

Independent Public Schools

As a developed nation, our education system is vital for our future prosperity and quality of life. It is therefore both understandable and entirely appropriate that the education of our children is an issue of major importance in which all of us should take an interest.

From debates on NAPLAN testing and the national curriculum to the MySchool website, parents spend a lot of time discussing, analysing and worrying about their children's education.

Since my eldest child started primary school I have been following the debates on our education system far more closely. Having said that, I have to admit I didn't have a great understanding of the Barnett Government's Independent Public Schools (IPS) policy when I first heard from other parents who were being asked whether their child's school should apply to become an IPS.

Several of the parents I spoke to admitted they also had only a fairly vague understanding of the policy but said that it seemed positive. It had been described to them as being about giving greater control to school communities and they mentioned the additional funding schools receive when they sign up.

My colleague, Professor Al Rainnie, and I were already undertaking some research on public service provision, so we decided to expand the scope of our project to include an analysis of the IPS policy and the impacts of similar approaches elsewhere.

Given the central importance of education, I find it concerning that there has been so little discussion and analysis of what is a very significant change to our education system.

The first point to note is that IPS is not a new policy. Victoria, the UK and the US have all advanced down this road adopting so called 'self-managing schools' policies. So we have plenty of evidence to draw upon when looking at the long term effects of such policies.

Worryingly for our education system in WA, it turns out that there are a raft of issues associated with self-managed schools and no evidence that they improve student learning outcomes overall.

Self-managed schools increase competition between schools rather than fostering cooperation, distort the roles of education staff and pave the way for privatisation. The whole process shifts the risk and the responsibility for education away from education departments and the elected Ministers who head them up to the school community - reducing democratic accountability.

By giving school principals greater control over administration, self-managed schools distort the school principal's role into that of a private company CEO. The school registrar's role is also greatly expanded as they take on a far greater workload. While some Principals and Registrars may have the relevant skills and capacity to perform these increased duties many others will not. The role of school principal shifts further away from that of an educator to that of an executive.

With increased responsibility for their own budget, there is pressure on self-managed schools to cut costs. In the US the drive to reduce running costs has resulted in the hiring of less experienced teachers, increased class sizes, pay reductions for education staff generally, and the avoidance of high-cost special education students.

A report by the UK's National Audit Office in 2010 notes that the increased competition between schools has led to a situation whereby schools compete for so-called 'value-adding' students i.e. those mostly likely to achieve good results thereby boosting the school's overall performance (and

who are the cheapest and easiest to teach); while avoiding 'negative-value' students – students with special needs or social and emotional difficulties.

In Victoria the introduction of a self-managing schools policy led to 8000 teachers being made redundant and 600 schools being either closed or amalgamated.

However the bottom line when comparing outcomes is that it is clear that self-managed schools do not improve overall student learning outcomes.

Given how similar the IPS approach is to these policies, we can see very little evidence that the development of IPS will benefit WA's children. Which begs the question, if IPS as a policy doesn't improve overall student outcomes why is the Government pursuing it with such zealously?

The answer may also lie in the experience of other states. Earlier this year a confidential Boston Consulting Group report was leaked to the Sydney Morning Herald. The then Labor NSW government had commissioned the report which recommended that to reduce costs the state should follow a self-managed schools model similar to that developed in Victoria. The move was bluntly justified not on education grounds but on budget savings. The report predicted that \$850 million could be raised if this model was followed through school closures and reduced teaching and education staff numbers. A trial was initiated involving 47 schools whose principals were told it was an opportunity for greater autonomy and flexibility but with no mention of the potential funding cutbacks.

The experiences of other self-managed schools initiatives, leaves me concerned that parents and schools in WA are being sold a con wrapped up in warm fuzzy language about greater autonomy for school communities. The education of our young people is far too important to allow governments to get away with spending cuts disguised as 'self-management'.

Dr Scott Fitzgerald is a Research Fellow at the Curtin Graduate School of Business. A report co-authored by Dr Fitzgerald with Professor Al Rainnie analysing the Independent Public Schools policy will be released tomorrow.