

Are we there yet?
The distance travelled with the school improvement approach in Queensland

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Abstract

The paper outlines key elements of the school planning and reporting framework in Queensland schools. It analyses this framework within contemporary debates on efficiency and effectiveness, target setting and corporate managerialism. The paper details aspects of the reform agenda in Queensland and gives an overview of the range of policy reforms and research work that supported these initiatives. It then provides an analysis of ways in which the reform and research agendas have shaped the interpretation and use of target settings approaches in Queensland schools.

It has often been said that Queensland is different. Indeed this has traditionally been used by our southern state counter-parts as something of a joke towards what was seen as the more parochial and less sophisticated approach across a range of areas by the Queensland government and its people. Today, however, this difference is seen more as a badge of honour than derision – at least by Queenslanders themselves. In education as in other areas Queensland is no longer regarded as a follower, but rather as a leading innovator of curriculum renewal, enhanced teaching practice and improvements in the performance of Indigenous students.

This paper outlines some of the directions Queensland is taking in the area of school planning and reporting. The paper is not the official viewpoint of the department but rather a personal interpretation based on previous academic and research work and informed by our current positions within the bureaucracy, rather than a departmental position on school improvement, planning and reporting. We, as authors of this paper, are presenting a position of workers who have been active in the planning and reporting frameworks of the department and who have witnessed the use and management of a process of target setting and reporting in Queensland schools that at this point is little known or well understood outside the state and that has a number of critical elements that are worth discussing in terms of the capacity to influence organisational change.

It is in fact because of the fact that the viewpoint of bureaucrats is poorly understood that we think it important to present a paper that may provide a different voice to that commonly published. The paper provides an overview of the critical elements of our school planning and reporting framework in Queensland. It then looks at these elements in light of some of the current discourse and theoretical constructs around target setting and puts an argument about why Queensland may be different to some of the common interpretations of these agendas.

We understand that in entering into this field we enter into an area of considerable contestability and debate on the use of targets. We also understand that we do so at a time when these agendas are being used in what appears to be reductionist and punitive ways in some countries across the world. Part of the difficulty in presenting this paper is our understanding of the way in which the debate over targets has been captured by the wider polarised debate over corporate managerialist reform (Corbiere, 2000).

School accountability

One side of the debate, well represented by educational policy analysts, sees corporate managerialism as antithetical to the advance of socially democratic and equitable practice (Taylor et al. 1997; Lingard, 1992; Smyth, 1993, 1994). On the other side, often more closely aligned to public and government policy, are advocates for level playing fields, increased competition, downsizing of central bureaucracies and a strong economic management focus for public resources (Pusey, 1991; Painter, 1998). While a number of theorists are beginning to straddle these polarised camps, the difficulty with the divide as it is presently constructed lies in its inability to develop robust accountability across both areas. One side remains focused on accountability in fiscal and line management terms, while the other side adjusts the books in terms of accountability to the 'public good', social justice and equity.

The different terminologies and language used in the transformation of public sector bureaucracy into a corporatised form tends to exclude the language and dialogue of other issues. As Du Gay (1995:19) notes:

... if we want certain jobs to continue being done we need to maintain the vocabularies that make them possible and even conceivable. If a certain vocabulary is jettisoned in favour of another, then the world that vocabulary brought into being will no longer be available to us. The wholesale importation of enterprise vocabulary into the domain of bureaucratic administration would hardly matter if both sets of activities - business management and public administration - were identical.

Part of the reason for the debate being polarised in education lies in the isolation of each side of the debate through the use of different vocabularies. Educationalists are only passingly familiar in the most part with the broader policy debates in public administration and labour market theory and tend to argue more strongly from a 'public good' perspective. Similarly, labour market theorists and public administrators often have an over-riding concern for efficiency and effectiveness linked to economic and output data (Pusey, 1991). Limited space has been available for mutual engagement in issues about bureaucratic change using a language that is understood by both sides.

This paper, however, suggests that there are ways forward that address these tensions and argues that as new political vocabularies emerge pathways are opened which construct the debate in less oppositional terms. Inroads towards a less polarised position are being made in different ways. For example, in the public policy field, Yeatman (1998a), Marginson (1997b, 1997c), Considine (1988) and Corbett (1996) are drawing together elements of each side of the debate to formulate public policy directions that promote efficient and effective economic governance and fair and equitable processes. These directions encompass democratic participation, equity and a strong, viable and competitive public service. Such inroads offer valuable insights for Queensland education that is working towards robust public policy responses to the changing nature of state bureaucracies and a mechanism through which educational communities can engage in the policy development of their local schools.

The paper now outlines the major reform agendas and research work that have been undertaken in Queensland as a backdrop to explaining why approaches to school improvement and target setting have been interpreted and managed in less oppositional terms that may be evident in other states.

Queensland State Education — 2010

In February 2000, the Queensland Government endorsed *Queensland State Education – 2010 (QSE - 2010)* as a statement of policy and strategic direction for state education for the next 10 years. It identified the importance of completing Year 12 or its equivalent for the majority of students as it provided a foundation for life after leaving school. ETRF was launched in 2002 and focussed on reforms in the early, middle and senior phases of learning. This included trialling and now implementation of a preparatory year, a significant new funding commitment to improve access to Information and Communication Technologies in schools and expansions to the senior schooling pathways that lead to work training and further study.

The importance of *QSE-2010* and the *Education and Training Reforms for the Future* were their capacity to allow the agency to show key stakeholders that there was and is a consistent and clear agenda for education in Queensland. This is useful at an interagency level for negotiating out years funding for the reform agenda and at a school level to set clear strategic directions and allow a sense of commitment to common goals at the local level.

Queensland State Education - 2010 was developed at a time when there was teacher and community pressure for changes and improvement in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and outcomes. There was also a drift of students to the non-state sector and a perception among educators that the middle years of schooling were not as productive as they could be. Research from the LSRLS characterised the middle years of schooling as subject-centric learning with low levels of effective teaching and low-stakes assessment regimes that were *ad hoc* and inconsistent.

The dominant themes that arose from the public consultation process that supported the development of the vision for education in Queensland were the need for the education system and schools to focus on preparing students for a knowledge economy and ensure equity of access and participation for all students.

Reforming Education in Queensland

There were a number of major reforms that were bringing together a range of issues for teachers, schools and the system. They were:

- the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study
- the New Basics Trial,
- a major investment in Information and Communication Technologies
- a new look at approaches to equity
- a re-conceptualisation of the school based management approach in Queensland State Schools.

The **Longitudinal study** was an extensive observation study of classroom practices. It was commissioned by Education Queensland (EQ) and conducted by researchers from the School of Education, The University of Queensland, from 1998 to 2000. The researchers made detailed observations and statistical analyses of 975 classroom lessons offered in 24 EQ schools over three years. The study sought to investigate possible relationships between school-based management practices and enhanced student outcomes, both academic and social.

Of the thirty-six recommendations from the study, two became critical drivers in the development of Queensland's school improvement and accountability frameworks. They were:

Recommendation 30

That Education Queensland give serious consideration to the role of districts and encourage an emphasis in their purposes for supporting school organisational capacity building.

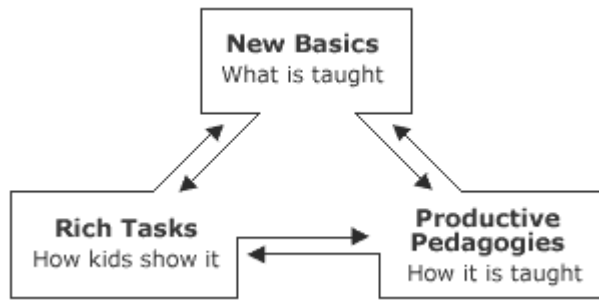
Recommendation 31

- That Education Queensland's school-based management model be located within system-wide policies and frameworks within loosely coupled and accountable system-school relationships.

The final report also identified specific challenges for improving educational practice and offered the department a powerful and comprehensive set of messages for policy reform and realignment. It made key recommendations to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; and leadership, management and administration.

The New Basics Trial investigated the viability of a new framework for integrating what is taught with how it is taught, assessed and reported. The New Basics looked at school reform by enabling dialogue on the professional, intellectual and industrial situation to develop new approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The trial reformed:

- curriculum through the design of 3-year, transdisciplinary curriculum plans around the Rich Tasks
- pedagogy through a concentrated in-service focus on Productive Pedagogies
- assessment through the implementation of authentic assessment and moderated teacher judgment at Years 3, 6 and 9.



This approach was officially trialled at approximately 60 state schools and many other schools engaged with and shared elements that suited their school communities.

Corporate Data Warehouse –The data warehouse allows department staff to view and analyse data using OLAP (On-Line Analytical Processing) tools. The aim of the warehouse is to put the power of analysis in the hands of principals, managers and operational staff so that their knowledge of the department can be used to drive the analysis process.

From February 1998 the Corporate Data Warehouse (CDW) delivered a powerful new capability to support departmental decision-making. Initial data sets were based on student enrolments, Year2 Net student achievement, Primary Class Size Ascertainment, and MLOTE have since been included. New data have been added according to school and organisational performance priorities.

From the start of Term 4, Year 2000, Queensland state schools have been able to log on to the CDW and view a number of tabular reports and graphs on data sets such as Year 2 Net, Year 5 Test, Year 7 Test, Year 12, Queensland Core Skills Test and Secondary Student Absences.

The benefits of adopting a data warehouse approach have been significant for the department. There is now a single trusted source of education performance data. All parts of the organisation are able to make decisions and report on the same set of figures. Principals and teachers have the ability to share data and compare student and school performance on the available datasets. This has been a significant cultural change for school staff.

A new deal on **equity** – There was a new focus on providing opportunities for all students within the state system. The consistent achievement and retention gap between all students and those from identified ‘target groups’ was acknowledged as significant. It was also acknowledged that there needed to be new ways of closing the gap. There were concerns that the disparities arising from the distribution of wealth, location and different cultures would become worse.

To support schools to respond to local needs within the framework of delivering on government priorities, a new approach to school management was developed. This included a restructure of the support provided to schools at the District level.

School Capacity reforms

The set of reforms laid out in *QSE - 2010* for schooling were supported by a range of staff located close to the school and its community. A number of new roles were

developed to work closely with schools in a coaching role. These positions had a strong school improvement and accountability focus.

The district director's role encompassed performance management of principals; coaching, mentoring and leadership of principals; and responsibility and accountability for the management of resources allocated in districts. The focus of the district director was the achievement of student outcomes. The other roles within the district included:

- Performance Measurement Officers - School planning and reporting. This role had a strong capacity building focus on data collection analysis and reporting of student outcomes. Schools were supported to increase the use of data in school planning and reporting. Principals and teachers were provided with skills and tools to monitor the outcomes of school programs.
- Principal Personnel Officer. This role supported schools to source appropriate teaching staff. This officer worked with schools to find the teaching staff that matched the school's needs.
- Principal Education Officer - Student Services. This role focussed on supporting low incidence special needs students located at special schools and units.
- Senior Finance Officers. This role focussed on Financial Management capacity building.

Destination – 2010

Destination —2010 is an action plan state schools that provides details of:

- outcomes that identify what Education Queensland plans to achieve and what constitutes success in Queensland state education
- key performance measures and performance indicators that show whether outcomes are being achieved and establish critical indicators which inform Education Queensland of its achievements.
- areas where school targets are to be established. These were to be achievable yet challenging, and responsive to community and student needs and to Education Queensland targets. School targets provide the specific focus for school communities and are to be detailed in the triennial and annual school planning and reporting documentation.
- data sources with systemic and school information that provides quantitative and qualitative evidence of progress towards achieving the 10-year vision for state school education.

The action plan distilled and simplified all these frameworks, models and policies and clearly set the outcomes for Queensland State School Students, it included the targets the system wanted to achieve by 2005 and the strategies and resources available to help schools achieve the outcomes. Target setting in schools was implemented in a way that supported and respected schools' focus on meeting the needs of its local community. As the District Directors visited each school they focused on student performance. They discussed with the principal the student outcomes achieved and the evidence the school was using to monitor its own performance. It was acknowledged by the District Directors that the targets did not capture the complete story on student achievement but it gave the organisation some clear messages about minimum standards/expectations.

Destination—2010 defined those areas for which schools had to set targets to monitor their own progress. The district staff implemented a strategic planning and reporting process to support schools to use the resources available to them to support schools.

Managerialism

I now want to explore some of the prevailing literature and interpretations in relation to new managerialism and target setting. There is no doubt that many of the key reforms fit neatly into the managerialist reforms begun in the 80s and 90s and continuing today. We do live in a world of higher expectations regarding accountability, transparency and reporting. We do have a range of frameworks that give weight to notions of efficiency, effectiveness and client services. We are – albeit slowly – moving towards more outcomes based reporting and we as bureaucrats are expected to implement the policies of the Government of the day.

What I find disappointing in the literature (Simkins, 20002; Leggett, 1997) is the way this is often linked to a disempowerment of local sites, a recentralisation of control and intervention, and a reductionist approach to determining school achievement. I think that in these interpretations the voice of teachers is often heard more clearly than the voice of the bureaucrats who tend to be represented through policy documents and reporting frameworks. While this may be useful, what is often lacking is the sense of dialogue – the all important relational aspect of change and performance and the ways in which negotiation happens between levels of the organisation. Indeed, in Queensland at least, the moves towards community engagement in the democratic process have been significant. Once decisions are taken by government, it is the work of the department to implement them. Unlike many other areas, it is my view that teachers have considerable discretion here. Indeed there is an expectation by the department that teachers will adjust high level policy directions to the context of their schools and students.

Having said all this, where do targets fit? Are they leading to a reductionist, managerialist style of performance in schools? Are they driving a ‘re-norming’ of school achievement, which, according the Leggett (1997: 277), is ‘a changed set of norms or expectations against which quality and achievement are judged’?

Gorard et al (2002:320-321) identifies four main criteria for effective educational targets. They are:

- Usefulness to policy makers
- Relevance and endurance
- Positioning targets as part of wider educational reforms
- Practitioner acceptance.

I will use this criteria as a framework on which to judge Queensland’s use of targets in education.

Usefulness to policy makers.

This is probably an area where the targets are not the key drivers for policy makers but rather a source of useful information to policy makers that informs strategic directions at a number of levels throughout the organisation. The data from the process of reporting against targets is used as part of a broader emphasis on

continuous improvement and the analysis of performance. Critical to the way in which these targets have been used by various stakeholders is the set of key messages that go with them. Senior bureaucrats in Queensland have been consistent in giving a few key messages to the system. These include the old mantra 'you can't manage what you can't measure'; 'you will never get the perfect measure'; and finally and perhaps most importantly 'no data without dialogue, and no dialogue without data'. These messages reinforce the importance of:

- the dialogue between levels of the organisation and the commitment to this dialogue
- the understanding that these measures and targets are partial, incomplete, do not tell the whole picture but are a starting point for real discussion
- capacity building throughout the organisation and a continuous improvement culture that allows for investigation of the realities and the myths regarding school performance.

Relevance and endurance.

One of the consistent areas of feedback on Destination 2010 – the QSE – 2010 action plan is that it provides a clear strategic direction for schools, that they know what is expected from them and that schools are not subject therefore to a myriad of changing expectations and reporting requirements. The establishment of clear measures and schools' individual targets in this context while initially greeted by principals as potentially concerning, has now in the third year of implementation been accepted as an effective means of providing a consistent approach to school improvement.

Performance Measurement officers when asked what were the strengths of Destination 2010 commented:

It has remained relatively stable for the three-year period'
Clearly articulated the strategic focus for schools
Clear accountabilities.

Overall, schools have responded positively to continuing these measures as a useful support to their cycle of planning and reporting, which provides certainty of direction for extended periods. However, not all schools will see the process as adding value:

...a significant number of schools simply view school planning as a 'compliance measure', rather than a strategic and operational response directed towards addressing the challenges associated with school improvement (comment Performance Measurement Officer).

Positioning targets as part of wider educational reforms

Much of the literature has argued that real reform in education has been sadly lacking across Australian and overseas jurisdictions. The advent of more corporate systems of accountability has often been portrayed as leading to schools spending much of their time not on the creation of diverse and challenging innovations in education, but on the marketing and financial concerns of their operations. As Marginson (1998:74) notes:

Devolution to corporate school councils has not led to a flowering of innovation, nor is there evidence of a greater sensitivity to customer needs – rather, the councils are pre-occupied with one difficult financial and management problem after another.

In Queensland, however, there has been a significant history of investing in a comprehensive and strategic reform agenda including the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, *QSE-2010*, Productive Pedagogies, New Basics, the *Education and Training Reforms for the Future* and Queensland Curriculum and Reporting (QCAR) framework. These reforms all focus on schools' core business. They support and encourage improved curriculum, assessment, student and teacher engagement, equity and attention to 'at risk' students. Targets in this setting where there has been sustained support for schools and teachers is very different from the 'top-down' approach commonly linked to targets.

Practitioner acceptance.

As stated earlier, Queensland has made a considerable investment in systems of corporate reporting. We can and do provide data to schools and districts that can be cut by a range of cohorts. Schools with the click of a button can investigate what is happening to boys' performance across the Yr 3 test in reading. They can also see the distance travelled between that test and the Yr 5 test for the same group of students. The level of the information supplied is directly useful and relevant to teachers who can look at the position of students in their classroom, to principals who can see the performance of students in their school, to districts and regions who can compare school performance and to central office who can cut the data in a range of ways that may be useful to identify issues for schools in rural and remote areas or performance information for specific cohorts. Setting targets in an environment where data is supplied in 'real time' to all levels of the organisation enables actions to be focussed at the local levels and gives some valuable indicators at the central level on where further or more effective strategies may need to be implemented.

One of the key indicators of practitioner acceptance is the fact that the release of test data through the Corporate Data Warehouse (CDW) has to be staggered because the number of hits on the website causes the system to crash. The number of hits by schools accessing their data has reached over one million this year.

While the information is used and seen as relevant, there is room for improvement. A recent review of the Destination 2010 targets had as a key objective the realignment of measures to the strategic reform agenda and where possible a decrease in measures schools were required to report against. Interestingly at the present time, it is often the stakeholders and most frequently principals who are driving access to and use of performance data.

Conclusion

The paper has outlined how Queensland has approached systemic reform in education. It has highlighted the need to understand both the nature of the reforms, the background to these changes and the dialogue, support and organisational expectations that accompanied them. A range of research has suggested that target setting is part of a broader corporate managerialist agenda that fails to recognise local agency, places too much emphasis on what is easily measurable and uses limited and inaccurate measures of students achievement. This paper presents an alternate view and suggests that if target setting is used as part of a broader approach to continuous

improvement then there are benefits in terms of organisational ability and willingness to engage in data supported dialogue on school improvement strategies.

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