

School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia

A Case of Residualising the Poor

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, government schools in Australia have been exposed to the effects of several major public policy reforms aimed at improving school performance. One is the well-documented push to *marketisation* or the re-organisation of school management around 'market' principles (see, for example, Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). Greater autonomy for schools through devolution of decision making, the introduction of school councils, a focus on school-based management, and the easing of restrictions on school catchment boundaries to enhance parental choice were all initiated with the promise of promoting more effective schools through increased competition. Another is the push to *privatisation* through increasing the levels of public funding to private providers, or what could be described as the public funding of private effort in the delivery of schooling. What is being referred to here is the role and support for private schools, rather than the notion of privatisation that is sometimes used to describe the re-organisation of government schools to promote greater competition. Arguments for the expansion in public funding for private schools focus on the 'free market' goal of ensuring diversity and choice (e.g. Nelson, 2004), and the promise of flow-on effects to school performance through increased competition. A third reform is school *rationalisation* where governments have implemented a number of restructuring strategies involving school closures and mergers, particularly of small schools. Smaller schools are viewed as less efficient with higher per capita costs and less capacity to deliver program breadth, limiting the educational opportunities available to students.

Central to the arguments behind these reforms is the view that government schools, like many state-funded services, are burdened by bureaucracy in a way that reduces productivity and output. Instead, government schools need to become more like private schools, which are treated, on this view, as models of efficiency with superior educational outcomes. School provision should operate in a framework of market demand and supply and become subject to the laws of open competition. Essential to this is not only a healthy sector of private schools, but also an active government prepared to intervene by identifying and responding to poorly performing or inefficient schools. Improvements to the quality of teaching and learning in government schools will be gained by allowing parents to choose more

freely between schools, by devolving decision making to local schools, and by ensuring a competitive private school sector which is an important source of choice and diversity.

What have been the effects of the reforms? Given their far-reaching nature and the length of time they have been in place it should be possible to assess whether or not the reforms have delivered on their promise. This chapter aims to contribute to such an evaluation by examining the impact of the reforms on the changing size and composition of schools in Melbourne (capital city of the state of Victoria with a population of 3.6 million in 2004) over the past 25 years and effects on student achievement. It does not attempt to provide a full or comprehensive assessment of the impact of the reforms in the style of systematic program evaluations. Rather it looks at the effects of the reforms on just a couple of elements: their effects on the size of government schools measured through enrolments, and the relationship between school size and student achievement.

This chapter shows that the various reforms have substantially changed the size and composition of government schools. Mean enrolments in both primary and secondary schools fell during the 1980s and grew during the 1990s, partly in response to changes in the size of the school-age population. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following closures and mergers initiated by government, the number of schools fell sharply and mean enrolments rose correspondingly. But the experiences in schools over the whole period varied by social intake. One of main effects of market reforms was to accelerate the growth of middle and high socioeconomic status (SES) government schools which swelled in student numbers under the weight of unregulated demand. At the same time, schools serving low SES areas tended to wither and decay, shedding numbers at a vast rate.

The importance of changes in enrolments is linked in part to a relationship between school size and student achievement. Regression analysis shows that in 1994, when schools were closer in size irrespective of social intake, student achievement was weaker in smaller secondary schools and school size exerted independent effects on student achievement. This was true of small government schools serving high SES communities as well as those serving low SES areas. By 2004, school size had become so associated with social intake that it no longer exerted an effect independent of SES. This does not mean that school size is no longer linked to student achievement. On the contrary, it is likely that the relationship between school size and student achievement remained strong or even intensified. What changed is that the majority of small schools increasingly were those serving low SES communities, thanks to the effects of market reforms. In Melbourne, school size has become an attribute of SES and indistinguishable from it.

At the end of 25 years of reform, schools in the poorer areas of Melbourne had become residualised and were a shadow of their former selves. They had become 'sink' schools, denuded of student numbers and resources, and, thanks to these changes, repositories of academic failure.

The rest of the chapter is organised in the following way. It begins by outlining some of the features and timing of the main policies associated with the adoption of the three areas of reform. The following section looks at the effects of the reforms,