



What makes a great school?

Miro Martin

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What one person thinks is great, another might think is ordinary. I have very strong opinions about what makes a school great and these opinions are no doubt at odds with those opinions of some of my colleagues and 'Joe Public'.

Jumping through hoops

As a principal I got to visit many other schools and my colleagues would proudly show off their facilities, trophies or achievements. Whenever they referred to their school's NAPLAN scores I would tune out. When you are part of a system of schools you need to conform for the most part. The extent of conformity depends on the system.

When I was a principal, although I didn't like it, I had to participate in NAPLAN. In my opinion NAPLAN encourages teachers to teach to the tests, which are standardised and in no way take into account the individual differences

of students or their communities. Results are made public and unfortunately many members of the public are not so discerning or have been indoctrinated into thinking that test scores are the be-all and end-all of success at school.

A small industry has emerged which generates practice NAPLAN tests and students are drilled accordingly. This may be a worse case scenario but I have seen it happen in a couple of schools with my own eyes. Hopefully it is not the norm. Anyway, in my opinion, having good NAPLAN scores doesn't make you a great school. It just shows that you have trained your students to perform well in tests. I was brilliant in tests. I could cram information in a relatively short period of time and achieve good results, however I forgot most of what I'd crammed in an equally short period of time. There must be others like me who learn very little from testing. There are other aspects of learning which I consider more relevant than being taught to jump through hoops.

An old cliché

We want the students to reach their potential. Teaching the same thing to 28 students only works if the same thing is interesting and relevant to each of those 28 students. What are the odds of getting 28 identical students who have the same interests and needs? This is impossible. Equally challenging is a teacher creating 28 individual learning plans. The "Great School" is not only hampered by the levels of conformity exerted by the establishment, it is also hampered by the physical, out-dated structure of schools which hasn't changed much since the industrial revolution where it all began.

Hattie's mega study indicated that class size didn't have that big an impact (size effect) on learning outcomes. You can't argue with the research, but my gut tells me that teachers would be much happier and less stressed working with smaller groups. A great school works out ways of catering for the individual

needs of each of its students. I'm not referring simply to the special needs of children with difficulties. I'm referring to the needs of children with special interests or abilities. It also has the resources to achieve this or is clever in using the frugal resources it may have.

I was principal of a small Aboriginal school where the children had a real talent and interest for the arts. I couldn't find a suitably skilled teacher anywhere for these children and had to do the best with the staff on hand. A great school is one that identifies the needs of its students and finds ways of catering for these needs. Often it is simply a case of money. Often small schools can't compete against bigger schools that offer more opportunities in sport, music and other electives. The small schools may not offer the electives but they can achieve their own greatness by knowing their students and offering a smaller family atmosphere.

Communication is the key

A great school is one where the individual is given a voice. It may be a student feeling comfortable telling his teacher that he is being bullied or a parent feeling the same comfort approaching a teacher or principal with a concern. It's a place where the staff are up-front with each other and don't act in a churlish manner, holding a grudge if criticised or confronted. In a great school parents are informed and consulted. The community is involved in the decision-making process. Everyone knows what's going on.

Ownership

Most schools have boards and Parents and Citizens groups. I used to hate all the after hour meetings I had to attend, but when I stopped to think about it objectively I realised the importance of involving parents in policy and the general running of the school. It took a lot of pressure off me when I could announce that a new initiative was a result of the community making a decision rather than me having the final say. Great schools have great participation by all members of the community. This ownership extends to the students as well. If it

involves them they should be consulted, e.g. at one of my schools we were given a large grant to put in a playground. We asked the children to submit plans and ended up incorporating their ideas in the final product.

Pride

I believe that the testimony of parents and staff contribute significantly to a school's greatness. You can't beat 'word of mouth' as an endorsement. The physical appearance of a school – from the tidiness of the grounds to the way in which the students wear their uniform in public – tells a lot about how people view their school. Shopping mall displays, the behaviour of students on excursions or on their way to and from school can all contribute to the school's image.

Some would argue that academic results (dare I say it – NAPLAN) also contribute to image and pride in a school. Where does my Gold Class fit in? The Gold Class that I have written so much about was one of my proudest achievements as a principal yet the students of this class would all be at the bottom of the NAPLAN score sheet. NAPLAN doesn't show the improvement in self-esteem or the drastic turn-around in behaviour or the success of these students in craft, cooking or the arts. The Gold Class was part of a great school. Test scores would never reveal this, but ask any of the parents or community and they would all speak with great pride about their school.

Going the extra mile

I have seen teachers do extraordinary things way beyond the call of duty, from donating clothes, food and even money, to making home visits or offering free tuition after hours. These same staff would rally if a colleague were in any sort of trouble. I could write a book about the way my community rallied and supported me when they found out I had cancer. And they were like that with anyone, student or adult alike, who was ill or in some sort of bother. This is what truly makes a great school. It's not just about academic success. It's about caring for each other.

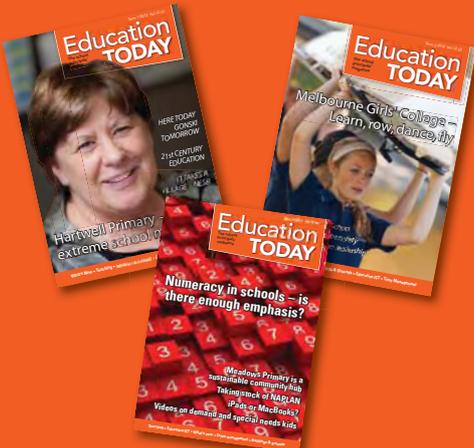
The bottom line

At the end of the day, a great school is one that focuses completely on the needs of its students. Small schools have a great advantage in this area. I went from a small school of 240 students to one that had over 700 students. In the small school I knew each child intimately. I knew the children's hobbies, pets' names, parents and even grandparents. All the staff knew the children equally as well.

I would also suggest that laughter and a good sense of humour are essential ingredients in a great school. The staff and students need to be happy. Their needs and opinions need to be respected. In a great school individuals look out for each other and are taught to care for those outside their community as well as caring for the environment. In a great school the holistic development of the child is important, not just the academic.

Finally, I believe that the most important factor in determining a great school is the quality of relationships. The staff may be brilliant and the school may have every resource known to mankind, but if the adults don't get on or the children don't have strategies for dealing with conflicts or bullying, it isn't a great school. As I said at the beginning, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

There may be some communities that think a great school is one that is run with military precision, where the children are controlled with strict discipline, where test results mean everything. For me, I prefer a place where everyone is relaxed and comfortable. It's a place where children and teachers want to be, where there is lots of laughter and where a love of learning is fostered rather than pressure to perform in a series of tests. **ET**



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