



# We the people

POLITICIANS AND BUREAUCRATS RUN THE EDUCATION AGENDA BECAUSE THEY CAN, AND THEY'LL CONTINUE TO DO THAT UNTIL WE SPEAK OUT OURSELVES, SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

We're lucky in this day and age to live in a free society where we can speak our mind, yet we act as if we live in a tightly-managed feudal society. We the people seem to have lost our voices and, apparently, are happy to leave public policy to the governing elite. Where's the variety of views, the cacophony of arguing voices, the rich dialectic of democratic debate? Without it we'll never achieve better, fairer and more sustainable outcomes in schooling.

Schools are being run by politicians and bureaucrats. They have the tax money to spend and they're using this financial power to determine what happens in schools. They are determining the curriculum, which is to be nationalised, and defining the nature of schooling, which is to be systematised, proceduralised and constrained by bureaucracy.

Our politicians and bureaucrats are defining the ways success will be measured, leaving ample room to allow 'failing' teachers, principals and schools to be identified and labelled. They're also labelling some parents as failures, and putting financial and other coercive pressure on parents who do not send their children to school.

It would appear that in 2009, teachers, academics and parents, the people who should be the key players in the dialogue about what is good schooling, have lost their voice. We've been intimidated into silence by the powerful forces of government.

Our politicians are experts in the art of depersonalisation. They refer to you and me as 'the electorate' or more recently as 'working families.' Such labelling is just one way of turning individuals into some impersonal conglomerate. Politicians find the impersonal, generalist label much easier to deal with than the troublesome individual.

There is no place in the government dialectic for personal stories, which is why education is now about systems, not individuals, about teaching, not independent learning, and about test scores, not people. More than that, debate is polarised into 'the government's view' and that of 'the opposition,' despite the fact that we all know education is much more complex than this.

Is there an alternative to this binary view? Yes, there are many and we should be actively considering them.

For those who still believe in formal schooling, there's the Swedish approach that is currently being debated favourably in Britain. In Sweden, remembering that this is a socialist country not a freewheeling market-driven country like the United States, anyone can set up a school which will be funded by government on a per-student basis. In Sweden, instead of being powerless, parents and the community can take action to establish a school according to their beliefs and values. For-profit and not-for-profit organisations can offer alternatives from which parents and students can choose.

It's a model in which existing schools that are not respected by students and their parents, as opposed to those which are not respected by the government, lose funding because they lose students. Because such a model gives parents power and space in the debate, what we take to be good teaching and learning is not just a matter for governments. As choices become more widely available, dialogue about curriculum, pedagogy and preferred ways of schooling can follow.

By opening the door to new entrants into the schooling mix, we can encourage solutions that break out of the institutional mould. Learning and teaching could, for

example, potentially be delivered outside of schools.

Literally, where two or three are gathered together, a community of learners is formed. Schools in themselves have no life; their life is derived from those within them. It's bureaucracies that give schools power, usually by taking power away from the real people who are actually in them. Schools are not in themselves living things, it's the people in them that have life, yet many of those who ought to lead them feel and act as if they are prisoners of the institution. We the people in schools need to take responsibility for ourselves and our school, by asking questions, challenging the bureaucracy, setting directions and defining values in the light of our experience. At the same time, as Andy Hargreaves says, our bureaucrats and politicians need 'to set aside their spreadsheets to build better relationships with their schools.'

There are enough indicators of malaise in our society without adding the theft of teaching and learning, but it's up to us to do something about this by speaking out, by looking for different ways of doing things, by making our voices heard. **T**

## REFERENCES

Hargreaves, A. (2009). *The Fourth Way of Educational Reform*. Sydney: Australian Council for Educational Leaders (Monograph 45).

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