

What makes a good school?

Phil Hirst

It occurs to me, and supported by discussions with experienced serving principals, that the independence of our schools is under an ever-increasing attack based on the growing expectations of the political class. Those who know their education history can trace this interference right back to the days when Rodney Cavalier was the Minister (a Labor Minister of all things!).

This centrist interference has manifested itself in the corporate model of quantifiable outcomes. (Trust me, I know because sadly I participated in promulgating the system.)

Their hovering interference only makes the position of an educator principal and staff all the more difficult. It risks supplanting educator principals with principals of the managerial class where plans, results and reports dominate the education discourse. The effectiveness of this corporate strategy and governance can be measured by our declining performances in our PISA results. (One could even postulate that there has been an inverse relationship in our decline in PISA results with our emphasis on NAPLAN.)

This situation has given rise to a condition where the definition of what constitutes a 'good school' has been lost, not by the schools themselves, but by society in general.

Recently I uncovered my principal's report from my time at Nowra High School. In part the report argues that:

While the school has done remarkably well this year in the academic, sporting and performance fields it remains difficult to report on each of the individual successes of our students, teachers and parents because they are not obvious to the outsider. They remain with the individual and only she or he knows of their true value.

These are the 'little successes' that define the worth of a school.

It's about the individual student who improves his or her results which lifted them from the bottom of the class, or the students whose attendance and results have improved despite a difficult family background, or the student who stood up and was counted by doing what she or he knew to be right despite peer pressure to do otherwise.

It's about the teacher who settled a dispute in the classroom to everyone's advantage, or the teacher who has finally succeeded in getting the entire class to understand a particularly difficult concept. Success is about the teacher who has rewritten their report on a student three times so as to give just the right message for growth and encouragement, or the teacher who brought the excursion back with everyone safe and happy.

The little successes too for the parents/caregivers who stretched their already tight family budget so their child could go on 'that excursion'. Perhaps it's about the parent/caregiver who soothed the nerves of their child before an important exam, or most importantly the parent/caregiver who has helped their child grow from the inconsistencies of youth to bloom as an adult.

These achievements of a school cannot be defined or measured in quantifiable terms or 'first past the post', but they are none the less what make a good student, a good teacher, a good parent/caregiver, and a good school.

Unless we reflect on the importance of the whole student, the art of teaching and the obligations of parents we may lose the ability to be able to define what makes a 'good school'. Having experienced both measures over the years I have little doubt that a focus on corporate plans, measures, assessment and reporting is marginally useful at best.

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Phil was Principal of Forbes High School from 1992–1996, Principal of Nowra High School from 1996–2004 and a School Education Director from 2004–2014. He was a Deputy President of the NSWSPC from 2002–2004 and is a Life Member of the Council. Today he is semi-retired doing some work in professional development in local schools, travelling and enjoying time in Jindabyne.