

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 946
THE DECLINE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION?**

The problems confronting public education in Australia at the present time are many, but the doomsayers are in part right and in part mistaken.

DOGS note that although succeeding governments have done everything they could to undermine our public education systems, and our teachers are struggling, they are still educating the vast majority – 66% of our children. And, this despite the fact that so many of our services – electricity, gas, transport, and even quarantine in times of plague – have been privatised.

DOGS believe that the constant undermining of public education is in large part the result of public funding of the opposing denominational system which separates children on the basis of class, creed and colour and costs the taxpayers more than \$20 billion per year.

But, since the 1980s, there is another ideology beside sectarian discrimination in the mix. This is the neoliberal ideology which justifies so much of the selfish greed of Australian oligarchs, corporations and representatives of wealthy or insecure parents. This economic paradigm has dominated the policies of those in the corridors of power, creating glaring educational and social inequalities in their wake.

John Frew, served for 10 years as a Foundation principal of a NSW secondary school for students with Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Disturbance and is a Principal of Frew Consultants Group. He has written the following very interesting article which is published on the Save our Schools website. This is what he has to say about the situation in New South Wales.

Behind the News – The Decline of Public Education

[National issues – SOS Australia \(saveourschools.com.au\)](http://saveourschools.com.au)

The NSW Education Minister's idea that the offer of an increase in pay would solve the complete systems failure of NSW's Public School's education department reveals her inability to grasp even the fundamental problems facing our schools; the inadequacies that exist have reached crisis point. There are many obvious explanations of what is wrong primarily the insufficient funding which Trevor Cobbold from the Save Our Schools

public schools advocacy group persistently identifies. Another evident problem is the exhausting, non-teaching duties and administrative workload that has grown in recent years. It would seem, if the political will existed these problems could be easily solved. However, the contemporary education bureaucracy is underpinned by a faulty belief system that is the corner stone of all public services, the dependence on the principles of neoliberalism.

The erosion of the prevailing system began back in the swinging sixties when western society made a valiant attempt to break the repressive shackles of conservatism and 'the church'. This contest between the policies of the establishment and this desire for freedom fuelled the intense coverage of the war in Vietnam. The emerging youth culture that questioned the actions of the existing authority led to a decade of social upheaval. The rear-guard actions of the establishment, desperate to keep their hold on their society culminated in the political assassination of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King.

People, especially the youth wanted to take back their 'power' and the obvious enemy was the State and 'Big Brother'. The focus for change shifted to the individual taking personal responsibility! In a time when the Cold War had divided the western world into two camps, this notion of individual responsibilities and choice was embraced as the antidote by the west as the antithesis of the Soviet Block.

What followed was an enthusiastic adoption of an economic paradigm referred to as neo-liberalism. This model had emerged in the 1930's, following the Great Depression when liberal scholars adopted this non-interventionist approach to the economy as a safeguard against the social move to centralisation. Their ideas centred around the need for competitive market places instead of the state controlling commerce.

Neoliberalism remained little more than an economic theory until the sixties when the urge to individualism was enthusiastically wedded to this economic model. The protagonists of this time who promoted this marriage of the power of the individual and the free-market were that 'loving couple', Reagan and Thatcher. As Thatcher pointed out, her goal was to "change Britain from a dependent to a self-reliant society – from a give-it-to-me to a do-it-yourself nation. A get-up-and-go, instead of a sit-

back-and-wait-for-it Britain.” The responsibility for success was determinedly connected to the effort of the individual!

The belief in individualism, became embedded in media and popular culture producing two supporting philosophies. The first, popularised in the best-selling book published towards the start of the 1960's was Michael Young's 'The Rise of Meritocracy'. This work reinforced the ideas of individuality that could be traced back to the teachings of Confucius and Plato in his book 'The Republic'. If you adopt the values of meritocracy then not only is it the individual's responsibility to care for themselves but to succeed you must earn that success! The second assumption that supports neoliberalism is the concept of 'grit'! If you accept the meritocracy premise you are rewarded on merit then the message that 'determination and passion' for long-term goals was a better predictor of success than intelligence must also follow! Together, the philosophies of 'meritocracy' and 'grit' determined that any failure was because the individual just didn't deserve to succeed.

There is an assumption made that would make this reliance on the individual a successful model and that is the concept of equity. That is every member of society has the same abilities and opportunities. This unintelligent belief is embedded in the US Constitution – “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. Therefore, the inference that appeals to those in power is that if the individual fails it is their fault!

What has become clear since the adoption of this approach to all aspects of social and economic management is that, in aggregate terms things have become a great deal better; the growth of the economy has been spectacular. However, the returns from this burgeoning economy have not been shared equally.

The emergence of a new class of extremely successful individuals – I use success in this context to mean wealth. It is difficult for these successful individuals not to support the concepts of neoliberalism, their success infers they have deserved it, they are meritorious and gritty! With this wealth comes power and they use this power to perpetuate this approach to governance.

Returning to education, parallel with the rise in neo-liberalism has been the continual 'renewal' of education based on the practices all underpinned by the 'rationalist' approach. Successive reforms have been imposed on schools and individual teachers all of which demand economic efficiency, the idea we can get more for our dollars if our staff work harder and that if the teachers do work harder they will be rewarded. Of course, this concept continually re-emerges with nauseating regularity in the hoary old 'performance payments' mantra being repetitively trotted out by governments!

A cursory examination of the 'reforms' made in NSW reveals a sequence of interventions designed to make the teachers 'better'. At first the education bureaucrats introduced 'productive pedagogy' – make the lessons more efficient. Then teachers were taught 'increase their capacity', that is train them to do more. These were followed by that magical feature of efficiency, goal-setting presented under the guise of personal performance profiles where each teacher had to single out four areas where they identified their goals that would track their improvement. Of course, their efforts would be monitored. Schools were also targeted for improvement with external teams of 'support' staff to scrutinise their performance and in true competitive spirit these results were published so parents could reward those schools who played the game. These reforms did little to break the continuous slide into the prevailing chaos which is the current situation in NSW schools.

Along with the direct action of management, there has been some recognition by the department on the wellbeing of the staff and it is interesting that even associations that represent teachers have adopted this mantra by focusing their supporting activities both on improving staff capacity and looking after their wellbeing – a healthy teacher is a productive teacher.

There is plenty of advice on how to improve teacher wellbeing. Acton and Glasgow present an excellent synthesis of these theories in the [Australian Journal of Teaching Education](#). They defined it as "an individual sense of personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students". They contend that for teachers to be supported there is value in their inclusion in the decisions that influence their work. This inclusion will allow them to

better negotiate the systems that are imposed on them. They suggested the following concepts that support teachers' wellbeing:

1. Reconnect to your purpose
2. Adopt a growth mindset
3. Focus on kindness and gratitude
4. Create clear boundaries between home and school
5. Set-up effective debriefing and mentoring structures
6. Establish good sleeping habits
7. Build-up your emotional resilience
8. Keep focused on your goals

Even a cursory examination of these tips illustrates the fundamental flaw in this approach. That is, it's the teacher's responsibility to make things better!

Acton and Glasgow almost get to the same conclusion as I have when they assert, and I paraphrase, that 'the possibilities for supporting teacher wellbeing are mediated by neoliberal policy considerations.' Every piece of advice offered on this list requires the teacher to take action, that is, all change must be in the teacher's approach to their work!

The system is at breaking point, vacant positions are not being filled, graduates are turning away from education as a career and teachers are leaving in record numbers. There is a real crisis but the impediment to introducing sensible changes remains locked in the philosophy of neoliberalism and that is, if we can deal with the efficiency and the wellbeing of the existing staff the problem will go away.

After the decades of efficiency improvement and interventions to improve wellbeing it is blatantly obvious that neoliberal approaches to education have been an abject failure! Until the government takes a critical look at how they are supporting schools nothing will change.

John Frew

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