Smoke and distorted mirrors

By Edd Black

In my five decades in the business of public education and all the political “argie-bargie” and stunts that governments of both flavours pulled, the winner of the biggest funding con job, in my opinion, has to be the Barnett Government’s Independent Public Schools (IPS) reform package.

What evidence is there to claim the IPS package was a snow job you ask?

Let’s start with this graph (see Chart 2, right) which covers the time span when IPS was introduced, produced by economist Trevor Cobbold.

Could the cutbacks in services and staff in both the regions and centrally when the IPS reform was being rolled out have had anything to do with the data on the graph, and could have the IPS reform school level funding formulas contributed to this result?

I can’t think of any other significant factors or reforms that occurred at that time to have such a dramatic impact on public education funding.

Remember we were assured that IPS would improve student funding and learning. Yes, regional and central services might be restructured (read: reduced) but public education would be better off?

IPS reforms would do much for public education. I can even recall the education minister of the day reportedly suggesting a school in Mandurah won their interschool sports carnival as they had become an IPS site.

As the smoke and distorted mirrors were rolled out, well-meaning school leaders put up their hands to join the IPS club.

The Barnett Government repeatedly refused to release any funding formulae to prove schools were being treated fairly but the extra admin support sign-up money, bonus PD resources and the right to refuse referred staff all looked good.

As more schools attained IPS status, services in the regions were reduced, social workers vanished and curriculum support evaporated at the same time as city regions grew from 110 schools to over 250 schools, supported by a regional executive director and a skeleton crew.

We had the axe fall in central services. The Maths Team training Getting It Right Numeracy teachers was reduced to a person and skilled curriculum people across subject areas were no longer required and many went back to schools or left the system.

Schools continued to sign up to IPS with the prospect of trips to Harvard University for IPS principals, with non-IPS excluded, and IPS schools took 12 per cent of referred teachers while non-IPS sites were given the rest.

IPS sites were not subject to the dreaded Expert Review Group (ERG) process in the roll out years, while those who did not sign up to IPS were subject to that review model, seen by some as discriminatory and punitive.

Some schools got extra funding, extra training opportunities and professional development, while other sites were excluded from such advantages.

Some of those schools which missed out had contexts such that they were arguably the ones in most need of such extras but were denied as they were not in position to apply/join the IPS club in those early “reform” years.

Equity was barely alive and not very well in public education, but the changes continued.

Coincidently in those heady IPS times a reform proposal was leaked from the NSW Education Minister’s Office.

Their government had commissioned a report from Boston Consulting, which was a proposal to reduce future public education costs.

The 300-odd page document went like this: Introduce the concept of autonomous schools, start with a small group and provide additional support funding and wider decision-making powers for principal and board. Add extra schools in groups and while that occurs reduce regional services and central services. When a bulk of schools sign up for autonomous status and the restructures are complete stop the additional support funding. Proposed future savings would be in excess of a billion dollars.

It was not applied, as a public servant leaked it to the NSW Teachers Federation and it prompted a local media storm. Not that such a reform would occur in Western Australia.

If you are not convinced that the IPS package contained smoke with cut back mirrors in the background have a look at national school funding in that era of the Liberal Government's reform agenda (see Chart 3, above). Why are WA's figures so different to other states?

How come funding trends in Western Australia were dramatically different from other states from between 2009 to 2018? Federal governments were gradually putting the torch to public education during that period and the territories were clear examples of that, but our resource changes in the mid-2000s appear not just to be due to federal funding.

The final graph (Chart 7, below), developed by Trevor Cobbold, illustrates resource changes in WA.

Changes that occurred include the period of the Barnett Government and their IPS reform package of public education.

A time that saw the state debt spin out of control while public education funding per student was significantly reduced.

Apart from reduction in services and funding, there were the processes knowingly introduced as part of the reforms, which could appear to be discriminatory.

Education was given special exemption under the Public Service Commission to reduce and restrict options for displaced/referred staff, both teachers and school administrators.

Principals not part of IPS were denied access to professional development programs that were designed to support leadership development.

In 2021, with IPS and non-IPS sites on the same funding base and no more ERG reviews, all schools now operate under the same school reviews and rules and we are in a good position to review and reflect on the IPS reform movement package.

Was it carried out with equity? Where were the promised follow up measures of effectiveness and hard data to prove it made a real difference?

Did the reforming Barnett Government leave public education better funded, supported and resourced after all their changes and assurances?

With a change of government and departure of education "reformers" such as (former Education Ministers) Liz Constable and Peter Collier, some repairs are being made to the public education system, but there is still more work to be done.

I believe that if we don't reflect and learn from our own history, we could be subjected to smoke and mirrors again by the next batch of zealous reformers appearing to bear glittering gifts to public education while ignoring equity and removing resources via the back door.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the SSTUWA or the Australian Education Union.

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