Futures-focused schools

WE HAVE SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS, SPECIALIST SCHOOLS, ENTREPRENEURIAL SCHOOLS AND ELITIST SCHOOLS, SO WHY NOT ASPIRE TO CREATING ONE MORE TYPE OF SCHOOL – THE FUTURES-FOCUSED SCHOOL? ASKS DAVID LOADER.

A FUTURES-FOCUSED SCHOOL ISN’T SET in some hazy ‘other’ future. It’s a school parked solidly in the present, but with an attitude and a commitment to engage with the future in order to discover alternatives as a context for making choices today. A futures-focused school wants to choose and create a future for itself and its students. The alternative to being futures-focused is to wait for the future to happen and then respond, or worse, to view the future as no more than an imagined glorious past, which the school seeks to recreate.

The process of changing current practices and culture in schools in Australia in 2008 is incremental, slow and frustrating, but it can be worthwhile and even exciting. It can happen when decisions made in one school make a difference not only in that school but in others, too, by setting the benchmark for all schools.

New practices emerge when there is innovation and in schools that means grappling with the future, looking for alternative ways to support learning. Unfortunately for many, innovation sits uneasily beside imposed benchmarks and demands for compliance. In our rush to impose standards, it’s important that we also encourage innovation and not just replication.

A futures-focused school is one that can meet its compliance commitments in curriculum, pedagogy, safety and the like, exceed the benchmarks set by relevant authorities for student, staff and school performance and then commit to addressing the future for students and staff. Leading and managing a futures-focused school means wrestling with the competing demands of short-term goals to deliver outcomes today and long-term goals that address the future, for students, staff and the school.

There’s plenty of information available about the characteristics of the best performing schools. By considering the references on these schools, all schools can aspire to lift their performance, as measured on established benchmarks. Similarly it’s possible to address compliance issues as these are all recorded and only need to be researched and implemented. None of this is easy, but by application and commitment these are goals that can be achieved over time.

We can’t predict the future, but the reality is that we define it each day in everything that we do. By basically continuing with what we’ve always done and improving it as best we can, we’re assuming that the environment in which schools exist is not changing to any great extent. The reality, however, is that our community, country and world are changing rapidly. Whether these changes are to do with macro issues like terrorism, globalisation and climate change or more immediate ones like changes in family, culture and community values, our environment is undoubtedly changing.

There are two issues that need our immediate attention. The first is technology, which is shaping our children and our society. Already learning can happen anywhere, at anytime, with anyone or alone. A futures-focused school will seek to address this and not just use schooling methods developed in the past. The second issue we must address is inequity. All students should leave school having been supported and enabled to participate equally and fully. This is not happening as it should, in Australia or overseas.

According to A Failed Generation, a recent report by Michael Gove, Britain’s Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, the chance of getting good results is determined by where a student lives. Inequality is not just unfair, it has the potential to lead to social unrest which could in turn destabilise a country.

Our students will be living in the future and they need preparation for that life. For schools to do this they need to employ the tools of a growing body of knowledge and skills developed by futurists, such as scenario building.

Schools are not just the product of governments or bureaucrats, but the creation of people for people. School evolution is not logical and linear but a complex interaction of millions of decisions to explore some options and ignore others. Futures thinking reminds us that we always have choices.

To become futures-focused, a school will begin by actively engaging with the future, rather than waiting for it to happen. Is your school ready to create its future?

REFERENCES


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