BACKGROUND

The well-known English author GK Chesterton once wrote: ‘Education was the soul of a society, as it passes from one generation to another.’ This is still relevant to the soul and purpose of education today.

Within the Australian school educational framework there are three distinct and separate educational authorities. This separation reaches back to the early days of our nation and to this day these authorities maintain their independence and virtual isolation from each other with little contact, but akin geographically. These authorities are the state government, the Catholic education sector and independent school authorities.

There are small but significant signs that these barriers and the aspirational educational goalposts are shifting. The non-government schools have fought hard for their survival and independence since they wished to cater for their families of young people, with special religious customs and heritage, whatever they may be. These schools have been retained as ‘citadels of learning’ with a strong cultural, historical and family focus.

Within this sector many of the independent—primarily the non-Catholic and Protestant schools—have blossomed as elite schools and this is reflected in their high fee structure. Most independent schools are located in major cities or towns with the highest concentration in the eastern suburbs of the city of Melbourne. Many of these schools will testify to having produced a prime minister, a state governor, a premier, many members of parliament, elite sports people and leaders in industry.

Catholic primary schools are often located next to the local Catholic parish church. Their financial survival has often been threatened. Successive governments have endeavoured to shift the Catholic primary schools into the government domain to avoid propping up a religious regime. From the earlier days the Catholic sector has always wanted their own

BRIDGING SCHOOL CULTURES: DESIGNING SHARED RESOURCE SCHOOLS

EDITORS’ PREAMBLE: Max Chester has designed schools over many years for diverse client groups. This paper begins with an interpretation of the various school sectors and their funding relationships with government bodies. He describes an intense personal learning experience as he undertook his first commission for an Islamic school. While Max advocates that government funding should support choice between government and private school systems, he also sees advantages in local schools from different sectors sharing resources with each other and their communities. The Australian government pilot program to fund shared educational facilities between local schools is an initiative which Max has been exploring with a range of client groups. He describes the barriers but also notes that the financial incentives may help develop bridges between diverse school cultures leading to more respectful and tolerant communities.
religion to be taught in their own schools, even at their own expense. The non-Catholic independent schools now do not cater as they once did in earlier days for a wide socioeconomic cross-section of children. There are also a few highly rated Catholic and Jewish schools, together with newer Islamic and other denominational schools. These independent schools generally come under the collective umbrella of State Associations of Independent Schools.

The Association of Independent Schools Victoria (AISV) was established in 1949. Membership of AISV is voluntary and is open to all registered non-government schools in Victoria. More than 200 schools belong to AISV. AISV is a member of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, the national organisation of state associations. The AISV therefore represents a select number of independent non-Catholic schools, Catholic schools that are not part of the Catholic Education Office, Jewish colleges and Islamic colleges. The association offers a wide range of services, which integrate the various streams of educational sectors for their mutual benefit.

There are at this time no ‘elite’ Islamic schools. The early Islamic schools of the 1950s were basically weekend schools where parents could send their children to the local mosque for a basic local religious education. The first Islamic school in Australia was King Khalid Islamic College, now named the Australian International Academy, in Coburg, established in 1983. King Khalid Islamic College was the first Islamic college I worked on, as an architect. The understanding and appreciation of the Islamic faith has been a steep personal learning curve; an interpretation of their needs required an adjustment in my religious psyche, for an architect who was educated in design through the mystique of the great gothic Christian churches of Europe.

A deeper understanding of the ways of Islam—to address the various attitudes, chords and differences in the faith—had to be developed to ensure that they could still be compatible with our Western building regulations. Other Islamic schools have now been established in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. These schools—all registered independent schools—rely on the Australian government for funding resources and of course survival. Generally the Islamic schools only educate a small number of Islamic children and the majority still go to local state schools.

Some Islamic parents also send their children to local Catholic schools, as some of these schools provide a single sex environment and perhaps a ‘moral’ or religious educational back drop. The incorporation of the Islamic colleges into the Independent School Associations, which acted as block grant authorities for the Commonwealth government, presented Islamic schools with the opportunity to open their doors to the wider world. Thus the government was able to channel controlled resource funds into this new section of religious schools.

The Local Schools Working Together Pilot Program

The Local Schools Working Together (LSWT) pilot program (the Program) is an important element of the Australian Government’s Education Revolution. The Program will provide $62.5 million over three funding years towards the construction of approximately 25 shared educational facilities.

The aim of the Program is to encourage government, Catholic and independent schools to work together to develop shared educational facilities which will broaden the benefit of government expenditure on capital infrastructure. Shared facilities will create new opportunities for students who might otherwise be denied access to the range of facilities enjoyed at better resourced schools. The theme of the LSWT program is ‘schools in partnership to achieve educational excellence and equity’.

The partnership theme may also extend to third parties such as local councils or businesses where the projects may feature broader community benefit. Projects involving community partnerships should maintain a primary focus on improved educational outcomes.


Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Accessed August 12, 2009

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2. The Local Schools Working Together Pilot Program
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FUNDING AND EVOLUTION

The financial status and survival of independent schools changed dramatically in the early 1970s. The Catholic school system, in particular, had survived for more than 100 years but was threatened with the growing community need for a better education platform to give their children increased opportunity in the emerging prosperous world. The secondary schools were under tremendous strain, coping with the increased numbers of Catholic children.

Commonwealth government grants started to flow, initially with recurrent grants, and then capital grants, for science blocks and libraries. The most dramatic change in funding occurred during the Whitlam government when the Australian Schools Commission was formed, chaired by the educational economist Professor Peter Karmel. The 1973 Karmel Report changed the whole fabric of educational financial resources. Yet this new broad-stream funding did not assist in bridging cultures and neither did it lead to the efficient use of shared resources:

- The Karmel Report gave rise to a period of vigorous public debate on a range of associated issues such as the legitimacy of government funding of non-government schools. It also led to acrimonious argument within the Catholic sector about needs-based and per capita funding, involving people at all levels of the Church. Some protagonists for State Aid wanted whatever funding was available distributed equally among students in non-government schools. Others took the view that the funding should be provided according to the needs of individual students.⁵

The report provided the basis for a shared use of financial resources but not as yet cultural and physical. The outcome was a trend towards more freedom of choice by parents within school systems. The bright children in the poorer parts of the city could start to have access to quality schools, as buildings and teachers started to improve.

The Islamic schools go about their work to cater for the diversity of their own national groups. Their academic results have improved significantly. The children became more self-assured in their daily activities. They were also more forthright which appeared to be a reflection of their increased pride in their schools. They are more articulate and certainly more confident as they stood to speak on their feet, and they presented well. They are less shy and always courteous. This change in the schoolyard was clearly evident reflecting the improvement in independent education.

Within this context, however, Lutheran schools have been at the forefront in sharing


“THE FINANCIAL STATUS AND SURVIVAL OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY IN THE EARLY 1970s.”

Max Chester
resources. Lutheran schools, principals and staff have sought over the years to relate to their community. Some of the ways in which there have been partnerships and relationships with the local community include:

- Sharing of teachers, especially specialist teachers—music and language
- Coordinated sporting competitions
- Sharing of facilities—trade and specialist areas, assembly halls, sporting facilities and clubs
- Local principal associations and subject group meetings
- Often there are common bus runs

These three sectors remained forthright in their ideological endeavours, separately pursuing their historical ambitions and low-lying sectarianism, with little, if any, educational contact with their adjoining neighbours. But they remained highly recognisable physically and geographically. This system evolved predominantly independently of each other but perhaps failed in achieving a wider community use of resources and a mutual understanding.

The growing central source of funding had one defined aim—a better universal independent education and sharing of resources for all. But there appeared to be limits to this aspiration, as there seemed to be barriers to achieving a shared educational prosperity that could bring them together.

To better integrate these sectors there needs to be:

- An appreciation of their individual faiths, religious or secular
- A removal of hostility and misunderstanding
- An understanding of economic and practical realities
- Better integration for a richer democratic community

There were some early examples of bridging school cultures and integration of resources but these often occurred through the agency of a unique or special opportunity and were not part of general government funding policy. In the 1970s library buildings funded by the Commonwealth government were sometimes shared between state and Catholic primary schools.

Science laboratories are another early concept of design and resources availability to secondary schools, again sponsored by the Commonwealth Schools Commission with its representatives representing the various school systems. Other examples of shared facilities evolved although these were not popular or common. These included:

- Administration facilities—not particularly successful
- Performing arts—these are expensive facilities, often sponsored by a local council. These generally are successful
- Before and after school care—some of these examples are working well
- Halls and gymnasiums—these are satisfactory if independent access is available
- Trade training—there are excellent examples at secondary colleges of this expensive facility, at state and independent institutes, with ease of access essential. The colleges should desirably be within walking distance from each other as the trade courses can be an all important part of the school curriculum in this technical age

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6 Adrienne Jericho, Executive Director, Lutheran Education Australia. Information submitted to my office April 2009.
We are now on the threshold of an exciting Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, DEEWR, project—the Local Schools Working Together Pilot Program, which formed part of the new Commonwealth government's May budget of 2008. The aim of this pilot program is to fund approximately 25 projects across Australia that display innovative collaborations between schools and other partners and to address and share infrastructure needs that are not met by existing facilities. It is envisaged that both government and non-government schools, working in partnership, could be the recipients of funding under this program. Some $62.5 million is being made available over three years.

The main emphasis is to be educational and could cover infrastructure projects facilities, such as gymnasiaums, performance arts centres, libraries, and facilities for teaching language, science or music. Partners will be invited to participate with local government and state and independent school associations.

The aim of the program is to encourage government, Catholic and independent schools to work together to develop shared educational facilities that will broaden the benefit of government expenditure on capital infrastructure. Shared facilities will create new opportunities for students who might not otherwise have access to such facilities. The theme of the program is 'schools in partnership to achieve educational excellence and equity'.

The partnership theme will also extend to third parties such as local councils or businesses where the projects may feature broader community benefit. The main aim, as stated in the Local Schools Working Together program is to pool resources and sharing the cost of maintaining infrastructure.

Bethany Catholic Primary School Classroom Block, completed 2008.

The independent classroom, has now given way to the shared learning environment, where children work individually or in groups.

7 Rudd K. and Smith, S. 2007, New Directions for our Schools. Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, Australian Labor Party
8 Rudd K. and Smith, S. 2007, New Directions for our Schools. Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, Australian Labor Party
The greatest potential for this sharing of resources lies in combining some of the facilities of government and non-government schools in the same area. Despite any apparent or suggested differences these schools may have in the values or philosophies they espouse, expensive facilities can be shared with financial savings and tangible benefits to the school, the community and the nation.  

A past example in Australia of Local Schools Working Together is the Golden Grove experiment in South Australia—refer to the article ‘Integrated Educational Services’ in this journal. It has been running successfully for more than 15 years— with a government, a Catholic, and a joint Anglican/Uniting Church secondary school all operating from the same site.

The campus shares specialist facilities, including:

- Six science laboratories
- Four networked computing laboratories
- Two computer aided design rooms
- Two electronics laboratories
- One multi-media computer room
- A computerised keyboard laboratory for music composition
- Two music studios and fourteen associated practice rooms
- Wood, metal, plastic and auto teaching areas
- Two food and two fabric craft laboratories
- A senior school library linked to satellite libraries in each of the junior schools

The three schools have their own campuses, philosophies, identities, buildings and management, but share some specialist buildings and sporting and cultural facilities. As a result, the schools have been able to afford outstanding facilities—far better than the schools could possibly aspire to if they were acting alone. There is a range of outstanding expertise that would be unlikely in schools of comparable size acting independently. A shared relationship with a government school, in particular, can only assist to make these schools overall more attractive and open to assessment by different family choices of their core school selection.

This project which would not normally be attractive educationally, economically or perhaps socially, due to:

- possible limited or restricted use
- other priorities
- obvious capital costs
- planning difficulties
- better facilities elsewhere
- potential concern at placing the school on a hierarchical platform away from the local community and providing a specialised facility which may appear pretentious

This will enable, perhaps for the first time in its history, a school or college to venture out to discover another local school, open the gate, enter, and meet the school principal and staff. It can then make contact with the local council and explain and sell the project and seek their endorsement. It is then necessary or concurrently to seek guidance from their educational authority, whether state or private.

A number of principals are apprehensive or vague about committing their school financially, legally, administratively or even morally. There has been a sense of remoteness, pride and perhaps even resentment at dealing with another school with a different faith, uneven social or economic standing and size. School principals do recognise a special leadership role in their pursuit of involving, or convincing, another local school or schools to take the risk to pursue this historic program for their mutual benefit.

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10 Rudd K. and Smith, S. 2007, New Directions for our Schools
11 Rudd K. and Smith, S. 2007, New Directions for our Schools
“SOMETIMES THE CONCEPT OF LOCAL SCHOOLS WORKING TOGETHER FELL INTO PLACE QUITE READILY IN THAT THE POTENTIAL SCHOOLS WERE NEXT DOOR, OR WITHIN EASY WALKING DISTANCE.”

Max Chester

CHOICE OF PROJECT—LOCAL SCHOOLS WORKING TOGETHER

The concept of Local Schools Working Together encouraged some more visionary schools with Commonwealth money available to open their doors for the overall betterment of the schools and the community. Responses from local councils have been positive—they can see the potential of a project for improved integration in their communities.

Projects pursued included a swimming pool; a gymnasium and multipurpose hall; a horticultural and agricultural area with specialised classroom; a sporting track and sports facilities; performing arts centres. Some councils offered support and encouraged community use. In some cases special school needs, particularly religious in nature, could be catered for by the program.

With the swimming pool it is hoped that one Islamic school will build the project and that it will be shared with a state TAFE college. The facility is designed to be open to the schools themselves; for swimming clubs; for Islamic requirements from the college; for outside use of local people; and for the parents of the students. Muslim women and their children do not have equal access to public swimming facilities at present and there is a demand for swimming facilities for Muslim women and their children. Controlled college swimming facilities would develop strategies and curricular programs by providing female-only sessions for Muslim women and their children.

For the multipurpose performing arts centre the opportunity arose where two schools shared a common boundary, a state primary school and a Catholic primary school. The existing hall on the state school site is in need of upgrading. The Catholic school also uses the hall for before and after school care, and both use the hall canteen. There are potentially strong community links, with local council support.

In this current developmental approach to pedagogy, there are strong moves for young people to develop self-esteem and communication skills. The facility will cover a range of curriculum options including music, drama and dance programs; debating and public speaking; special needs education; programs for gifted and talented children; and specialist language classes. Other non-core programs will include physical education and basketball; out of hours school care programmes; local industry training; and YMCA holiday programs.

Sometimes the concept of Local Schools Working Together fell into place quite readily in that the potential schools were next door, or within easy walking distance. There already were some working relationships between the schools and so the school principals actually knew each other. A unique opportunity

A number of people submitted advice

- Mgr Tom Doyle AM, Former Director Catholic Education, Melbourne
- Andre Butler, Assistant General Manager Facilities and Infrastructure Branch, Victoria, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
- Megan Ioannou, Manager Facilities, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
- Peter Roberts, Company Secretary, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
existed for the architect to become involved in the bridging of school cultures in the establishment of the partnership and governance committee for the ongoing legal framework as a joint committee; supporting the building committee to encompass planning and construction; advising the management and financial committee; and advising on strategies for maintenance control.

**CONCLUSIONS**

As the Local Schools Working Together Pilot Program unfolds, we begin to see a vital trend in education. The sharing of resources has other benefits. The possibility of Islamic and Catholic children working together on common projects at primary and secondary level is being considered. Projects will require physical space to conceive and exercise real community outcomes which will help to break down barriers and prejudice.

The Karmel Report in 1973 ensured the survival of the three separated streams of educational systems and the Local Schools Working Together, LSWT, funding program will further enrich our complex community and democracy. These shared resources, whether they be physical spaces, software or hardware, or human skills will benefit both students and communities.

As the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations reviews the Local Schools Working Together Pilot Program they will recognise the benefits to produce a significant bridge between cultures. It has to be noted, however, that there is some hesitancy in Catholic and Lutheran schools becoming too involved in sharing or bridging school cultures. A certain protective element has arisen due to their hard-won gains over many decades in ensuring their survival and unique religious character.

“Ivanhoe East Primary School
Space Centre
Architect: Max Chester & Associates
Image: Max Chester & Associate

**THESE SHARED RESOURCES, WHETHER THEY BE PHYSICAL SPACES, SOFTWARE OR HARDWARE, OR HUMAN SKILLS WILL BENEFIT BOTH STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES.”**

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