8. Collaboration in education¹

Rachel Hunter

Australia's education and training system is founded on multiple models of collaboration. In Queensland, we collaborate with three school sectors (state, Catholic and independent), three education sectors (schools, vocational education and training and higher education), seven other states and territories, the Commonwealth Government, innumerable statutory authorities, local government, communities, parents, students, industry and, importantly, our workforce and their industrial representatives.

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) was formed in September 2006 and is Queensland's largest government agency. DETA employs more than 62 000 full-time staff and supports almost one million students in state and non-state schools and in the Queensland technical and further education (TAFE) system. We are directly responsible for the funding, operations and performance of more than 1250 state schools and support a further 460 non-state schools with financial assistance, educational partnerships and a framework of regulation and quality assurance.

Our vision is for a smart, skilled and creative Queensland—a goal that is shared by our many collaborative partners. The African proverb 'It takes a village to educate a child' succinctly sums up our philosophy. Education is a shared responsibility and partnerships within our education and training systems and beyond are crucial. Without collaboration, our schools and training institutions cannot hope to meet the human and social capital needs of a modern and prosperous state and ensure that the social and economic benefits of education and training are shared more equally than is currently the case.

How we collaborate is also important. Here I examine collaboration within and across governments, particularly the nexus between education policy and funding in the federalist model in which we operate.

Human and social capital

Around the world, there is a growing research and policy consensus that investment in education and skills is critical to a nation's future prosperity and social wellbeing. Many developed nations are facing the challenge of sustaining and increasing productivity without the benefits of large-scale population growth and in the face of an ageing workforce. Our capacity to compete in the global knowledge economy depends on the strength of our response to this human-capital challenge.

In Queensland, the tightest labour market in years means that young people are finding employment readily available and in the short term more attractive as an alternative to education. The labour-market participation rate of Queensland's young people aged 15–17 years is almost 60 per cent, compared with about 46 per cent for the rest of Australia.² This can be explained partly by Queensland's larger than average share of youth working part-time in retail, tourism and hospitality. The additional job opportunities due to the strength of the economy are placing pressure on retention rates, as students weigh up the costs of continuing schooling or gaining readily available employment.

Despite the current strength of the labour market, seldom has the need to invest in education and skills been more crucial, to remain competitive with the booming economies of our Asian neighbours, which are investing more and more in education and skills development.

In Queensland, we are looking to innovative collaborations between the public and private sectors to help us meet the skills demands of a productive economy. One example is the Aerospace Project, involving Education Queensland, Boeing Australia, Aviation Australia, Australian Aerospace, Smiths Aerospace and the Brisbane Airport Corporation. Developed at the aerospace industry's request, the initial project started in 2004 with joint funding from Boeing, which contributed \$600 000, and the Queensland Government, with a \$300 000 investment. The project now involves 17 'gateway' schools—state and non-state—which incorporate aerospace into their regular subjects. Boeing offers up to 12 traineeships and 30 work-experience placements to gateway students annually. Ten students each year will be offered direct entry into new double-major bachelor degree programs at the University of Queensland in electrical, mechanical or software-system engineering coupled with aerospace engineering. Additionally, the new Aviation High, a former gateway school, was officially launched in 2007. It offers specialist aviation education and training to students in Years 8 to 12, providing them with a direct path to careers in the aviation industry.

Equity

Collaborative projects of this kind are designed to best match the skills of the state's young people with industry needs. Across Queensland, teachers, leaders, schools, students and parents contribute every day to the achievement of outstanding educational performance and to the current strength of the Queensland economy. The benefits of education are, however, not being realised to their fullest extent, and are not being shared equally.

Despite the fact that Queensland students perform well on average when benchmarked internationally, Queensland has persistent inequalities in achievement for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. National research

shows high levels of social exclusion for school-age young children in Queensland. Of the 10 per cent of the most disadvantaged children in Australia, it is estimated that half live in Queensland (NATSEM 2006).

One of the key lessons we have learnt is that collaboration between agencies can make a difference to individual lives. An exemplary case is that of a nine-year-old Indigenous boy—a victim of abandonment, sexual abuse and domestic violence. He was receiving one-to-one care and was isolated because of his history of dangerous and unpredictable behaviour. Obviously, he faced very substantial barriers to education. Thanks to a committed, flexible, multidisciplinary team of caring professionals, the child's situation is changing. Professionals from the Department of Child Safety, the Department of Disability Services Queensland, Queensland Health and DETA joined forces to provide emotional, therapeutic and educational support to meet the complex needs of the child. Led by DETA, together these dedicated professionals have helped support the boy to successfully join the regular Year 4 program three mornings a week. This is a positive example of collaboration between government agencies at the state level, but one that illustrates the intensity of effort and resources required to make a positive difference to one child's life.

The reality is that disadvantaged students are often over-represented in state schools, as well as geographically concentrated in remote and rural areas. In the provision of education services to students with disabilities, Indigenous students and students in remote and rural areas, it is state schools that bear the majority of responsibilities and the higher associated costs.³ When you take into account recent research that suggests that density of disadvantage at the school level is a significant contributor to poor outcomes, the consequences of this stratification of students begin to look even more significant (Holmes-Smith 2006).

The current state of stratification is at least partly attributable to a deliberate policy on the part of the Federal Government to subsidise school choice, understood simply as a choice between government and non-government schools. For example, in Queensland, the state government provides 91 per cent of the public funding for Queensland state schools and the Federal Government provides 9 per cent. For Queensland non-state schools, the Federal Government provides 70 per cent of the public funding and the Queensland Government provides 30 per cent.⁴

This federal funding regime has as its first principle who owns the schools, rather than what the students need. In a sustained period, the impact has been to divide the school sectors and feed the increasing stratification of government and non-government schools. An education system thus divided in its responsibilities for students in need operates in nobody's interests. It is wastefully inefficient, creates diseconomies of scale, encourages false forms of competition

and prevents all schools from contributing fully to the creation of human and social capital.

American social theorist Robert Putnam (2004) has addressed the social purposes of schooling and the role of schools in forging social capital and social cohesion. He describes two forms of social capital that schools help create: bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding capital refers to connections between like social groups, while bridging capital is the development of connections between different social groups. Following Putnam, Barry McGaw (2006) has used these concepts to consider the current state of schooling in Australia. Schools that emphasise accessibility, inclusion and collaboration must create bonding and bridging capital in order to be successful.

Continuing to divide schools through funding regimes that inadequately reflect student need, enrolment practices that produce concentrations of disadvantage and competing regulatory and policy regimes at different levels of government can create strong forms of bonding capital within some schools, but will not contribute to the creation of bridging capital.

The cost of losing that opportunity will be felt in the performance of all our schools and in the entrenched educational, socioeconomic and geographical disadvantage that it will continue to create in sections of the student cohort. If we are to ensure that schools contribute fully to the development of human and social capital, every school must be expected—and resourced—to provide high-quality education for each of their students.

A new federalism

To meet this challenge will require genuine collaboration between both levels of government that regulate and financially support our schools. It will require a new federalism. As John Wanna (2007) suggests, early federalism was not premised on collaboration between different levels of government, but instead on a notion of separate responsibilities. This notion has been steadily eroded since Federation. School education, for example, is constitutionally a residual power of the states, but is an area in which federal intervention has increased in the past 50 years.

This constitutional legacy has converged in recent times with a historical anomaly that has seen Labor governments in all the states and territories, and the Coalition in power in Canberra. Together, these factors exacerbate the inherent structural tensions within our federation.

It is a matter of constitutional design, rather than a deliberate policy choice of any of our current governments, that the Commonwealth has the majority of revenue-raising capabilities and the states have the responsibilities for the majority of service delivery. In the current expression of vertical fiscal imbalance within education policy, however, we see the creation of a set of conditions that

militates against collaboration in ways that are fundamentally detrimental to the creation of human and social capital in our schools.

The current dysfunction of school funding is not a matter of constitutional inevitability. The current funding and policy regimes foster the stratification of our school education system and limit positive collaboration between schools and between different levels of government.

The hard work required to make a difference for every individual child must not be confined primarily to government schools and should not be compounded by unproductive interference in the day-to-day operations of schools.

All funding provided by the Commonwealth is attached to accountability requirements that are alike for state and non-state schools. The scope of policy emanating from the federal education department has been reduced through these requirements to a series of mundane and ad hoc minutiae, such as whether every school has a regulation flagpole, displays a values poster or tests all students in a certain way at the end of Year 12.

Equally frustrating are the recent exhortations that schools should begin a dialogue with businesses. This ignores the depth of the current engagement with industry, such as I have described above in relation to Aviation High. While I accept that it is not possible to have at one's fingertips a detailed understanding of the rich tapestry of school education as it is provided across Australia, this is precisely my point. The prescriptive nature of the Commonwealth's policymaking is out of step with its knowledge of our landscape. We would prefer the Commonwealth was more aware and less prescriptive.

To borrow Wanna's words, this is a form of coercive federalism that is divorced from the lessons of day-to-day service provision, lacks the capacity to implement reforms directly and does not foster the conditions for innovation in our schools. It is a basic tenet of governance that service delivery should take place at the local level—that those closest to the ground should carry out the function, within broader policy settings that are dictated by systemic needs and priorities. The Commonwealth is ill suited to the role of micro-manager.

If we could start afresh, what roles would we assign the Commonwealth Government, and what roles would we assign the states?

We acknowledge that the Commonwealth has a broader interest in education beyond the provision of specific-purpose payments. This includes, for example, advocacy of national consistency, where appropriate. Queensland supports national consistency, where it can be shown to be in the best interests of students, parents and schools.

The states and the Commonwealth need to be able to influence and support the whole of the education sector in the service of local and national economic and social priorities. When, however, the leadership and vision that should be the

role of the Commonwealth reduces to evaluating an external exam or offering prizes to teachers and students, the role of the Australian Government has been diminished.

The Commonwealth rightly seeks to exert influence over the largest provider of school education services, which remains the government school system in all states and territories. At the same time, the states are rightly wary of the stratification of schools and the imbalance in the funding regimes that serve to limit the states' capacity to influence the whole of the education sector in a time when productivity experts are telling us that it is most crucial to exert this leverage.

The Commonwealth could instead use its investment in schooling to direct the broad policy settings at the national level, in genuine collaboration with the states and territories. This would avoid the duplication of state efforts, as recently seen, for example, in the Commonwealth budget initiatives that sought to reward teacher performance by the provision of summer schools and individual incentives, or in the expansion of the \$700 voucher program to address literacy and numeracy needs. Instead, we should aim to harness the collective power of Commonwealth and state resources to address these issues comprehensively.

One fruitful area in which a more collaborative partnership could begin is in relation to school funding. The Commonwealth and states could work together to design funding models for schooling that do not compromise the principle of school choice, that recognise and support differences and innovations in schools and that regulate and encourage quality in meaningful ways across sectors and systems. Above all, these new collaborative approaches could help to support all schools to provide high-quality education services and teaching to overcome disadvantage.

In the scale of collaboration that Wanna describes in his chapter of this volume, this is at the highest level and involves the highest risks. The work on the future of schooling being done by the states and territories through the newly formed Council for the Australian Federation provides a starting point for a much-needed debate with the Federal Government and with key stakeholders about the roles of respective levels of government within a federal model in charting the future of schooling.

I conclude with an invitation and an exhortation of my own. We welcome the challenge of a new federalism and the opportunity it brings to engage in high-risk but meaningful, transformative collaboration. We are passionate about the potential of creating and sustaining an education system that underpins national prosperity and has at its heart a belief in equity and a commitment to improving lives. To do so, we must dispense with recriminations and act for the sake of all students, no matter which schools they attend.

References

- Holmes-Smith, Phillip 2006, *School Socio-Economic Density and its Effect on School Performance*, NSW Department of Education and Training.
- McGaw, Barry 2006, 'Achieving quality and equity in education', Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), 3 August.
- National Centre for Social and Economic Monitoring (NATSEM) 2006, *Indicators of Social Exclusion for Australia's Children: An analysis by state and age group*, <http://www.natsem.canberra.edu.au/publications/papers/cps/cp06/cp2006_007/cp2006_007.pdf>
- Putnam, Robert 2004, Education, diversity, social cohesion and 'social capital', Meeting of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Education Ministers, 18–19 March.
- Wanna, John 2007, 'Governing Through Collaboration: Managing better through others', paper presented at the Australia New Zealand School of Government Annual Conference, *Governing through Collaboration: managing better through others*, held at the Hyatt Hotel Canberra, 28 and 29 June, 2007. A revised version of this paper is reproduced as Chapter 1 in this volume, 'Collaborative government: meanings, dimensions, drivers and outcomes'.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This chapter was presented as a conference paper in June 2007 and, since that time, there have been some significant shifts in the landscape of Commonwealth–state relations in the area of collaboration in education, including through the Council of Australian Governments. While the chapter does not reflect these developments, the key messages are still relevant.
- ² Unpublished Australian Bureau of Statistics labour-force data; DETA Labour Market Research Unit.
- ³ *Report on Government Services* 2007, School Education, Attachment 3, various tables.
- ⁴ *Report on Government Services* 2007, Table 3A.9, Real Australian, State and Territory Government Recurrent Expenditure, 2004–05 figures.