relationship of the schools to the Higher School Certificate and tertiary entrance selection, the place of the school in its local educational ‘market’, and general reflections about the present and future of the school in relation to the ideals and current practice of comprehensive schooling. The research project was titled ‘Residualisation, regionalism and the recent history of the state comprehensive high school: 1950-2000’ and was funded by the Australian Research Council in the years 2000-2002.
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