

Consumer Choice: The Key to Educational Quality?

Ken Gannicott, Taking Education Seriously: A Reform Program for Australian Schools, The Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 1997

Reviewed by Brian Crittenden

THIS book provides a clear assessment of what are called 'charter schools' in the United States, where they are rapidly spreading. Ken Gannicott, a Professor of Education at the University of Wollongong, strongly supports their introduction in Australia, ultimately to the extent of replacing the present government system. For the most part, he relies heavily on the language and images of economic analysis: education is a commodity; schools are the agencies through which it is dispensed; the crucial issue is how the providers and the customers are related in the transaction that is the central business of schools. As the book is about primary and secondary education, Gannicott almost always regards parents as the customers, with only an occasional reference to students in this capacity.

Gannicott notes that Australia now spends about twice as much, in real terms, on primary and secondary schooling as it did 20 years ago. Government schools are, on average, more costly than non-government schools (Catholic schools being, on average, the least expensive). The common justification for the increased spending is that it leads to better education. However, while there are no effective measures for many desired outcomes (and strong opposition from teacher unions to any comparative assessment), the available evidence from national and international tests indicates no general improvement in academic performance over the two decades. A substantial minority of students fall below minimally desirable levels. Recent studies of final year results suggest that, even with adjustment for differences in socio-economic background, government schools perform less well than Catholic and other private schools. Although OECD surveys have indicated no significant difference in student achievement for class sizes in the 15-40 range, much of the additional funding in the past two decades has been spent in government schools on employing more teachers in order to reduce class size.

While acknowledging the complexity of assessing educational production by using quantitative measures of input and output, Gannicott is satisfied that it is a reliable approach. He does note, however, that there is the further question of determining the underlying causes of the economic efficiency or otherwise that the quantitative measures show. In his view, the most important of these causes in the case of government schools is that they are producer dominated.

Qualitative analysis of individual schools has produced a predictable list of characteristics that make for an effective school. The 'effective school' approach has influenced policy for government schools in recent years. The main change has been a shift to greater self-management at the individual school level. However, after nearly a decade, there is no strong evidence of improved educational output. This is largely due, Gannicott claims, to the limited adoption of self-management.

The school-based administrative bureaucracy has increased in both government and non-government schools over the past six years. The total bureaucracy is now bigger than the central-regional one it has partly replaced; and, in any case, the devolution of decision-making to each school's principal and classroom teachers keeps the emphasis firmly on producer control.

Gannicott agrees that the establishment of selective and specialist government high schools and the end of zoning are desirable moves in the direction of some degree of consumer control. But the producer remains dominant, and unsuccessful applicants for a school usually outnumber those who gain enrolment. The most important reform we need, Gannicott claims, is a substantial increase in the supply of autonomous schools, in both the public and private sectors. The key to higher-quality educational outcomes is to break the dominance of the providers and enable consumers (parents) to apply more pressure of competition on those who offer educational 'goods'.

This is the special virtue Gannicott sees in 'charter schools' and for which they receive his enthusiastic support. They not only break down producer monopoly in the government system, but ensure that what is being offered as education is substantially subject to consumer choice. They are publicly owned and funded schools, but self-governing under the terms of a performance contract. They can be established by a group of parents, a local community, teachers, a university, and so on; and they may be run as profit or non-profit organisations. While they are free from many government and union restrictions, the proposal for such a school must set out how it will be conducted and, in particular, the details of its educational programme and the way its objectives will be assessed. These proposals (forming the 'charter') are to be approved by an appropriate public body. Approval of the charter would normally be for a period of three to six years. It would be revoked if the school failed to meet the tests of achievement set out in its charter. Details of each charter school would be widely published so that parents could make informed choices. Students who enrolled would bring the same per capita funding as for other public schools. 'Set-up' funds and capital costs would also be provided, as for other public schools. (I am not sure whether Gannicott includes profit-making charter schools in the public scheme.)

Charter schools could exist as a supplement to the public system. But Gannicott proposes that they should gradually replace it entirely. He is confident that public education provided wholly through these schools would ensure substantial autonomy at individual school level, and a range of options that would give customers the opportunity for meaningful choice. In these conditions of genuine competition, he does not doubt that the quality of the educational product of schooling is bound to be enhanced.

Although there are many points on which this book can be criticised, I shall restrict my comments to two pervasive features of its analysis and argument. First, the model of buying and selling a product in a competitive market is far too narrow for a good such as education. It grossly underestimates the complexity of what constitutes a worthwhile education; or, if the term is used normatively, what criteria dis-

tinguish education from indoctrinating and the many other forms of miseducation. Even when defensible criteria are established, it is a difficult task to assess the quality of actual processes and outcomes that claim to meet these criteria.

Although Gannicott acknowledges that the personal and social benefits of formal education are not just economic, it is the economic that he stresses: 'education is, after all, part of the information industry' (pp. 61-2). He often makes glowing comments on the quality of Asian schools as endorsed by their contribution to the 'rapidly growing economies' in that area. On this criterion, does the recent financial collapse in Asian countries cast doubt on the educational quality of their schools?

Despite the title of the book, it does not address in any thorough way the basic question of what primary and secondary schools should be doing in the name of education. The list of references is very thin on writings that treat this question.

Second, the proposal for charter schools is open to a number of objections. Gannicott is excessively optimistic about the capacity of parents to make sound judgments on the educational quality of schools. As is well known, choice is often based on a school's high tertiary entrance scores, even though such results leave open the question of its educational quality. A number of recent studies (relating to family health, nutrition, drugs, gambling and so on) would, at the least, indicate caution about a scheme so heavily reliant on informed and responsible choice being exercised by most parents in our society. In any case, giving the customers what they want in the name of education is not a sufficient condition for its quality.

Although Gannicott acknowledges that schools contribute to common economic and other benefits as well as to private interests, he neglects the crucial role of schools in relation to the cultural, political and other dimensions of a society's common good. These are not simply 'spillover' or 'external' benefits; they are integral to the process of education. Among the consequences are the degree of public supervision that should be exercised over schools, and the conditions that apply to what parents, students and others may choose in the name of education. Gannicott defends strong constraints on the former, and very little on the latter. His discussion does not even refer to John Dewey, the foremost theorist in defence of a common school system in a pluralist democracy. (I have attempted to discuss the complex issues, including a criticism of Dewey, in my *Parents, the State, and the Right to Educate*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988.)

To be sure, there is a place for charter schools. However, I believe that an appropriate public body should exercise more detailed supervision than Gannicott seems to allow. This would include setting and monitoring standards of teacher competence, and general curriculum guidelines. Such a body would represent the justifiable interests of the whole society in the conduct of our schools. What schools do in the name of education is not simply a matter for parents of school-age children. Charter schools might develop to the point where they replaced the present public system. But they are only one alternative, not without limitations of their own. Certainly, they should not be promoted to the neglect of other ways in which the educational quality of our schools can be improved.

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