

Education and Health Standing Committee
Inquiry into the Department of Education's Independent Public Schools Initiative

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Over the last five years, with the above colleagues at Curtin University and the University of Sydney, I have examined the changes associated with the Independent Public Schools policy initiative in Western Australia. This research has in part involved comparative policy analysis which has placed the IPS initiative within a broader history of attempts by governments to devolve responsibility and decision making through the establishment of local school 'autonomy' or 'self-managing schools'. Despite a very mixed record of effects, school autonomy has been embraced widely by western nations, including British 'Academy' schools, USA 'Charter' schools, and a surge of 'independent' schools, such as in Sweden. In Australia, such government devolution policies have included *Better Schools* in Western Australia (1987) *Schools Renewal* in New South Wales (1989) and *Schools of the Future* in Victoria (1993). For all the initial discussion of the novelty of the IPS policy, and all its focus on community and school empowerment as opposed to choice, competition and efficiency, the IPS initiative is part of this broader reform agenda to transform public education. In reviewing this experience of the push towards self-managing schools within Australia and internationally we found that what occurs through such policies is a shift of risk to families and an abrogation of responsibility on behalf of government to operate and fund an inclusive and equitable public education system (Fitzgerald and Rainnie 2011; Fitzgerald and Rainnie 2012). As I note below, research has consistently shown, at best, a very tenuous link between school autonomy and improved student outcomes across public education systems.

In researching these autonomy initiatives it is clear that there are differences in policy and practice in the emphasis placed on decision-making and responsibility regarding staffing, budgeting, student policies and curriculum and assessment matters. It is the first two dimensions that have been the centre of the current IPS initiative. As one high school principal remarked to us:

the agenda at the moment is around devolution, and that word devolution has become a big word since about 1986 in Western Australia with the release of the *Better Schools* document; now the promise of devolution has been that educational decisions about education for kids would be made closer to those particular kids and communities. To a large extent what devolution has led to, is devolution of administrative tasks and less devolution of educational responsibility. So for example, decisions around reporting, curriculum, assessment - all of those things that we're supposed to be expert in - are more generally taken centrally. Decisions around spending money, allocation of staff, timetables - which are administrative types of questions - they're certainly things that we've got more responsibility for.

During 2014-15 we conducted 28 interviews with principals and teachers at primary and secondary schools in regional and metropolitan WA. Three additional interviews were undertaken with stakeholders in the sector. These were part of a pilot project to examine the effects of this form of school autonomy in a large and dispersed education system like Western Australia, which already faced challenges in achieving equity. As well as increased stress, the pilot study highlighted often conflicted responses of teachers and principals regarding the effects and complexity of the changes taking place – an outcome that makes further research imperative. While often broadly supporting decision-making empowerment, respondents suggested that the current changes, which shift hiring, payroll, budgeting and workplace health and safety from existing systems to individual schools and reduced forms of education department support, escalate teacher/principal workloads, hugely increase the administrative load they bear and augment peripheral demands that diminish teachers' and principals' capacity to facilitate and lead learning. Given these findings, this parliamentary inquiry provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the IPS initiative. The following comments address some the terms of reference of the inquiry that directly connect with our current research findings. If the promoted potential of the IPS initiative is to be achieved, and for it to act as a 'trigger mechanism' for better school outcomes and better school experiences for all students, the issues raised by the interviewees in our research will need to be fully addressed.

The implementation of the initiative, including support provided to schools transitioning to become Independent Public Schools and the use of Delivery and Performance Agreements.

Since the IPS initiative commenced in 2009 with 34 schools, it has expanded through a number of intakes, each with a larger number of schools than the last. When it was launched, the Education Minister, Liz Constable noted that one day she hoped to see the initiative extend to all public schools; in 2014 the new Education minister Peter Collier introduced a new \$18.2 million development and transition program which would help more schools prepare to become eligible for IPS and this led to a record intake of IPS 178 schools in 2015. Today there are 445 IPS schools out of 830 public schools in WA or over 53%; however these schools represent approximately 70% of students and teaching staff. Financial support for these schools has not significantly increased and, as in 2010, today IPS schools receive between \$20,000 and \$40,000 for set-up costs and an increase of between \$25,000 and \$50,000 in recurring funding. Interview respondents in our research noted that this figure was often not commensurate with additional administrative burden they have encountered (see below). Some respondents noted that in part the attraction of IPS status was the ability to

avoid the increased staffing pressure that would face schools that did not transition to the IPS program.

The risks posed by the piecemeal, yet inevitable, approach to devolution was noted by the WA Auditor General in 2011 when only 98 schools were IPS. The Auditor-General noted that the ability of IPS principals to select their own staff instead of leaving it to “central office”, could result in unfilled vacancies and “uncompetitive” schools and in effect reinforce a two-tiered system where students in “better schools” get the best teachers:

IPSs have a number of perceived advantages in the open market that could result in a concentration of particular types of teachers in those schools, while other schools find it difficult to attract diverse or high quality teachers. There is the concern that some schools attract and retain the ‘best’ teachers, and that these schools are often good candidates for IPS status (WA Auditor General 2011:22).

The Auditor-General noted the Education Department had not put adequate measures in place to respond to the risks generated by the new system and “if they just let the market decide, then some teachers and some schools may miss out” (Hiatt & Parker 2011:9). Though conceding more recruitment training may be required, Liz Constable had argued that the problem of teacher recruitment was endemic and not exacerbated by the new policy. Yet extending devolution posed the risk of further fragmentation of HR coordination, the “residualisation” (Lamb 2007) of hard-to-staff schools and a deepening of the geographies of marginalisation within the state.

Some of key differences between the 389 non-IPS public schools and those selected for the initiative have since been reduced. One difference is in regards to staff selection and recruitment, and I will address that issue further below. Another issue is the introduction of the one-line budget that was extended to all schools in 2015 and which, according to the Department, has given principals “more flexibility to determine how the funding is used to benefit students”. In 2014 an IPS principal interviewee expressed concern about how they would manage the one-line budget:

One of the biggest learning curves for us as IPS has been the financial budgetary resourcing...That’s probably the biggest impact as a principal, and luckily I’ve got a good business manager but it’s been very challenging – very very challenging.

By 2015 these challenges of managing a one-line budget had increased significantly as ongoing effective cuts in the education budget coincided with the introduction of the new Student Centred Funding Model (SCFM). Some interviewed principals saw the one-line budget as a mechanism through which they could respond to the challenge:

the one-line budget ... was something for IPS but now everyone’s got it in WA. And I know some people are struggling. For us, we lost a huge amount of money in the transition into it...We were one of the worst schools in the state affected. Yeah so it was interesting in that regards. But in some ways though, having the flexibility in the funding coming in, instead of being on a really small budget, it’s also freed us up to say okay we can maybe save on that, we cannot use – this person’s going on long service leave, let’s not take – we don’t need to replace that one at this stage and they’re only going for a short time. So we’ve

made savings here and there. It's really about I'll jump in here, and I'll put a bit here, and I'll take a bit here. But you've got to know how to play the game I suppose and if you don't I think you end up in a bit of a mess to be honest.

Other respondents reacted more negatively and objected to their 'devolved responsibility' to 'make ends meet' and manage a reduced budget at a school level by making tough decisions about cutting programs, engineering staff leave arrangements, and not renewing educational assistant positions. Other interviewees commented on the narrow focus that was seen to be engendered by the new funding arrangements:

This is my patch and a number of people don't give a stuff about the system. And I think if we don't think about our system then all schools get damaged but it's nothing beyond their fence. And there's a lot of novelty in being a cowboy and moving the money around and thinking you are a business person you know.

The majority of interview respondents made reference to the effective budget cuts that had been introduced since 2013 and a common theme was the challenges produced by the SCFM and one-line budget. However, it is important to note that while funding increases and training initiatives have been extended to IPS schools, respondents in non-IPS school claimed that the same level of support was not provided to their schools despite system-wide effects of changes to budget and staffing arrangements. Given that a central objective of a public education system is to provide equity of opportunity to all children, the provision of less support funding and less professional development to 47% of schools is highly questionable and will lead to a greater level of residualisation of hard-to-staff schools and a reinforcement of the geographies of marginalisation within the state.

The ongoing role of the Department of Education, and other agencies, supporting Independent Public Schools.

The IPS program foregrounds, in particular, the role of highly competent and skilled principals to lead educational innovation and improvement. What is not as clear is that the IPS program has been associated with the reduction of support from central and district office staff.

Interview respondents noted the initial training and support that was given to the first round of principals to apply for their school to move to the IPS role. The Department has introduced some headline training initiatives such the Independent Public School Principals' Fellowship Program for 40 IPS principals out of 445 during 2016-2018. There are reports that all IPS principals will be put through a two-month "advanced leadership" course which will include four days of face-to-face training. Such advanced leadership training does not appear to be available to approximately 47% of public schools that are not IPS, even though the Department claims that staffing and budgetary autonomy is now available to all public schools.

Notwithstanding this training, interviewees noted the dramatic reduction of support from the Department of Education's central and district offices. Since 2009 14 district offices, which had directorial control, have been replaced by 8 guiding regional offices and the number of staff have been reduced from 662 to 150 (WA Auditor General 2015). Hundreds of staff

positions have been eliminated at central office, as responsibility is increasingly devolved to individual schools.

Discussing these changes as part of our research, WA Primary Principals' Association president, Stephen Breen said

I've come to conclusion, nothing has changed except the district office and the central office have been decimated because of a \$180 million have been taken out of recurrent funding in 2013/14. All of those duties, all of those accountabilities have been handballed to the principal, delegation to the principal, that's the problem.

School leaders have reported massive escalation of workload and growing complexity of their roles. One high school principal noted that

I'm a curriculum-based person and I don't get enough time to get out there and be with my staff and my students and that bit I miss... It's become much harder because there is so much required of you in a sort of a – it's almost like I suppose like a CEO kind of role more than a principal's role...it's become so complex and even the principals at the moment are trying to get a grasp on what is it that they do, what needs to happen.

Breen has noted publicly that fewer people are prepared to take on the increasingly complex workload of principal and as such schools are struggling to fill advertised principals' jobs even in some of the more desirable, so-called leafy green suburbs. Ron Bamford, president of the Australian Principals Federation (APF) Western Australia branch, has made the radical suggestion that a separate 'CEO-like role' be established in schools to reduce principals' responsibility for rising administrative workloads as the rate of change and performance expectations associated with school autonomy mount.

In reflecting on recent changes, another one of our principal interviewees stated that the

structures have fallen away. So that's another result of this model of autonomy. I think the formula is autonomy equals abandonment. That's a Victorian model and that's coming to [W.A.]... now. And I think teachers are abandoned because no one knows really what the principal is doing".

Teachers interviewed also noted the effects of the reduction in support from the Department of Education:

So I think that the whole IPS, independent school situation has been a good thing, but I think that there has been a lack of real understanding from all the schools as to the true extent of what that was going to involve, as all those functions were devolved from a central or regional kind of context, that absolute weight of what now has to be done at school has just been, I think, completely undersold and completely misunderstood by the vast majority of people...

A teacher at another school remarked,

I think that there is a gap between the Department's responsibility to their staff, and I think they put their staff under a huge amount of pressure to perform at this level all the time, and there's not been a consideration, I don't believe, in terms of staff wellbeing. The department is our employer and has a responsibility to us also... it's been a huge way of devolving and maybe cutting back in certain areas. But if the work needed to be done, you can't just take it away from a central office and expect the people who are already busy in schools to just absorb that workload and get it done. And that's precisely what really has happened.

The impact on the engagement and performance of students, in particular those with additional needs.

A central claim of the IPS that increased student achievement is associated with higher levels of school autonomy. Yet there is no clear evidence that the IPS program has led to an improvement in the performance of students' performance, a point noted in the evaluation of the program by the Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) at the University of Melbourne. While it may be too early to assess its impact on student performance, a review of international research shows that there is not a straightforward connection between school autonomy and student outcomes; indeed there remains a high level of contention regarding both the meaning and purposes of school autonomy (Hanushek, Link, and Wößmann 2013) and its effects. Analysis of international student achievement (PISA) data from 2000-2009 notes that in high income countries "the autonomy effects are most pronounced in decision-making on academic content with some additional relevance for personnel autonomy and, less so, for budgetary autonomy" (Hanushek, Link, and Wößmann 2013: 227). A recent OECD report using 2012 PISA data found emphatically that greater school autonomy in curriculum and assessment, (learning and teaching), tends to improve student outcomes, but greater school autonomy in budgeting and staffing (the organisation and management work) has little to no effect. The OECD concludes that greater responsibility in managing resources at the school level "appears to be unrelated to a school system's overall performance" (OECD, 2013:52).

Yet this is the form of autonomy being implemented in Western Australia. The record of such initiatives in Australia is further called into question by the fact that NSW, the State public education system with the least autonomy, has achieved NAPLAN and PISA literacy and numeracy outcomes equivalent to, or higher than, Victoria which implemented school autonomy policies from the early 1990s (Jensen 2013). Brian Caldwell (2015), a strong advocate of autonomy and self-managing schools, acknowledges there is little direct evidence yet argues that autonomy initiatives can act as a 'triggering mechanism' for improved school achievement. However, he suggests that autonomy may not lead to improved school performance if educational leadership (support for the best learning and teaching practices) and devolved management capacities (around staffing and budget) are not developed, aligned and utilised over time.

Critics of autonomy initiatives argue that they often undermine the coherence between management and leadership (for example Connell , 2009; Smyth 2003) and weaken the 'culture of collaboration between teachers and principals' which the OECD (2013: 53) argues is crucial to improvements in student achievement. It is important to note that many respondents in the research conducted thus far were enthusiastic about the promise of greater autonomy for decisions that would benefit students and communities. Yet they pointed to

budget, management and workload issues that aligned with the findings previously detailed in the significant body of literature that has critiqued the school autonomy reform agenda (for a review see Fitzgerald et al 2015; McGrath -Champ et al 2015; Gavin and McGrath-Champ 2016).

The impact of Independent Public Schools on staffing arrangements.

Teachers we interviewed at IPS schools remarked upon their experience of a significant increase in workloads and pressure to improve outcomes, often without due regard to the socio-economic background of the students:

the pressure of performance management, the pressure of dealing with disruptive unruly kids, unmotivated kids if you happen to be in one of those not so leafy green schools, is huge. The pressure to perform, the pressure to produce results, the pressure for improvement is enormous and the constant meetings and accountability and tick-a-boxing rather than the action is taking, taking a lot of time to do a lot of, a lot of stuff that normally you'd spend all your energy on, on your students with.

Just higher levels of accountability generally across all elements of teaching now, which ranges all the way from the classroom teacher all the way through to principals and beyond. Lots and lots and lots of extra checks and balances that have been placed in and along the way.

There's been a high shift into training, like there's a lot of pressure for staff to upskill, upskill, upskill, and be doing a lot of PD around various elements obviously to cater for individual needs of students. But that creates a pressure in itself... you go off and do a day's training here, a day's training there, but there's an immediate assumption that that's implemented straight away.

However there is a broader impact of Independent Public Schools on staffing arrangements. As noted, an explicit policy agenda of moving towards greater school autonomy has existed in Western Australia since the Burke Government's *Better Schools in Western Australia: A Program for Improvement* (1987) initiative. Scholars that have examined the history of this agenda, such as UWA's Associate Professor Martin Forsey (2009), have argued that one central reason why neither side of politics in WA had previously attempted to fully implement the extent of devolution proposed in the Better Schools document was Western Australia's geography: the vast size of the state made the goal of autonomous schools incompatible with the pragmatic realities of running an education system with any semblance of commitment to equity. Spread over more than 2.5 million square kilometres, Western Australian is one of the most geographically dispersed education districts in the world. Although the vast majority of the state's quarter of a million public school students are located in Perth's metropolitan schools, the size of the state has required a highly centralised staffing system that can transfer teachers anywhere in the State and which makes permanent employment contingent upon teaching in a rural and remote schools for an extended period of

time. Through this system, teachers who agreed to teach in remote or hard-to-staff locations could accumulate transfer points to guarantee them priority when applying for a city school.

This method of ensuring that hard-to-staff schools have sufficient teachers produces its own geographies of marginalisation, with inexperienced staff sent to remote locations whilst more experienced teachers are offered permanent placement in Perth. While it is fair to surmise that the majority of teachers seek a position in the city at some stage of their career, higher socio-economic metropolitan schools are able to attract the more capable teachers, reinforcing these students pre-existing educational advantage. Reviewing the moves to greater school autonomy, Forsey (2009: 462) was adamant that “this reality creates forms of systemic inertia demanding reform but simultaneously makes such reforms difficult to achieve”. Even when they have retained strong central control over staffing, the Education Department has struggled to adequately meet the staffing needs of schools located in rural and remote areas: “The problems would become almost intractable if control of employment of staff was devolved to individual school principals... it seems politically impossible for administrators to give free reign to what they might otherwise think of as eminently sensible policy” (Forsey (2009:465-466).

This reality of the Western Australian public education system is still shaping the implementation of school autonomy programs today. The way staffing is currently managed in across the system runs the risk of reinforcing a two-tiered public education system and reinforcing inequity. The Department argues that the differences in staffing process between IPS and non-IPS schools has now largely been removed because now “every principal can recruit, select and appoint their own staff” rather than being provided with staff through a centralised staffing process. Yet non-IPS public schools, which account for 30% of teaching positions, are still required to accept transfers and redeployed staff. Given that many non-IPS schools are located in small regional towns this means that in reality they have little staff selection opportunities. Some of the respondents we interviewed in relatively small regional non-IPS schools expressed a high level of despondency that the IPS system was only increasing the challenges they faced. When asked if it was likely that the Department would move to reduce the distinction between school types in the WA public education system, one interview responded “yeah possibly but the problem that I can see at the moment is that they still need the non-IPS to place certain staff”. To ensure that equity in the system is not further reduced, this issue of staffing needs to be more adequately addressed. It is clear from the responses of the interviewees that there is a need for the Department of Education, and ultimately the Government, to provide better support across the public education system if the IPS initiative is to improve the opportunities of all students in the WA.

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