

Schools of Special Character

Alternative, Progressive and Democratic Schools (www.aapae.edu.au) exist in Australia and around the world (www.educationrevolution.org) because parents and children seek, sometimes intuitively, a learning place which is participatory, caring and enabling of unique and diverse learners. Transparency and accountability are integral for continuation and survival. Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Israel provide freedom of choice and supportive funding and we seek similar policies in Australia.

Julia Gillard (SMH 29/5/08) gave heart to the school communities when she articulated that diversity in education is a basis of strength, a desire to change the education focus from the public/private divide, the need to focus on the needs of each student and combine that with social and educational equity, the need to have a serious conversation about the substance of curriculum and that schools need to become more flexible and innovative in the way they teach. Five months later through the legislative process of the School Assistance Bill 2008, this rhetoric appears to be overturned by the requirements imposed on the schools as conditions of receiving the next round of funding. This government seems to equate transparency with uniformity and conformity.

Across the spectrum of Alternative Education concerns are being expressed about this. (Age, 7/11/08:5 ;WA, 7/11/08:12) We are being asked to accept and implement a national curriculum before the 'serious conversation'. The Minister (Age, 11/11/08) has attempted to reassure the educational communities that the national curriculum will accommodate alternatives such as Steiner and Montessori programmes, but she has asked the curriculum board to review other models. Before this complex task happens the Minister has already insisted that the national curriculum will be compulsory, and non-negotiable, we "must accept the case for transparency and accountability across the whole of Australia's school system."

(<http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/Gillard/Releases/2008CurriculumCorporationConference.htm>)

Parents, children and teachers who value the development of the individual in caring, democratic learning environments, education which honours and enables their total wellbeing, seek public funding to enable these schools of special character to exist. They seek the opportunity to provide transparency and accountability processes which acknowledge individual difference and learning styles, collaboration and co-operation and reduces comparisons between students and schools.

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