Money, money, money!

Instead of wringing our hands over the competition for scarce resources, we need to be looking for inventive alternatives that will be equitable and effective, affordable and sustainable, says David Loader.

As the economic situation bites and talk turns to a recession, all school funding becomes more difficult, even in the public sector. While we can be confident that state or territory and Commonwealth governments will see education as a priority, we all know there are many calls on the public purse, which is why it’s critically important that schools manage their resources efficiently and effectively.

Alternative or supplementary sources of school funding are also becoming scarcer. Many parents have less to spend. Organisations that previously may have offered support to schools and students are finding it difficult to be as generous as in the past. The well-resourced ‘education revolution,’ based upon today’s schooling model, looks like it could be a fast fading dream.

Of course we all want the best for our young people, but we also want the best in hospital care, a reliable power supply, sufficient water, efficient public transport, effective police and security services – the list goes on. Our wants have always exceeded our ability to provide and in the immediate future it’s going to be even harder to provide all that the community desires. Competition for scarce funds is likely to become fiercer.

In education, one cash-saving solution is to reduce schooling from five days to four, as is happening in some parts of the United States. In south-eastern Arizona, according to a report in the Sydney Morning Herald in February, the Bisbee Unified School District board voted to close schools every Friday for the next two school years, to save US$500,000 a year. The difficulty is that President Barack Obama, in his first major speech on education in March, called for students to spend more not less time in schools to improve achievement.

Another cash-saving solution is to channel resources into teaching rather than infrastructure, on the Swedish model, where sought-after schools in often spartan accommodation have as Fraser Nelson described them in the Spectator, an Ikea-style simplicity. In Nelson’s example, Enskede School in the south of Stockholm, ‘There are no trophy buildings, interactive whiteboards or other gizmos…. The classrooms have tables and chairs, but not much else. Playgrounds are converted car parks, but no one seems to mind…. Success is achieved not in the architecture or landscaping, but in the pedagogy. For example, the speciality of Kunskapsskol at School is personalised education, where each child starts the day with a tutor, and is set an individual timetable.’

Another cash-saving solution closer to home is the Victorian government’s partnership approach with businesses to build and maintain new schools. The problem with such solutions, however, is that they don’t address the basic schooling model.

Now is the time to be looking for different ways of delivering a good education to our young people. Learning has always been built around the technology of the time, but our schools are built around old technology, set in a structure that is based on an industrial model of batch processing.

The system as we know it has been good for some of us, giving us status and well-paid jobs, but it has failed others badly, leaving them struggling socially and financially.

Given that we no longer live in an industrial society, what is the most appropriate education system for our contemporary knowledge society?

Why would we want to build new schools, maintain old schools and staff them, based on old assumptions, particularly when we can’t afford to do it properly?

How equitable, effective and sustainable is our present system of schooling?

Today, governments are struggling; tomorrow, they will find it even harder to find the funds for a process to induct young people into society and to equip them with the necessary skills for long term success.

Instead of wringing our hands over the competition for scarce resources, we need to be looking for inventive alternatives that will be more equitable and effective, as well as affordable and sustainable.

Instead of looking for additional money to do more of the same, we need to be actively looking for new models of delivering good education to all Australians.

David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is Jousting for the New Generation: Challenges to contemporary schooling, published by ACER Press. Email davidloader@bigpond.com

REFERENCES