

Educational reform has taken many shapes over the last ten years. The 1990s started with *Schools Renewal* in the public system with business management principles being applied to education to deliver better services to schools. It delivered greater school autonomy, especially around funding and budgets, new processes for recruitment and school accountability and drove the wedge of change into many traditional practices.

Restructuring became a way of life in NSW public education in the 1990s with ten regions becoming 40 districts and an almost annual restructuring of some State Office Directorates has continued unabated. Driven by fundamental concepts such as outcomes rather than inputs, merit rather than entitlement, the fundamental control mechanism throughout all these changes has been the curriculum.

For the first time since the 1980s primary schools have today a full set of curriculum documents expressed in terms of both outcomes and content and secondary schools have a new HSC with outcomes, *learn to* and *learn about* statements. Soon the last part of the curriculum puzzle will be in place when the Years 7-10 syllabuses are revised to an outcomes and content format.

Undoubtedly there have been important gains from the business approach to education including a focused curriculum that provides a curriculum guarantee to the community and appropriate assessment and reporting processes including the standards-referenced HSC. Schools enjoy more decision-making and financial autonomy, school communities are more involved with their schools and teaching has become more explicit and closely related to outcomes.

But not all features of a business driven model have helped public education. Business is driven by competition, its product and customers are clearly defined and the measures of success are also clear. Education does not simply fit into this model.

Three matters for further thought are: competition, clients and product. In these areas Christians might have a different view of education.

Competition

Education is primarily a collaborative endeavour not a competitive one. Teachers, students and parents work together to assist students to achieve their highest level of performance in terms of learning outcomes and the wider social goals of schooling. They are assisted by system support that employs the most efficient distribution of resources to schools. Competition between teachers, faculties, executive staff, schools, districts, directorates and senior officers is not always productive. Collaboration is about jointly meeting needs, setting priorities based on needs and recognising the needs of others. Competition can be about securing resources irrespective of the needs of others, getting ahead of the competitor (school, district, directorate) and ultimately lead to less efficient uses of resources. Competition is a different way and not necessarily a better way, especially in education.

As Christians we are all part of the *one body* sharing the same *Spirit*. Collaboration, sharing and mutual support are features of a Christian approach to education which, when practiced, may achieve higher learning outcomes for students, schools and the system than unproductive competition often resulting in wasted resources on self promotion rather than learning. Such matters are not solely the concern of public education.

Clients

The business model is client focused. But who are the school's clients? In this area, confusion reigns. To the government the community is the client for public schools, for schools the clients are a community subset - parents. The clients are not students.

Nor are students customers. Students are producers. They produce the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes and values that our community needs to sustain it and advance it. They go to school compulsorily because the community has decided and legislated that they attend school not only for their own advancement, but for the improvement of the society in which they live, for the common good.

As Christians, we would expand on the new testament writing of Paul and his emphasis on acting for and on behalf of our fellow brother and sister in Christ so that the whole *body* might be built up. For Christians the concept of students as producers has immense appeal because the purpose of learning is community.

Product

Our society has continued to emphasise the rights of individuals as shown by increased litigation, the inability of people to accept responsibility for the consequences of their own actions and desire to blame anyone but oneself for misfortune.

In these times, the concept of the common good seems to be disappearing as isolation, if not alienation, rather than a sense of community envelopes the lives of individuals. In this context, schools are learning communities that bring meaning to the lives of students giving them a reason for their learning. They can experience, and not only know, the importance of community. Their product, the knowledge, skills, understandings, values and attitudes, is geared to not only individual survival in the world but to the survival and welfare of others. The common good should be their goal, not only because there can be no individual wealth without common wealth, but because other people are of value. Their worth is intrinsic, imputed by God because he loves them. Now that's Christian education.