

Comprehensive government high school

Australia, 1950-2010

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This entry posted February 22, 2014.

The idea that a secondary school could include all youth in a community or neighbourhood, regardless of their social circumstances, belongs to the twentieth century. By the 1970s such comprehensive schools educated a majority of Australian 12-17 year-old youth, but the size of the majority has been in a steady, though slow decline, from the 1980s.

The comprehensive idea had to overcome at least three arguments against it. Many resisted the idea that it was both desirable and possible to construct an institution that would offer a mainly common secondary curriculum to all youth, whether they be boys or girls, Protestants or Catholics, clever or dull, middle or working class, or Anglo-Australian or other ethnic or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The argument never persuaded some twenty percent of parents even in the 1960s and 1970s, when the popularity of this form of schooling was at its height. The other argument against it occurred mainly within the public school systems. Many believed that working class boys, 'good with their hands', should be in technical schools, or really clever children from all classes should be in academically selective high schools. Comprehensive schools were often seen as a threat to those who believed in **differentiated schooling**. Another and related argument was that common secondary schooling for all would lead to a drop in educational standards.

Defining 'comprehensive'

Comprehensive schools are adaptive institutions. It is likely none meet all the conditions of the different definitions that abound in the international literature, nevertheless it is likely that a school wishing to define itself as comprehensive needs to satisfy the following conditions to a substantial degree:

- a. the school admits all children of a certain age range especially from its local community or neighbourhood, and
- b. the school provides a curriculum suiting the range of their interests and abilities.

If these two conditions are substantially met, then in Australia, the comprehensive high school is almost certainly a government school.

Nongovernment schools may provide 'comprehensive' curricula, but they target enrolments from certain groups. The groups may include adherents of a certain church or religion, or those able to pay fees or win scholarships. Schools, including some public schools, may enrol students on grounds that include students' cleverness or abilities, their gender, their likely or actual compliance with school behaviour codes, their ethno-cultural backgrounds, and so on. Schools that are

involved in such selections have enrolment practices that are 'exclusive'. Comprehensive schools are formally 'inclusive'. As discussed below, that does not necessarily mean that the students of a comprehensive high school will be fully representative of the range of families in its district.

Origins of the Australian comprehensive high school

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century progressive and New Education ideas had their impact first on infant and primary education. Reform in public secondary school systems often involved the development of different sets of schools to cater for the diverse groups of students entering them as leaving ages move upward. In New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia decisions were made in the 1910-1930 period to solve the problem of educating 12-15 year olds with **differentiated government schools**. It was a commonplace idea that students, clever and not-so-clever, boys and girls, the 'good with their hands' as opposed to the 'good with their brains', and those apparently bound for different sectors of the labour market needed different schools, or curricula within schools.

In the process, commercial, technical, agricultural, central, domestic science and other, mainly junior secondary schools were founded by governments, usually in the well-populated capital cities. For the time being, the high schools that oriented themselves to the public examinations provided by the state universities, were justified as being that group of differentiated schools that catered to that segment of the student population designated 'the clever'. (On these schools see **Public high schools, the foundations**.)

This institutional solution to the problems arising from universal secondary schooling developed a number of problems, most of which came to the forefront in the post-World War II period, but the first of them predated the war.

Problem 1

Most rural towns were too small to support a range of separate and differentiated secondary schools. Most were too small to support single schools that were multilateral in character (that is housing separate courses, for example, general-academic, technical, domestic science or agricultural courses). Most rural towns could not support schools that educated much beyond the leaving age marking the end of compulsory schooling. Different forms of post-primary schools emerged as a result. They were variably named in different Australian states, for example, as 'central', 'area', 'district' and 'higher elementary' schools. Many students in families in the outer suburbs of the capital cities as well as rural areas needed to travel long distances in order to access suitable secondary education.

Problem 2

This was a post-World War II problem, caused by the 'baby boom' and the difficulties state governments and education departments had in providing a range of services, including schools, to the hundreds of new housing estates pushing out from the older pre-war city boundaries. In Sydney for example, the new secondary high schools in

the new suburbs tended to be comprehensive or multilateral in character. Families that required a junior boys or girls technical or selective school would need to put their children on the train. Demographic pressure and the associated government budget crises of the 1950s and 1960s were as significant a pressure towards the government comprehensive high school as any. This was still in the period that the federal government accepted almost no responsibility for funding school education.

Problem 3

The 1950s and 1960s were periods of low unemployment. The labour market saw increasing employment opportunities in the 'white collar', semi-professional and professional sectors. Employers in these sectors were likely to require public examination credentials. The Intermediate and Leaving certificates became increasingly important. As the Australian universities began their post-war expansion they also sought well qualified school matriculants. The demand could not be met by the old selective or academic high schools of the inner cities and larger rural towns. New high schools in the middle and outer suburbs were needed to provide opportunities for public examination success and their resulting credentials. A new high school that was multilateral could do some of the work, but the more likely means of managing the demand was through **streaming**, based on intelligence testing in comprehensive schools. As in England initial enthusiasm for comprehensive schools was as much about meeting family aspirations, 'grammar schooling for all!' as opposed to the provision of comprehensive curricula for all.

Problem 4

A social critique developed in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the cultural, social class and democratic ill-effects of differentiated schooling. Differentiated schools and curricula were criticised for trapping working class children in schools and courses that deterred access, not only to higher education, but better employment and lives.

The arguments for comprehensive high schools

Arguments for the comprehensive high school included the possibility of solutions to the four problems outlined above, but a positive educational argument was also developed.

The New Education Fellowship conference held in Australian cities in 1937 introduced a number of significant reform ideas to education and school networks of the time (Cunningham, 1938). The general thrust was that secondary schools needed to develop beyond their concentrations on narrow academic and vocational training. Schools needed to develop citizenship and democratic values, model a better social order, cease wasting talents by expanding opportunities through education, develop stronger community ties, throw off public examination domination of the curriculum and meet the needs of young people conceived as adolescents, including their health, psychological and physical needs.

These ideas had emerged in the United States with the **Cardinal Principles of Education** (1918). [See Glossary]. They were also being developed in Scandinavian

countries, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Many Australian educators were aware of these ideas; they appeared as a modern, reforming 'wave' of the future.

After World War II as various forms of social reconstruction were planned, in most Australian states, there was pressure towards reformed secondary schooling, including universally accessible government secondary schools.

Creating systems of comprehensive high schools

Tasmania

The problem of extending secondary education to youth in rural communities was a prime factor in the adoption of public comprehensive high schools. By the 1940s selective entrance high schools were decreasingly accessible to students who sought enrolment. In 1951 a teachers union inquiry recommended a single government secondary school for each population centre, but one in which streaming could take place. A number of multilateral schools were founded in the 1950s. **Donald Tribolet**, Director of Education (1952-1962), returned to Tasmania from a study tour of English schools, concluding that *tripartism* [see Glossary] in England, and even that country's version of comprehensive schools were problematic. He was sympathetic to American versions of the comprehensive school. He was critical of Tasmania's own version of tripartism. Tribolet commissioned experimental comprehensive schools, the first in 1956, reorganising the New Norfolk Area School. More experimental comprehensives proceeded, though there was some opposition. In 1963 the last of Tasmania's differentiated schools were converted to comprehensives. The comprehensives were judged successful, not the least on the ground that they increased student retention.

Western Australia

The Box Report (1954), inquiring into the reorganisation of Western Australian secondary education recommended that existing three and five year high schools be replaced by four-year comprehensives, with new two-year junior colleges enabling university matriculation. The comprehensives were to be coeducational and community-based. The Director of Education, **Thomas Logan Robertson**, supported the argument of the report, although not the junior colleges. In 1957 a further government inquiry led by Robertson produced a curriculum plan suitable for comprehensive government high schools, and in 1958 government policy declared the future of secondary education as comprehensive. Existing public secondary schools whose enrolments were selective, including the prestigious Perth Modern School, were made comprehensive. The resistance of alumni of the Perth Modern School was defeated and the school became comprehensive in 1961.

New South Wales

The comparable figure to Robertson in New South Wales was **Harold Wyndham**. Having made a career by pursuing differentiated schooling, and the use of intelligence testing, by the early 1950s he had his doubts. Working with an earlier Wallace Report (1934) that had advocated a number of useful reforms in secondary schooling, Wyndham persuaded the New South Wales government to establish a

new inquiry, chaired by Wyndham himself. The **Report** was published in 1959. It had similarities to the Western Australian scheme in that it advocated a full comprehensive reorganisation of existing junior technical and selective academic secondary schools. The junior years of the comprehensive high school (7-10) would operate a mainly core curriculum, with a School Certificate at the end, replacing the existing Intermediate examination. Years 11 and 12 were conceived as an academic 'top', the curriculum preparing students for the Higher School Certificate and university entrance. Resistance to this model of comprehensive reorganisation was fiercer than in Western Australia. Three groups organised:

1. supporters (including many powerful alumni) of the competitive entrance, academic selective high schools
2. the Catholic schools; already in crisis as existing numbers of 'religious' teachers were unable to meet the baby boom expansion in enrolments; the Wyndham scheme required an additional year of secondary schooling before the School Certificate, thereby producing a classroom supply crisis on top of the staffing problems, and
3. the universities of Sydney and New South Wales and others who disputed those elements of the scheme that they argued would lead to a loss in matriculation and other academic standards.

Working through these and other problems meant that the comprehensive reorganisation of New South Wales government schools had a less than pristine implementation. Despite the Education Act (1961) that approved the scheme, implementation took several years. Some academically selective government schools, including Fort Street High, survived while others like Newcastle Girls and Boys high schools did not.

South Australia

From the 1920s South Australia had developed central, then girls and boys technical schools that lasted into the 1970s. The 1945 Bean Report had advocated an increase in the school leaving age from 14 years, and less of a reliance on intelligence testing in determining courses of instruction in public schools. **Jean Blackburn** was a significant voice for comprehensive public schools in the Hall Liberal Government's Peter Karmel-led inquiry into education (1969-1971). The recommendation that there should be but one type of high school, comprehensive and coeducational was made. The succeeding Dunstan Labor government accepted the recommendation and within a few years the conversion of all high and technical schools to comprehensive took place.

Queensland

The **state high schools** of early twentieth century Queensland competed for enrolments with powerful state technical colleges that took students direct from primary schools, and the prestigious state-founded grammar schools, supported by state bursaries. In some places, such as Rockhampton multilateral institutions developed that housed both high school and technical college. As in other places in Australia, the scattered population over great distances suggested the logic of school consolidation. Brisbane suburban multilateral schools were opened in 1942

(Wynnum) and 1952 (Cavendish). Nevertheless through to World War II and beyond there appeared to be less pressure in Queensland than elsewhere for universal secondary education. Students in state secondary schools were organised into differentiated courses: academic, industrial, commercial, home science, agricultural, and composite and special. The baby boom helped impel Queensland towards reform. Education Minister **Jack Pizzey**, impressed by the Wyndham Report (New South Wales), established a similar inquiry. In 1961 it reported in favour of a raised school leaving age, the abolition of the state scholarship examination and a comprehensive style curriculum in the junior years of high school. Access, retention and opportunity increased. In 1970 the **Radford Report** took the next step towards comprehensive secondary education in Queensland. Public examinations were abolished, and secondary schools were encouraged to see themselves as primarily meeting the 'needs' of their students rather than, for example, the needs of the university.

Victoria

In Victoria, the Ramsay Report into state education was published in 1960. It did not challenge the existing differentiated arrangements of government secondary education despite the suggestion of a common two year foundation course across post-primary schools. Government post-primary schools belonged either to the '**technical**' system or the separate '**secondary**'. The boys junior technical and girls domestic arts and other junior technical schools catered for apparently 'not-so-bright' children, where the secondaries, designated high, higher elementary and central schools, were for the 'more intelligent' children. This approach, despite strong criticism in the 1920s and a 1945 enquiry, was widely supported from within government and the public service, as well as communities, and teacher unions. In the early 1980s however the separate technical schools division was abolished. The **Blackburn Report** into post-compulsory schooling (1985) rejected the technical schools as anachronistic, and recommended that all government secondary schools should be coeducational and comprehensive. The reform was to be supported by the creation of a single secondary school completion credential, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) introduced in 1992. Academically selective school survivors included Mac.Robertson Girls and Melbourne Boys high schools. The comprehensive schools were named 'secondary colleges'. By the 1980s however there were neoliberal forces at work that led to new school differentiations. Victoria cannot be said to have had the same kind of comprehensive reorganisation of the 1960s and 1970s that occurred in other Australian states.

The fates of comprehensive public high schools

Despite the democratic, equal opportunity and curriculum reform hopes held out for comprehensive schools in the 1960s and 1970s, their period of ascendance was relatively brief, even though they remain the most likely schools to enrol Australian youth into the twenty-first century. From the 1970s the following labour market, government policy and other factors affected the growth and reputation of the schools:

1. the federal government began **funding nongovernment schools**, those with the least resources quite generously. A great number of low- and medium-fee schools

proliferated across Australia drawing enrolments from local public comprehensive high schools

2. some states, especially New South Wales, began creating new academically selective government schools and creating academically selective streams inside former comprehensive schools
3. most states began to designate some high schools as specialist curriculum schools, for example 'technology', 'performing arts' and so on; ordinary comprehensives were seen by some as less interesting
4. devolution of considerable controls over school budgets, staffing and curriculum, perhaps going furthest in Western Australia and Victoria, meant that many comprehensive schools developed some exclusive characteristics, targeting specific enrolments and specialising in certain curricula
5. multicultural policy in schooling linked with new nongovernment school funding. While the comprehensive high schools had been assimilating institutions there were now separate schools, mainly nongovernment, that targeted or served specific ethno-religious-national communities
6. federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal moved towards the idea that a school market, researched and accessed by parents, was desirable. In the process a standard comprehensive school began to look old-fashioned, as schools, public and nongovernment competed for 'customers' against one another on the basis of their differences
7. a consequence of many of these movements was to remake many comprehensive high schools in poorer areas as 'residual' schools, that increasingly took students from families in poverty or perhaps of recent immigration; some became 'failing' schools and could no longer offer a comprehensive curriculum, especially in the senior years
8. with high youth unemployment pressure was on comprehensive schools to provide for a greater range of students in the senior years; this included creating links with other institutions, including the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. The older model, the stand alone comprehensive school was arguably unable to meet the developing range of student needs.

Despite a significant history in expanding access and educational opportunity in the second half of the twentieth century, the future of comprehensive government high schools looked uncertain in the twenty-first century.

Glossary

Cardinal Principles of Education (1918) was a **Report** of the National Education Association in the United States. It advocated an education for the adolescent that advocated good citizenship, healthy development and work-force preparation. It was revolutionary given the college preparatory focus of most high schools at the time.

Tripartism was the direction chosen for English secondary education after World War II. There would be three kinds of government secondary school, 'grammar' for those who passed an 'eleven plus' entrance exam, 'technical' schools with vocational and applied science curricula and for most young people, 'secondary modern' schools catering to the educational needs of unexceptional adolescents. By the 1960s this differentiated arrangement of schools endured great criticism. Comprehensive schools began to win favour with local educational authorities and some Conservative as well as Labour administrations. There are Australian parallels with this English history.

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Citation of this entry

- Campbell, C. 2014. Comprehensive government high school. *Dictionary of Educational History in Australia and New Zealand (DEHANZ)*, 22 February. Available: <http://dehanz.net.au>