

# Self-governing schools provide a better option

LAST week, I contributed to a feature in *The Advertiser* in which key stakeholders assessed our state's education system. A variety of issues were raised, but there was a consistent response to the question: Where should money be spent to improve education? Those who don't work for the government answered: Less money on centralised administration - more money in schools.

That same week, the Western Australian government announced its own revolution in education - independent public schools. Jane Lomax-Smith told us we don't want them in South Australia.

The WA program reads like SA's Partnerships 21 (P21) before it was hobbled. For those who don't know, under P21 SA school councils became governing councils, with powers and authorities to run the local school. It didn't last very long once the state government changed in 2002.

Under the Act, the governing council has the authority, autonomy and resources to plan, staff and operate the school. In reality, governing councils have limited and declining scope to make any positive impact on the school. Almost all the money is pre-spent by



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the Department of Education and Children's Services, the principal has little influence over staff selection and the governing council is more a policy taker than policy maker.

What went wrong? We decentralised the education Act, but we kept the centralised education department - and it has been a tug-of war ever since.

Find a country where education is flourishing and you find a country with self-governing schools (SGS). The WA trial isn't some fringe theory. SGS is a global phenomenon because it delivers a better standard of education than the old, massive, centralised government department.

In New Zealand, they don't have an education department any more. A Ministry of Education handles curriculum and assessment, but everything else is done at the school level. In countries like the Netherlands, 94 per cent of all school decisions are made at the local

level; in Australia only 11 per cent are made with real autonomy.

Why are self-governing schools better? Because every school is different and the local community is better at adapting to local needs than a large government department. Parents and the local community:

**ARE** more committed to their children than bureaucracies are to their clients;

**HAVE** a better understanding of local problems than a government department;

**ARE** more flexible and creative than massive service agencies;

**ARE** cheaper than bureaucrats, leaving more dollars for the actual school.

It isn't just international studies that prove this. Look at what is happening in our own state. Four years ago, we had the national *Investing in Our Schools* program. Like the BER, schools applied for improvement grants, funding computers to buildings.

It worked wonderfully well. Why? Because the money went directly to schools and they spent it wisely.

Instead, it goes to the state governments and within months, there is an inquiry underway to investigate skimming, price-gouging and waste.