

**CRA09995**

**RESEARCHING THE PUBLIC PURPOSES OF EDUCATION IN  
AUSTRALIA: THE RESULTS OF A NATIONAL SURVEY OF  
PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS\***

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*Paper prepared for the 2009 Australian Association for Research in Education  
Conference, Canberra*

\* Part of a 3 year ARC-Linkage project conducted with partners, the *Australian Government Primary Principals' Association (AGPPA)* and the *Education Foundation*.

## 1. Introduction and background

Historically, Australian schools have been seen as central to nation building. That is, as well as enhancing the life chances of individuals, schooling has had a number of public purposes that advance the interests of the society as a whole. However, in response to a variety of national and international forces (Mulford et al, in press), in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding around what is meant by public purposes has become less clear. Indeed, while there continues to be considerable investment of public funds in Australian schools, there are questions as to whether and how schools today are serving public purposes. This paper reports on the initial results of one aspect, a national survey, of an ARC-Linkage project looking into such questions. The research is focused on the primary schooling sector and was conducted in partnership with the Australian Government Primary Principals' Association (AGPPA) and the Education Foundation.

Other aspects of the project are being reported elsewhere. These include an examination of the forces impacting on education nationally and internationally today (Mulford et al, in press), the shifting purposes of education in Australia as influenced by politics (Cranston et al, in press), philosophical and historical aspects of the purposes of education, and the development of professional development materials. Other writings will report on a series of Australia-wide in-depth case studies of primary schools examining how purposes of education are understood by teachers, principals and parents and actually enacted in practice, and analyses of systemic policy statements and media reporting and in-depth interviews with systemic and strategic policy makers from across Australia, relevant to the purposes of education.

Earlier work, including an earlier AARE Conference paper, set out the conceptual and theoretical framework for the research (Reid et al, 2007; Reid et al, 2008). Labaree's (1997) notions contributed to the theoretical base of our work, considering purposes such as *democratic equality*, *social efficiency* and *social mobility* - these were defined as:

- *democratic equality* - Which is about a society preparing all of its young people to be active and competent citizens. Since we depend on the collective judgment of the whole citizenry then an education based on the goal of democratic equality is clearly a public good and also involves notions of equity and social justice.
- *social efficiency* - Which is about preparing young people to be competent and productive workers. To the extent that we all benefit from an economy that is working well, then an education based on the goal of social efficiency is a public good. But it is a public good that also has a strong private purpose since it results in economic rewards for individuals.
- *social mobility* - Which is about providing individuals with a credential which will advantage them in the competition for desirable social positions. This goal constructs education as a commodity which can be traded in, say, the labour market. As such, an education based on a goal of social mobility is a private good which serves mainly private purposes.

The focus of this paper is on the first wave of results from a national survey of primary school principals in Australia. The paper will provide a discussion of some of the key findings from the survey and raise some implications and possible recommendations flowing from these.

It is important to note that every effort was made by the research team to include schools beyond the state/government sector in the survey. Invitations to participate were extended to the non-government sector (including faith-based sectors) through various avenues, including the national cross-sector principal body, the Australian Primary Principals' Association (APPA). These invitations were made across the "life" of the project and paralleled efforts by the research team to keep all primary school sectors informed of project developments. Despite the efforts to make the project inclusive of all sectors, only the government school sector participated.

## **2. The national survey**

### *2.1 Survey development*

Because the in-depth case studies were undertaken in a limited number of best-practice schools across the country, one of the main underlying purposes of the survey was to give every school, via the principal, an opportunity to contribute to the research. The original intent was for all primary schools across all sectors to participate but as noted above, this did not eventuate.

The survey was developed from the earlier conceptual and analytical work outlined above undertaken in 2007 and 2008. A battery of items, illustrative of the three purposes of education as identified in Labaree's work (1997) was generated related to the two notions of (a) *the level of importance of particular purposes of education* and (b) *the level or extent of (actual) enactment of those purposes in practice*. These items were reviewed and refined as described below. The survey was designed such that principals rated these two notions on a five-point scale of importance from "very low" to "very high".

The draft items were reviewed and refined by the research team on a number of occasions before wider critique was provided by groups of principals. For example, in Queensland, the two principals involved in the in-depth case studies were provided with a copy of the draft survey and invited to complete it and then provide comments, while in Tasmania, a workshop of interested principals (including the case study principal and president of the state primary principals' association) was convened in a workshop to review the instrument. Through such processes, feedback was obtained on the logic and clarity of each item, on the instrument generally in terms of clarity of instructions and layout, and other matters that might help maximise the return rate from principals. This range of feedback was considered by the research team. After a number of further iterations, the final version of the survey was developed.

### *2.2 Survey description*

The final version of the 2009 survey comprised 71 items of a closed format and 3 items of an open-ended format. The first eight of the closed items addressed bio-demographic information, such as school size, gender of principal. The remaining closed items (9 to 71) required participants to rate firstly the *importance* they ascribed to particular purposes of education, then secondly to rate the degree to which they believed these purposes were actually *enacted* in their particular school. This set of closed items was clustered into a number of sub-sections, including items related to *purposes of schooling* and *strategies to achieve purposes of schooling* – the latter set of items was framed around issues such as *the school curriculum, parents and community, staff organisational issues related to schools*. The

(optional) open-ended items allowed respondents to expand on a range of matters, including comments regarding any particular facilitators and barriers they saw for schools in achieving particular purposes.

It was anticipated the survey would take about 20 minutes to complete on-line (see below).

### 2.3 Survey distribution and return rate

The national survey was distributed in electronic format via membership databases provided by the AGPPA and its affiliated state and territory bodies. It was anticipated that the use of state and territory membership databases would maximise the return rate as it demonstrated to individual principals that their professional association was supportive of the administration of the survey and allowed individual states to undertake “local” strategies to urge members to complete the instrument. In some states, the presidents of the respective associations wrote directly to members encouraging them to complete the survey. It was also advertised in some state member publications. A commercial company with expertise in conducting large scale electronic surveys was employed to manage and coordinate survey distribution and return under the guidance of one of the research team members.

In all, 1071 completed surveys were received, representing an approximate 25 percent response rate. Some of the factors considered to mitigate against a higher rate included inaccurate email address lists, slow download speeds in some remote areas and the fact that many principals were engaged in other priority activities at the time, such as completing national infrastructure applications. Table 1 below summarises response rates by state/territory.

**Table 1: Response rates for survey**

State/ Territory	Supplied email address lists (N)*	Corrected address list (N)**	Useable responses (N)	Response rate (%)***
ACT	116	107	13	12
NSW	1877	1736	377	22
NT	73	68	17	25
QLD	784	725	188	26
SA	388	359	69	19
TAS	182	168	57	34
VIC	763	706	197	28
WA	471	436	153	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>4654</b>	<b>4305</b>	<b>1071</b>	<b>25</b>

\*supplied by each State/Territory primary principals' association

\*\*detailed analysis of one state (TAS) found a 7.5% error rate in the supplied email address list (as a result of principal reassignment, leave, retirement, and resignation) and this has been applied to all States/Territories

\*\*\* as a percentage of the Corrected address list; percentages are rounded

A majority of respondents provided comments via the open-ended written final three items. These were categorised under a number of broad headings. Many respondents provided more than one statement. Some of these comments are drawn upon in the discussion below to illustrate particular points.

### 3. Survey responses

Discussions of the survey responses are presented below in a number of separate sections. It should be noted that these represent a first set of analyses of the data, with further analyses underway. These will be reported at a later time.

### ***3.1 Demographic responses***

Male and female primary school principals were equally represented across the respondents, nationally, although males were more highly represented in Queensland, and Western Australia and females in South Australia, Victoria and the Territories. Schools were predominantly primary (90%), with a small number combined primary and secondary (6%). Respondents were drawn from schools of a variety of sizes, ranging from those with 50 or less students to some of 750 or more. Respondents from the larger states (e.g. New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland) tended to draw from the full range of school sizes with smaller systems (e.g. Tasmania [fewer larger schools] and the Territories) less evenly spread.

The vast majority of principals (88%) were aged 41 years or older (65% were aged 51+) with almost half (44%) having 11 or more years experience as a principal. Over half had been in their current school for more than 4 years.

### ***3.2 Item analysis – individual items***

#### (a) Item comparisons – highest, lowest mean scores

The following table (Table 2) contrasts the *highest* and *lowest* ratings of items (based on mean scores) for the *importance of purposes* and *strategies to achieve the purposes* as seen by principals.

**Table 2: Highest & lowest scoring items (mean scores)\* – level of importance of purposes and level of importance of strategies to achieve purposes**

	<b>Highest scoring</b>	<b>Lowest scoring</b>
<b>Importance of purposes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help students develop a love for learning</li> <li>• Help students develop capacities to become active and responsible members of a democratic society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start the process of sorting and selecting students into categories that help determine their life opportunities</li> <li>• Strengthen Australia’s economy</li> </ul>
<b>Importance of strategies to achieve purposes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage students to accept responsibility for their own actions</li> <li>• Encourage respect and cooperation among students</li> <li>• Value and foster the professionalism of teachers</li> <li>• Promote trust amongst students, staff and parents</li> <li>• Make students the focus of what happens in schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate league tables based upon test outcomes</li> <li>• Mandate national testing programs</li> <li>• Ensure that assessment and reporting approaches are used to sort students</li> <li>• Make schools accountable for social outcomes</li> <li>• Be focused on success in national literacy and numeracy tests</li> </ul>

\* Each item was rated on a 5 point scale – *Very high level of importance* to *Very low level of importance*

The highest scoring items for both *purposes* and *strategies* seem clearly aligned with what we would describe as public purposes, or in Labaree’s terms, democratic equality notions. In this regard, one principal noted:

*Our schools promote equity, social cohesion and reconciliation, and continue to be a core institutional component of our democratic society.*

By contrast, the cluster of lowest scoring items are aligned more closely with private purposes, or in Labaree’s terms, social efficiency and social mobility. For example, one respondent was critical of:

*A narrow focus on only academic learning and tests instead of on quality teaching and learning and relationships. ... A failure to recognise the importance of the social/emotional i.e. relationships and trust building.*

That is, this group of primary principals are clear that (democratic equality) public purposes ought be at the top of the agenda in determining what primary schools should be aiming towards and that (social mobility, social efficiency) private purposes should have much less focus. However, as the following response indicates, they were not so confident that the purposes as they saw them were necessarily those shared by policy makers:

*NAPLAN. We are told that our primary purpose is to get kids through this test! Sadly, this is where the real focus of schools is heading.*

Table 3 contrasts the highest and lowest scoring items (based on mean scores) with respect to the *enactment of the purposes and strategies to achieve the purposes* as reported by the principals in their schools.

**Table 3: Highest and lowest scoring items (mean scores)\* – level of enactment of purposes and level of enactment of strategies to achieve purposes**

	<b>Highest scoring</b>	<b>Lowest scoring</b>
<b>Enactment of purposes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote social cohesion</li> <li>• Help students develop capacities to become active and responsible members of democratic Australian society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start the process of sorting and selecting students into categories that help determine their later life opportunities</li> <li>• Strengthen Australia’s economy</li> </ul>
<b>Enactment of strategies to achieve purposes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage respect and cooperation among students</li> <li>• Encourage students to accept responsibility for their own actions</li> <li>• Involve staff in decision making and leadership</li> <li>• Make students the focus of what happens in schools</li> <li>• Value and foster the professionalism of teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate league tables based upon test outcomes</li> <li>• Encourage parental involvement in delivering the curriculum</li> <li>• Encourage parental involvement in negotiating the curriculum</li> <li>• Allow for school autonomy from system/employer</li> <li>• Ensure that assessment and reporting approaches are used to sort students</li> </ul>

\* Each item was rated on a 5 point scale – *Very high level of enactment* to *Very low level of enactment*

In terms of the actual enactment of purposes and strategies in their schools, principals, consistent with the results noted above, again identified what can be clustered as public purposes (democratic equality) to be the more important than those items related to mainly private purposes (social mobility, social efficiency). One principal noted the very negative impact of current national testing priorities on schools, the impact resulting very much from an emphasis on private purposes:

*Schooling is being distorted by a national testing agenda – the curriculum is narrowed, opportunities for students to actively participate in curriculum decisions are narrowed. ... disadvantaged students and communities are funded so inadequately that these students have limited opportunities for success.*

In one sense, principals are clear on what they would like to be doing and what they think they ought be doing, viz. public purposes, but in reality, circumstances are such that private purposes are dominant.

(b) Item comparison – purposes of schooling versus enactment of purposes

The mean scores are statistically significantly (employing 2-tailed T-test Related) higher for the level of *importance of purposes* compared with the level of *enactment of those purposes* on all but seven of the 63 items. On six items *enactment* is statistically significantly higher than *importance* and on one item there is no statistically significant difference (viz. *start the process of sorting and selecting students into categories that help to determine later life opportunities*).

Tables 4 and 5 summarise the highest and lowest statistically significantly different items with regard to *purposes* and *strategies to achieve those purposes* with regard to their level of importance and their level of enactment – importance higher than enactment.

**Table 4: Comparisons of items (mean scores) – differences with respect to *level of importance of purposes and level of enactment of those purposes***

	<b>Highest differences</b>	<b>Lowest differences</b>
<b>Purposes – importance v enactment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help students develop a love of learning</li> <li>• Contribute to an environmentally sustainable society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a resource for the local community</li> <li>• Strengthen Australia’s economy</li> </ul>

Principals report the highest difference between what they see as the purposes of schooling and the level at which they believe their school enacts those purposes as relating to helping students develop a love of learning and contributing to a sustainable society, both clearly public purposes. On the other hand, they feel they are contributing to their local communities (again a public purpose) while also contributing more generally to the economy of Australia (in Labaree’s terms, economic efficiency) which may contribute to both public and private purposes.

That an item regarding helping students develop a love of learning is reported with such differences should cause some alarm.

**Table 5: Comparisons of items (mean scores) – differences with respect to *level of importance of strategies to achieve purposes and level of enactment of those strategies***

	<b>Highest differences</b>	<b>Lowest differences</b>
<b>Strategies to achieve purposes – importance v enactment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund schools on a needs basis</li> <li>• Ensure school involvement in developing education policy</li> <li>• Support schools to collaborate with each other</li> <li>• Promote collaboration rather than competition amongst schools</li> <li>• Encourage parent involvement in delivering the curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give priority to academic learning in schools</li> <li>• Give parents the right to choose a school for their children</li> <li>• Have enrolment policies and practices that result in a diverse mix of students</li> <li>• Employ democratic decision-making</li> <li>• Have goals and priorities that primarily reflect the interests of society as a whole</li> </ul>

All five items where there is the greatest difference between level of importance and level of enactment with regard to strategies to achieve the purposes of education are related to public purposes. Some of these are matters external to the school (e.g. funding) while others are matters perhaps more relevant at the local school level (e.g. collaboration and parental involvement). However, some of the principals’ open-ended comments suggest that collaboration between schools is now being moderated by broader societal values:

*Lack of agreed collaboration between community members and school staff, competitiveness between community groups and their schools, single-mindedness of schools, parental and community groups (not my kid’s school, not my business) fostering an unwillingness to share.*

In reviewing the open-ended comments in the survey for some elaboration on these findings overall, there are two very powerful messages that emerge. The first is that there is

insufficient attention to, and funding for students with socio-economic disadvantage and/or learning needs. The government schooling sector in particular is seen to be carrying significant responsibilities regarding these students without adequate or equitable funding. Principals' comments illustrate where they see funding priorities ought to be:

*Funding schools on a basis of need should ensure that all schools receive adequate funding to meet the needs of their students and those with additional needs and challenges receive additional funding accordingly.*

*Inadequate funding of differential support for students with special educational, social, emotional or welfare needs. Schools that cater for 'more difficult to educate' students need to be recognised and funded to continue this work.*

The second message seen to underpin these findings is linked to the current focus on national testing:

*League tables and comparisons ... that (do) not take into account the clientele of a school will create angst, division, disparity between schools ... and, ultimately destroy the morale of the teaching service.*

Table 6 summarise the highest significantly different items with regard to *purposes* and *strategies* with regard to their level of importance and their level of enactment – enactment higher than importance.

**Table 6: Comparisons of items (mean scores) – Differences with respect to *level of enactment and level of importance of purposes & strategies***

	<b>Highest differences</b>
<b>Purposes and strategies – enactment v importance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate national testing programs</li> <li>• Mandate league tables based on test outcomes</li> <li>• Be focussed upon success in the national literacy and numeracy results</li> <li>• Make schools accountable for social outcomes</li> <li>• Make schools accountable for academic outcomes</li> <li>• Ensure that assessment and reporting approaches are used to sort students</li> </ul>

It is clear here that principals see assessment, testing and accountability agendas as taking on a higher prominence than they, the principals think should be the case. This is reflected in some of the comments made by principals already noted above. Apart from the item “make schools accountable for social outcomes”, there is no sense of public purpose in the other items. Even for the “social outcomes” item, several of open-ended comments suggest that this is more about principals feeling their schools are being required to “pick up” responsibilities for the social, emotional development of young people more than they might like and in areas that might otherwise have been the remit of someone else e.g. parents. In terms of schooling sectors, many suggest that government schools are carrying the dominant load in this regard in comparison with non-government schools. The following comments illustrate these points:

*Overwhelming expectations on schools – seen as the social clearing house for every issue of society.*

*Society keeps “dumping” problems into schools for them to solve or teach e.g. sex education, bike education, non-sexist education, healthy eating ...*

*Government schools carry too large a percentage of students from poorer backgrounds, with learning and social issues and disabilities compared with the private system ...*

### **3.3 Data reduction: Factor Analysis**

In order to “produce a manageable number of factor variables to deal with” (Gay et al, 2006, p. 2004) rather than the larger number of survey items, Factor Analysis of the survey responses was undertaken using SPSS Statistics Version 17. The Factor Analyses of the survey responses employed the principal component analysis extraction with varimax rotation (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Eigenvalues greater than one were used to get a sense of how many factors and items were deleted, especially for the strategy factors, where they did not load highly and/or clearly on one factor.

The results of the Factor Analysis are considered firstly in terms of the items related to the *purposes of schooling*, then to the items related to the *strategies to achieve those purposes*.

#### **(a) Purposes of education**

Four clusters or groupings of items (factors) were found to account for 60% of the variance (see Table 7 below). These were assigned labels (variables) as follows:

1. Student love of learning and responsible citizens for democracy and common good (33%)
2. Community development and resource (11%)
3. Social justice (8%)
4. Sorting for employment and the economy (8%)

Factors 1 to 3 are considered *public purposes*, while Factor 4 is considered a *private purpose*.

**Table 7: Factors - How are the purposes understood?**

Item #	Item	Factor Weightings*
<b>1. Student love of learning and responsible citizens for democracy and common good (Public Purpose) – 33%</b>		
9	Help students develop a love for learning	0.677
13	Help students develop capacities to become active and responsible members of Australian democratic society	0.677
11	Help students learn to value diversity	0.656
15	Reflect and sustain democratic values of society	0.649
14	Contribute to an environmentally sustainable society	0.642
12	Promote social cohesion	0.574
<b>2. Community development and resource (Public Purpose) - 11%</b>		
17	Assist in the development of their local communities	0.857
16	Provide a resource for the local community	0.846
<b>3. Social justice (Public Purpose) - 8%</b>		
19	Compensate for disadvantage among students	0.838
20	Lay the foundations for a more socially just society	0.729
<b>4. Sorting for employment and the economy (Private Purpose) - 8%</b>		
18	Start the process of sorting and selecting students into categories that help determine their later life opportunities	0.713
10	Help students develop basic knowledge and skills for employment	0.657
21	Strengthen Australia's economy	0.650

\* 60% of variance accounted for

It is clear that the respondents to this survey gave an priority to public purposes over private purpose – over fifty percent of the variance is accounted for in the three identified public purpose factors. Even item 10, *Help students develop basic knowledge and skills for employment*, might be considered to have some public purpose orientations in so far as assisting students move successfully into later carer choices. In Labaree's terms, this is about social efficiency which can serve both public and private purposes.

This situation, not surprisingly, is consistent with the discussions above and in many ways runs counter to the prevailing priorities currently in evidence in schools and education across Australia today.

#### (b) Strategies to achieve purposes

Six clusters or groupings of items (factors) were found to account for 52% of the variance (see Table 8 below). These were assigned labels (variables) as follows:

1. Foster professional and student trust and collaboration (24%)
2. Value and resource difference and disadvantage (8%)

3. Community resource, development and involvement (6%)
4. Emphasise diversity within and between schools (5%)
5. Student involvement in curriculum (4%)
6. National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools (5%)

Factors 1 to 5 are considered *public purposes*, while Factor 6 is considered a *private purpose*.

**Table 8: How are the purposes enacted (i.e., strategies)?**

Item No.	Focus *	Item Wording	Factor Weightings**
<b>1. Foster professional and student trust and collaboration - 24% of variance (Public Purpose)</b>			
51	ST	Involve staff in decision making and leadership	0.674
50	ST	Value and foster the professionalism of teachers	0.668
48	ST	Promote trust amongst students, staff and parents	0.639
49	ST	Practice decision making processes that are democratic and transparent	0.625
55	SP	Foster an open and collaborative teaching culture	0.591
42	S	Encourage students to accept responsibility for their own actions	0.590
41	S	Encourage respect and cooperation among students	0.582
54	SP	Employ democratic decision making	0.543
52	ST	Foster staff discussions about the purposes of schooling	0.508
<b>2. Value and resource difference and disadvantage - 8% (Public Purpose)</b>			
40	S	Allocate extra resources for programs for students with specific or extra learning needs	0.691
38	S	Include measures to cater for students with diverse interests and needs	0.681
37	S	Have interventions to help compensate for disadvantage	0.674
39	S	Value differences amongst students	0.662
34	C	Promote respect for and understanding of difference	0.586
25	C	Be flexible enough to cater for the needs, interests and abilities of all students	0.515
<b>3. Community resource, development and involvement - 6% (Public Purpose)</b>			
46	P	Be a community resource	0.776
57	SP	Contribute to the development of the local community	0.741
47	P	Encourage wider community involvement in the school	0.723
44	PC	Encourage parents in negotiating the curriculum	0.551
45	PC	Encourage parent involvement in delivering the curriculum	0.547
<b>4. Emphasise diversity within and between schools - 5% (Public Purpose)</b>			
61	O	Give emphasis to diversity within schools	0.704
60	O	Give emphasis to diversity between schools	0.638
59	O	Give parents the right to choose a school for their children	0.627

5. Student involvement in curriculum - 4% (Public Purpose)				
23	C	Encourage student participation in delivering the curriculum		0.794
22	C	Allow students involvement in negotiating the curriculum		0.781
6. National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools - 5% (Private Purpose)				
29	C	Be focussed upon success in national literacy and numeracy tests		0.758
64	O	Mandate national testing programs		0.723
32	C	Ensure that assessment and reporting approaches are used sort students		0.613
65	O	Mandate league tables based on test outcomes		0.560
26	C	Give priority to academic learning in the school		0.520
* Focus section in survey, i.e.: C=Curriculum, S=Students, PC=Parent & Community, ST=Staff, SP=School Processes, O=Organisation of schooling				
** Only those items loading at .500 or higher - a total of 52% of the variance accounted for				

Again, public purposes dominate, with the five public purpose factors accounting for most of the variance. The sixth purposes factor, *National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools*, accounts for only 5 percent of the variance.

### (c) Comparisons of importance and enactment factors for purposes of schooling

Table 9 compares the Level of Importance and Level of Enactment for the four broad purposes of Australian primary schooling factors identified via the Factor Analysis.

**Table 9: Comparisons of level of importance and level of enactment for four purposes of schooling factors**

Factor (variance accounted for)	Importance		Enactment		Difference		Sig 2-tailed
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<u>Public Purposes:</u>							
1. Student love of learning and responsible citizens for democracy and common good (33%)	4.43	0.45	3.93	0.57	0.50	-0.12	0.000
2. Community development and resource (11%)	3.70	0.81	2.66	0.72	1.05	0.09	0.000
3. Social justice (8%)	4.10	0.73	3.75	0.77	0.35	-0.04	0.000
<u>Private Purpose:</u>							
4. Sorting for employment and the economy (8%)	3.05	0.66	3.22	0.57	-0.17	0.09	0.000

The highest scoring importance factor (using means) was *student love of learning and responsible citizens for democracy and common good*, followed by *social justice, community development and resource*, and *sorting for employment and the economy*. The highest scoring enactment factor was *student love of learning and responsible citizens for democracy and common good* followed by *social justice, sorting for employment and the economy*, and *community development and resource*.

All differences in means between importance factors and enactment factors were statistically significant (employing 2-tailed t-test - related) with *importance* being higher than *enactment*, except for *sorting for employment and the economy* where *enactment* was higher than *importance*. The largest difference in means between *importance* and *enactment* was *community development and resource* followed by *student love of learning and responsible citizens for democracy and common good, social justice* and *sorting for employment and the economy*.

In summary, it could be argued that, generally, while principals saw public purpose factors as priorities in terms of level of importance in absolute terms, they were not able to translate those into practice (enactment) to that same degree. Indeed, this was emphasised with the private purpose factor, *sorting for employment and the economy*, being enacted to a higher degree than was its assigned level of importance. There are clear tensions here between what principals think ought be the priorities of schooling, and what those priorities translate into in practice in their schools.

Contributing to the development of the community and making the school a community resource was seen by principals as the most significant area for action – the level of enactment fell well below its assigned level of importance.

(d) Comparisons of importance and enactment factors for strategies to achieve purposes of education

Table 10 compares the Level of Importance and Level of Enactment for the six strategies to implement the purposes of schooling factors.

**Table 10: Comparisons of level of importance and enactment for six strategies to achieve the purposes of schooling factors**

Factor (variance accounted for)	Importance		Enactment		Difference		Sig 2-tailed
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<u>Public Strategies:</u>							
1. Foster professional and student trust and collaboration (24%)	4.64	0.33	4.16	0.51	0.48	-0.18	0.000
2. Value and resource difference and disadvantage (8%)	4.56	0.40	3.99	0.62	0.57	-0.22	0.000
3. Community resource, development and involvement (6%)	3.83	0.57	3.00	0.68	0.83	-0.11	0.000
4. Emphasise diversity within and between schools (5%)	3.70	0.79	3.28	0.79	0.42	0.00	0.000
5. Student involvement in curriculum (4%)	3.51	0.81	2.87	0.79	0.64	0.02	0.000
<u>Private Strategy:</u>							
6. National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools (5%)	2.72	0.61	3.03	0.66	-0.31	-0.05	0.000

The highest scoring importance factor (using means) was *foster professional and student trust and collaboration* followed by *value and resource difference and disadvantage, community resource, development and involvement, emphasise diversity within and between schools, student involvement in curriculum, and National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools*. The highest scoring enactment factor was *foster professional and student trust and*

*collaboration followed by value and resource difference and disadvantage, emphasise diversity within and between schools, National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools, community resource, development and involvement, and student involvement in curriculum.*

All differences in means between importance factors and enactment factors were statistically significant (employing 2-tailed t-test related) with importance being higher than enactment, except for *National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools* where enactment was higher than importance. The largest difference in means between importance and enactment was *community resource, development and involvement*, followed by *student involvement in curriculum, value and resource difference and disadvantage, foster professional and student trust and collaboration, emphasise diversity within and between schools*, and *National 'basics' tests to sort students and schools*.

Similar comments to those made above are relevant here. That is, while principals clearly noted strategies to achieve public purposes as having high levels of importance, they were not enacted (in practice) to the same level. The exception, similar to that noted above related to national testing where that was enacted to a higher level than its perceived level of importance. Many principals' open-ended comments related to matters concerning the national testing program – all of these were negative.

Again, the largest difference for importance over enactment was evident in areas related to community resource and development – with embedded notions of public purposes.

#### **4. General discussion**

These preliminary findings from this national survey of (government) primary school principals overwhelmingly points to tensions between what they, the principals, believe ought be the purposes of education and what the strategies to achieve those purposes might be, and the realities of what is actually happening. It could be argued that the results indicate a major shift away from public purposes of education to those more aligned with private purposes. Using Labaree's terminology, democratic equality orientations are diminished relative to those associated with social efficiency and social mobility.

Analysis of 950 open-ended comments provided by principals regarding what they saw as the barriers to schools focusing on and achieving public purposes indicated that the main elements were related to (number of comments relevant to each point are noted):

- inadequate, inequitable facilities and resourcing (n = 235);
- unsympathetic, divisive, fragmented and expedient political processes and policy (178);
- mistaken belief that public schools can fix all societal problems (129);
- negative media and political portrayal of public schools (127);
- competitive national testing and league tables (68);
- unfair enrolment policies and practices (59);
- poor teachers, curriculum and school organisation (39);
- negative and incorrect public perceptions about the quality of public education (and the consequent residualisation of public education) (38);
- teacher and principal quality, income, workload, planning time, administrative demands, training and access to quality professional development (35);

- societal issues and fragmentary change e.g. individualism (23); and,
- lack of principal and school autonomy e.g. to hire and fire staff, resource use (21).

Principals also were asked to indicate those elements that might help promote public purposes. Some 900 comments were provided and these have been categorised into 8 areas:

- adequate, equitable resourcing and support (n = 292);
- belief in students, partnerships and diversity (210);
- sympathetic political processes and policy (168);
- positive media and school promotion (142);
- address societal problems and believe in public education (128);
- quality teaching and learning (119);
- transparency and accountability for funding (23); and,
- public perception, understanding and knowledge about education and schooling (19).

It is noteworthy here that barriers ‘external’ to the school dominate (at least 80% of responses). Inadequate resourcing and support, unsympathetic politicians and bureaucracies, broader societal problems laid at the school door, and a negative media are seen by the principals as contributing to an uneven and unfair playing field, especially in comparison to the private schooling sector, and difficulty in successfully catering for, or at a minimum showing tolerance to, a diverse student population and facilitating a socially just, equitable, cohesive, and inclusive society. A good number of the facilitating factors also are related to ‘external’ issues. However, there are certainly some, such as *belief in students, partnerships and diversity* and *quality teaching and learning* that are clearly the remit of individual schools -principals, teachers and school communities.

There is a strong sense that principals write with a level of anger and perhaps despair at the lack of fairness they claim abounds in the management and treatment of public education in Australian society. Indeed, the social mobility notion becomes strongly evident in the open-ended responses of many principals when they draw stark contrasts between the government and non-government sectors. To be noted in considering this point is that the survey made no attempt to overtly draw distinctions across the schooling sectors, nor even invite respondents to make any such comments. However, the extent of the comments in this regard cannot be ignored. Many of the comments reflected views that highlighted two particular issues. The first of these related to what was considered to be unfair funding patterns across the schooling sectors. Comments illustrative of this include:

*A huge resourcing divide still continues to exist between government and private school sectors. A more serious attempt must be made to ensure all students have access to the same educational opportunities in facilities that are of equal standard.*

*Sufficient funding and resourcing to ensure that public schools are not seen as the ‘poor cousins’ of their private contemporaries ...*

The second key point of difference made between the sectors related to the student ‘clientele’ present in the respective government and non-government schools. Many respondents saw that government schools enrolled “all comers” and particularly catered for those from more challenging social-economic backgrounds compared with the non-government school sector.

*Public schools are inclusive. We do not judge students on entry, rather we accept every child who walks through the door as an individual who has individual educational needs.*

*Uneven playing field between public and private sectors. Public must enrol all whereas private pick and choose only those that fill their schemata.*

## **6. Concluding comments**

The results of this national survey echo a deal of pessimism if we believe schools do have roles and responsibilities in addressing public purposes of education. There are clearly reported tensions, as expressed by primary government school principals, that schools are not orientated towards public purposes to the degree they think they should, nor are they enacting practices that support public purposes. Many of the barriers to achieving a greater focus in schools on public purposes are seen to be related to external (to the school) issues, such as government policy decisions, differential funding and resourcing across school sectors and emerging community and societal factors. The following comments from two principals illustrate and summarise many of the issues raised in this paper. They present as matters warranting debate among policy makers and practitioners if we are to move (back) to a situation where schools are seen as central to nation building.

*Our history will reflect a time of wasted opportunity and social divisiveness due largely to our failed approach to schooling and the provision of education in the second half of the 20th century. Unless we agree as a nation to bring together all those involved in policy making and develop a bipartisan approach to the provision and funding of education, Australia as a nation will continue to slide further down the list of advanced countries. How can we possibly expect to remain a highly advanced futuristic nation with our current haphazard, highly political approach to education?*

*Narrow understandings of the nature of schooling in the 21st century on the behalf of politicians, influential community members and educational bureaucracies continue to hamper the work of schools, the learning of young people and the development of productive community/school partnerships. ... Schools must be better resourced to manage the diversity of students and communities. We have 21st century needs, but are funded on a model that does not understand the nature of our student need. Inadvertently schools then become the scapegoats for all that is amiss in society. Schools can do better for the common good- no doubt about it - but we need to be resourced and supported to respond to contemporary needs, not those of a bygone era.*

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