

Policy: School Education

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The LDP believes school regulation should be devolved to state level and funded through school vouchers that promote competition between schools and encourage parental choice.

The LDP opposes the state-federal jurisdictional duplication in education policy and believes that school funding and regulation should be decentralised and devolved to the state level.

At the state level the LDP supports the introduction of school vouchers to allow greater competition between schools and greater parental choice.

Most parents want their children to receive a sound education. Indeed, many regard it as their most important parental responsibility, to ensure their children are well equipped for life's journey. Similarly, most people agree that it would be seriously unjust for children to miss out on education simply because their family lacked the means to provide it.

When governments first began to establish schools in the late nineteenth century, they were motivated by the belief that all children should receive an education irrespective of their means, and that the education should meet certain standards. For hundreds of years before that, education had been a matter for private institutions and churches. More than a century later, the rationale for governments to remain involved in the provision of education has no validity. Indeed, both children and the community generally would be better off if the provision of education was left to others. The role of government is simply to establish a policy framework that ensures all children receive a good educational start in life.

Australia currently has a mixed education system comprising a substantial but declining government sector and a growing private sector. There is also a vast bureaucracy devoted to the administration of education. Dissatisfaction with government schools is leading to a substantial drop in their popularity. The percentage of students enrolled in non-government schools grew from 23 percent in 1980 to 33 percent in 2005. Forty percent of students attend non-government senior secondary schools. However, the ability of parents to choose a different school for their children is restricted to those wealthy enough to buy into those areas where there are successful government schools or to pay costly fees. Clearly, a more equitable solution would be to give parents on low incomes the same type of choice.

Moreover, the cost to governments is not equitably shared. Based on figures compiled by the Productivity Commission, the average recurrent cost to state and federal governments of educating a student in a government school is \$10,003 a year. The equivalent figure for a non-government school is \$5,995. This indicates poor use of taxpayer funds. Despite their higher level of government support and lower cost to parents, government schools are being deserted in droves.

The LDP supports the use of government education vouchers, usable in any school that meets minimum educational standards, to ensure the education of children. Instead of education being centrally managed and funded, with the state having monopoly control over the school system, vouchers allow the money to follow the child and, in turn, give parents the freedom to choose between government and non-government schools.

Empowering parents and giving them increased responsibility and control over educational decision-making is not only good in theory; experience in the US shows it helps to strengthen community ties and engagement. In underdeveloped places such as Puerto Rico and Colombia, voucher systems are targeted at disadvantaged communities on the basis that education represents a ladder of opportunity.

A market-based approach relies on choice and competition, with inbuilt incentives to perform, improve and change. The need to attract students provides strong incentives to meet the expectations of parents and punish mistakes. It also rewards success and provides continual pressure for improvement. Non-government schools are in a stronger position to

resist destructive experiments such as outcomes-based education, where students no longer fail and academic studies are a thing of the past. Vouchers also free schools from provider-capture, where schools are managed more for the benefit of education bureaucrats and teacher unions than for those at the local level.

A system based on incentives will also be better able to attract and keep highly qualified, motivated and committed teachers, many of whom become dispirited and leave the profession because of unreasonable and time-consuming bureaucratic obligations imposed from on high.

The way teachers are rewarded also promotes mediocrity, with little financial or professional incentive for more able teachers. Vouchers open the system to market forces that lead to a stronger incentive to raise standards by innovation and rewarding better teachers.

If, as a result of vouchers, more students attend non-government schools, that is also a good thing. The money saved can be spent on health and other services, or allow a reduction in taxes.

The role of governments should be limited to establishing a regulatory framework that ensures all children receive a proper educational start to life. This means the prevention of coercion and exploitation, the maintenance of minimum educational standards and ensuring a competitive education-provider market continues to operate.

That is a lot different from a centrally mandated and controlled state-designed curriculum, such as the bureaucracy seeks to impose currently, or the over-regulation and interference faced by government schools. It is essential that schools are not forced to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. However, it may mean having to abide by a minimum set of regulations and accountability measures, and a common curriculum in areas such as literacy and numeracy with external testing and publication of results.

The LDP supports:

- Progressive withdrawal of governments from the provision of education.
- Regular accreditation of schools based on objective standards including facilities, accountability and performance.
- Introduction of an education voucher system, with vouchers transferable between any accredited public or private school.
- Freedom by parents to choose a school for their children.
- Reducing the role of government to setting and enforcing the rules by which schools are accredited and facilitating the operation of market forces among education providers.
- Allowing failing schools to close or be taken over by better performing schools.
- Removing barriers to opening new schools.
- External literacy and numeracy testing of children, with publication of results for each student and school.
- Allowing schools to make their own decisions on staffing, curriculum design, teacher salaries, etc.
- Establishing incentives to upgrade the teaching profession through improved training, rewarding good teachers and sacking bad teachers.