

Background Briefing

on ABC Radio National

Testing times for schools

18 November 2007



Queensland school children

[full image](#)

There's a new kind of primary school coming -- ready or not. Bigger schools, different ways of learning, more special interest groups in class. Not just the three Rs and computers, but character and your place in society taught in all schools across the country, and a chaplain to help with behaviour and mental health. Reporter: Ian Townsend.

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Transcript

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THEME

Charlotte: and I got it.

Ian Townsend: What's up here, Charlie, what can you see up here on the left?

Charlotte: My rainbow school.

Ian Townsend: When are you going to school?

Charlotte: Five weeks time.

Ian Townsend: Next year.

Charlotte: Next year.

Ian Townsend: Excited?

Charlotte: Yes.

Ian Townsend: When my daughter Charlotte walks down this road to the local primary to start her first day at school next year, she'll be entering a public school system that's lurching into an uncertain future.

Big changes are coming for all schools, public and private, primary and secondary. But it's the small public primary school that's going to change the most. It's in real danger of disappearing.

Welcome to Background Briefing. I'm Ian Townsend and this is my daughter Charlotte.

Charlotte: Got to be good, there's a play area.

Ian Townsend: Will you be learning new things?

Charlotte: Yes.

Ian Townsend: Learn to read and write?

Charlotte: Yes. I'm going to play with all my friends forever. Not forever.

Ian Townsend: Charlotte's a bit nervous about school. And so am I. The changes that are happening in our schools are many and mind-boggling. Around the world, the revolution in technology alone is turning schools upside down.

On the board of the International Confederation of Principals is Andrew Blair.

Andrew Blair: Fifteen years ago schools were about providing information to kids, and asking for kids to retrieve that information on the day of the exam. Now, if a school is in the business of providing information to kids as their core purpose, then they're well out of date already. The internet, electronic communication, has replaced all of that. What we are now on about is young people having sets of skills which enables them to interpret, development argument, to be creative and be innovative, in a way that wasn't in the curriculum 15, 20 years ago.

Ian Townsend: We're all a bit scared of change. For the parents of the 3-million children in public and private schools around the country, this is going to be a big issue. The changes that are coming will challenge what we think education is.

Andrew Blair.

Andrew Blair: Information is not the game; it's what you do with it, and how you actually use that information to create interdisciplinary learning, for example. The whole idea that we will return to history, geography, Australian history and think that those things aren't merged for me is a rather curious notion when, in fact, we've got to be going in the opposite direction.

Ian Townsend: So today on Background Briefing, we'll be looking closely at how these ideas will affect that most elementary of schools, the publicly-funded primary school.

And it's not just technology that's shaking things up.

Big business, for instance, has found a market in public schools and schools are becoming more businesslike themselves.

Imagine public super-schools of 3,000 children or more, from kindergarten to Year 12, with front offices that look more like the head office of a corporation. Schools that compete with other schools for the best students and for private as well as public dollars, schools with brand names that specialise in the arts, or in environmental studies, and that have budgets of perhaps \$30-million or \$40-million.

That's where the public school system is heading.

In this push for bigger and more corporate schools though, the primary school's being left behind.

When governments make education policies nowadays they speak in a language that most of us aren't familiar with. When policymakers talk about schools they talk about the 'early years' from kindergarten to Year 4; the 'middle years', from Year 5 to about Year 9; and 'senior years'. They don't mention primary schools much any more.

The president of the Australian Primary Principals' Association is Leonie Trimper.

Leonie Trimper: Yes, we felt the word 'primary' was starting to disappear, and that became a real worry to us because there's well over 6,500 primary schools. I think the only time that 'primary' is discussed fully is when the national testing occurs and when the results come out, and I think that's the only time the spotlight is on primary, is around national testing, and I think that's real sad.

Ian Townsend: And their concerns that primary schools are being left behind are being backed up by researchers.

A new report that looks at the precarious state of primary schools was released last month. It's called *In the Balance* and its author is Professor of Education at Perth's Edith Cowan University, Max Angus.

Max Angus: The primary school is more than a place where you go just to learn to read and to compute and so forth. They're places where you learn about where you fit in the world, how to get on with others, character is formed in those years. And I think primary school principals are justifiably concerned that they've basically dropped off the radar a bit. We talk about early years, we talk about the senior years and we talk about the middle years, which spans primary and secondary. Well, we should be talking about primary schools because kids spend usually six or seven years or more of their life in a primary school, and the total institution is of enormous importance to their character

development, as well as to their cognitive development.

Ian Townsend: Over the past decade, there's been a seismic shift in the way governments and businesses look at schools. The Parents and Citizens groups around the country have been watching as other groups have become much more interested in what schools are doing.

Busy?

Terry Aulich: Yes, because you've also got an internal conference following.

Ian Townsend: The national umbrella group of P&Cs is called the Council of State School Organisations, and its executive director is Terry Aulich.

Terry Aulich: Governments have in a way, in the last decade, decided that they will intervene much more in education. That is, at the political end there's been a lot more intervention in the way education is funded, the way education is organised, what goes in the curriculum. They've got a hands-on approach which is compared with, say, 30 years ago, quite different, and that's partly because they want better national results, they want us to be more productive, they want us to turn out kids who have got skills that make them good citizens and productive workers etc. etc.

Ian Townsend: So what happened a decade ago that suddenly got everybody interested in what all schools were actually doing?

Well in the late 1990s, the education ministers from around the country met and decided to write down exactly what they wanted to see schools achieve.

They signed what's called the *National Goals for Schooling*. It's only two pages long and there's a link to it on the Background Briefing website.

It lists 18 goals for schools. For instance, the paper says that when students leave school they should:

Reader: Have qualities of self-confidence, optimism, high self-esteem, and a commitment to personal excellence as a basis for their potential life roles as family, community and workforce members.

Ian Townsend: The paper lists eight key learning areas that children should study: the arts, English, health and physical education, languages other than English, mathematics, science, studies of society and environment, and technology.

But what the paper also does is set goals for other things, such as character. Students should:

Reader: Have the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives, and to accept responsibility for their own actions.

As well as

Have an understanding of, and concern for, stewardship of the natural environment, and the knowledge and skills to contribute to ecologically sustainable development.

Ian Townsend: These are fine ideals, and it means that we expect schools to tackle a great deal more than just maths and English.

And what's happened in the past few years is that schools have been swamped with good ideas about how to achieve these goals.

So you get interest groups coming to schools, wanting to run classes in pet care, or beach safety, or ethics.

You can see the problem for primary school teachers, who have to teach all of these things to one class and have only 25 hours a week in which to do it. It's created what's now called the cluttered curriculum.

Leonie Trimper from the Primary Principals Association.

Leonie Trimper: So we're talking sex education, drug education, road safety, bike safety, dog safety, financial literacy. Some of those have always been part of the primary school curriculum, but I think more in a complementary role. The expectation has been that they would be dealt with at home and, of course, we'd complement what's done at home. But we think the pendulum has swung now and that there's just an expectation that the schools will pick up these issues and resolve them.

Ian Townsend: Why does a school feel as if it might be obliged to do that? What pressures are on principals to do this, because surely if there's an overcrowded curriculum it's the principal's fault?

Leonie Trimper: Well look, what happens, interest groups lobby the government, and all of these issues that you list are important. Of course, we want children to understand bike safety and road safety and train safety, you do tend to think you don't want the children to miss out, they are important skills, some children you know with their family backgrounds and that may not access all these safety issues, so you tend to in your nurturing role (say), 'Well yes, we'd better do them', and you try to squeeze them in somehow.

Ian Townsend: In other words, primary school principals find it really hard to say 'no' to any group with a good idea.

But last month the association representing primary principals did something about it. They released a Charter on Primary Schooling that effectively cuts the eight key learning areas listed in the Goals for Schooling in half. It says for primary schools the core subjects are English, maths, science and social education. Social education was to be called 'history', and this term's still at the centre of a hot debate.

But essentially, says Leonie Trimper, the charter's trying to give principals more power to say 'no'.

Leonie Trimper: The Charter is trying to help schools I guess rationalise and give them permission to say, 'Hey, some of these things do belong with parents. If they're taking you away from your core business, say no'.

Ian Townsend: The charter's still being debated. In the meantime, principals and education departments are still saying 'yes'.

It's a full day for kids attending this large public school in Sydney.

Parent: It's a lot busier, and parents have to be much more interactive with their children, which is quite a tax on parents in the evenings. Often parents need to have tutors, because the complexity of some of the English and things is quite challenging even for the parents.

Parent: There's some pressure from some parents to add languages into the school, but I think that would be too much for them.

Parent: I think the kids do get tired. They come home exhausted and just collapse in a heap and don't want to do anything else. Whereas we used to play.

Parent: Look, I think there is a great deal more pressure on them nowadays, than there ever was in the past, and I think sometimes homework is not as beneficial as we may think it could be for them. Although she's very lucky in the sense that she handles it reasonably well, and I think the sad part about it is that she's only going to have to go on and handle even more pressure in high school. So in a sense, they may as well get used to it because that's the way it is, not that I necessarily agree with it.

Ian Townsend: Trying to squeeze new subjects into an already overcrowded curriculum has put enormous pressure on teachers and principals as well.

More than 800 teachers a year claim compensation for stress related illnesses in New South Wales alone. A study in 2003 found that 40% of school principals in Victoria had a diagnosed work-related illness.

We heard earlier from Andrew Blair, who's on the board of the organisation of international principals. He's also president of the Australian Secondary Principals Association and is part of a growing number of school leaders who want to take control of public schools out of the hands of governments and put it firmly in the hands of principals.

This is what's called 'autonomy', and it's the new buzzword in education.

There's a big difference between states, in how much control or autonomy a principal has in his school. In Queensland, public school principals don't know what their staff are paid. In Victoria,

principals and school councils can hire and fire, and control much of their budget.

The argument also goes that the principals of autonomous schools would have a bigger say in what their schools teach. Primary schools, in that case, wouldn't need a charter and in fact, says Andrew Blair, the Primary Schools Charter is a backward step.

Andrew Blair: The world is far more complex. The challenges are more complex for schools and therefore I think the curriculum needs to be more complex and the organisation of schools needs to be more complex to meet those needs. I don't think we're going to solve that by saying, 'We're going to throw the emphasis entirely on literacy and numeracy, and throw up our hands because the curriculum is looking crowded'. What actually autonomy says is that within a national framework, school communities have got the capacity to make the decisions about the curriculum organisation, the level of content; so in other words, there is local control which in many ways cuts through those issues of 'This has all been done to us'. Really, in the end, I want school communities to stand up and say, 'Well these are the requests being made of us, now we're going to sift through that and see what works for us', and make those decisions and feel they have the capacity to do that. And I don't think a reductionist return to the 1950s is going to actually put Australia in the place it needs to be.

SINGING: 'Inchworm'

Two and two are four

Four and four are eight

Eight and eight are sixteen,

Sixteen and sixteen are thirty-two.

Inchworm, inchworm, measuring a marigold

You and your arithmetic you'll probably go far.

Ian Townsend: That's Danny Kaye singing 'Inchworm' from the 1952 movie, *Hans Christian Andersen*.

The public primary school today is expected to do a lot more than it did 50 years ago. All sorts of groups now see primary schools as a sort of supermarket in which they can sell their ideas.

In North Queensland, the city of Mackay is booming with workers flocking to the Bowen Basin coal mines. Eight years ago, Beaconsfield State Primary School was flanked by sugarcane fields. Now it's surrounded by housing estates.

Good-day Paul.

Paul Richardson: Welcome to Beaconsfield.

Ian Townsend: Ian Townsend from ABC Radio National. Thanks, it's nice to be here. It's lovely. Lovely day. I do like the

The school's principal, Paul Richardson, is enthusiastic about his school's green credentials, and we're out behind the school looking at a corner of the yard where there's a small forest of young trees.

Paul Richardson: This is our future forest. It's part of our curriculum connections program where we're linked in with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and it's a joint venture with the Mackay City Council.

The Marine Park Authority has very much taken the school under its wing, and we go up and visit the Reef Wonderland up in Townsville, and the educational programs that they offer are very supportive of what we're trying to do here. Mackay City Council has been very proactive in getting schools involved in the future of the development of Mackay, and the project officer from Mackay City Council works really closely with the teachers here, and they provide the trees for us, they provide the machinery to dig the holes for trees. As you can see by the big piles of mulch around everywhere, we get those as well. So it's very much supported in an active way as well as in a financial way.

Ian Townsend: The community's involved in a big way at Beaconsfield. There's certainly a lot going on, and much of the emphasis is on the environment.

Paul Richardson: And as part of all these projects we joined in with the Pioneer Catchment Group as well, so the children understand that whether we're up the valley at Eungella or whether we're down here on the coast, we're part of the same catchment and we impact on each other's environments. We've just joined the turtle watch group. We've got children here who are going to spend many a night over the next few months sitting out on a beach waiting for turtles to climb the beach and lay eggs. And that's another significant feature of the school where we get the children going out and working with other community members.

Ian Townsend: And the principal, Paul Richardson, says environmental groups are now approaching the school, to see what's going on.

Paul Richardson: What we're doing in the school is attracting people to come in and see what's happening. When we were kids it was slightly different, but now I think that's the future of schools, to have community interaction and make it a community resource so that people can use the things that the kids are doing here, and the learning that the kids are doing is creating an environment so that when they grow up they too can go back to their schools.

Ian Townsend: All this community involvement seems to work well for Beaconsfield State Primary School.

But Beaconsfield is also doing something that in Victoria recently, created a storm of controversy. It's running a Steiner class at the school. The Steiner method of teaching does look very odd at a public primary school.

It follows the ideas of Rudolph Steiner, an Austrian philosopher. Steiner believed the spirit wasn't quite used to the world until the child got his or her second teeth. So children aren't taught how to read until the age of six or seven. They're discouraged from using black when they paint. The children sing 'blessings' before school. There's a lot of talk of spirits and souls. Behind the Steiner school system is a much deeper philosophical movement and some say it's a religion, even a cult, and has no place in a secular school system. Others, though, say it's simply a philosophy and Steiner classes are a creative way of teaching children.

Teacher: What I'm going to do is I'm going to have a special box up here, and inside that box there's going to be some bits and pieces of things relating to the countries we've been looking at. There might be something from China, there might be something from - where else have we been?

Child: England.

Child: South Africa.

Teacher: Wonderful. Maggie?

Child: Papua-New Guinea.

Teacher: Papua-New Guinea. Where else?

Child: Fiji.

Child: Thailand.

Teacher: Well, Gypsy?

Ian Townsend: In recent years, the Steiner movement, which runs a number of private schools around the country, has been eager to enter the public school system.

One Steiner website has handy hints about how to start a Steiner course in an Australian public school.

Reader: Remember, you must be able to influence the selection of your class teachers. If the Education Department wants to appoint a teacher, it might be okay for the first one or two, but at some stage it won't work. At some stage the principal will retire or move on, so you need to be aware of how a new appointment will be made. Will the department appoint someone who may not be interested in Steiner, or does the school have a say in who is chosen?

Ian Townsend: In the case of Beaconsfield State Primary School, it was the Queensland Education

Department that told the principal, Paul Richardson, to run the program. The department pays the salary of the Steiner teachers.

Paul Richardson: It came from negotiations between the Blue River Steiner Association here in Mackay and Education Queensland and this school was chosen as the campus for it to be on. So yes, it is a partnership between Education Queensland and the parents who originally set up the program. Now it's become the Beaconsfield Steiner program, it's got its own parent reference group and all those sort of supports.

Ian Townsend: Do you get any extra resources running a program like that? How does that work?

Paul Richardson: The program is resourced the same. The children are state school children so they get the same resourcing as the rest of the state school. The parents by choice will add extra resources themselves if they want things that are above and beyond what we would normally provide to a state school program.

Ian Townsend: Beaconsfield Primary School principal, Paul Richardson.

There's a link to some of the Steiner school groups on the Background Briefing website.

The movement is just one example of an interest group that's managed to bend the ear of a government and get its program running in a public primary school.

Tony McGruther runs the Primary Principals Association in Queensland and he's not so much worried about the types of programs, but by the sheer number of them.

Tony McGruther: At a broad level there is a very large number of very powerful pressure groups who are exerting pressure on politicians and community groups and having their voices heard in the media in terms of their particular focus, and I suppose the analogy we would say is 'Look, that's all fine, we don't have a problem with the principles underpinning your request, it's just that there is only a limited amount of time and focus that we can give to any of those in a day.' It's sort of like having 40 very good friends, but only having a room that will fit 20 to the birthday party. You know, you're going to have to make some tough choices.

Ian Townsend: And those tough choices are appearing on class timetables.

Take this timetable for a Monday at a primary school in South Australia.

At a quarter to nine there's a roll call, and the children order lunch. At ten past nine there's a beach walk. It's part of the fitness program and it's used also to study society and the environment, science and artwork. Then when they're back in class, there's numeracy, followed by literacy, which includes writing, spelling, reading, grammar, comprehension, speaking and listening. After lunch is what's called resource-based learning. This includes a trip to the library for research and questioning skills. There's reading, and finally a class meeting.

On other days the children in this class might have to learn about safe routes to school, citizenship, and activities to promote such things as resilience and confidence. Now if the local RSPCA has a good idea for a lesson on pet care, or the surf lifesavers think there should be something on beach safety, then something else has to give. They're great ideas, but they take up time.

And here's another example. Next year the Queensland government will make sure each state primary student does half an hour's exercise every day. The program's called Smart Moves and it's a political response to the obesity epidemic.

Tony McGruther.

Tony McGruther: Principals may see that every child will be required to provide 30 minutes of physical activity for every child in the school, every day, despite the fact the principal knows that little Mary has already done two hours of swimming training in the pool that morning, and arrives at half past eight, and the parent might say, 'I don't need them to do any more physical activity today, I really would like them to do some maths today', or 'I'd like them to go into music instead, because they've had their physical activity'.

Ian Townsend: It seems everyone has a good idea, and schools have become the place where all of society's ills can be fixed. It's written down in the National Goals for Schooling.

Reader: When students leave schools they should 'have the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to establish and maintain a healthy lifestyle, and for the creative and satisfying use of leisure time.'

Ian Townsend: What's happening is that schools are under pressure to take on these new classes in health or lifestyle, at the same time that they have to cope with something else that seems to be happening to children themselves.

Tony McGruther.

Tony McGruther: Research would suggest that one out of every five children in a classroom has an anxiety issue or a diagnosable mental health issue. And we also are identifying those same students or others who have a physical issue surrounding disability or nutrition generally or levels of physical activity. So these are issues that come with the pressure of society with the changes in family structure. And when the major cause of death for 15 to 44 year olds in Australia is suicide, and we have the fourth highest rate of suicide in the OECD world, then we're seeing a major change in the nature of childhood and therefore of learning.

Ian Townsend: Now this raises the question of whether more children are simply being diagnosed with behavioural problems that would in the past have been accepted as within the normal range of students in a classroom.

But principals and teachers are insisting that something big is going on in society, and Professor of

Education, Max Angus, says his seven-year study of primary schools confirms it.

Max Angus: Teachers were reporting more and more kids turning up at school who couldn't sit still, didn't pay attention, fought, were rude, called out, needed a lot of additional support just to get the kids to learn how to become socialised I suppose, as classroom students. And among them were children who had no mental disability or mental health condition, but who could be very aggressive, and teachers were reporting that this was happening; used to be occasionally in the upper primary years but now it's happening all the way through. It almost seems like a problem that was once a secondary school problem, was being pushed further and further down into primary schools.

Ian Townsend: It's partly because of this that there's been a big response this year to yet another program. In this case, the Federal Government's bid to put more chaplains into schools.

From the AM program, Tony Eastley: The Education Minister, Julie Bishop, will implement the program which is designed to provide greater pastoral care and spiritual support for students.

Julie Bishop: Chaplains are already making a valuable contribution to the wellbeing of school communities across Australia, but not all schools, and certainly not in all states are these services available. So the Australian Government's responding to the call that chaplaincy services be more broadly available and we're putting them in reach of more schools.

Ian Townsend: The government's tripling the number of school chaplains around the country. It's paying \$20,000 for each new chaplain employed in schools, public and private. Most schools seem to want one.

Some schools have had chaplains for decades. They don't teach religion; they provide what's called pastoral care, and spiritual guidance.

The agency that employs chaplains in Queensland is the non-denominational group, Scripture Union. Its Chief Executive is Tim Mander.

Tim Mander: Well they're not counsellors. They're involved with pastoral care, but they're also involved with spiritual guidance. Look, we don't back away from the fact that we're a Christian organisation and that our chaplains are Christians and that's what motivates them, is their faith, and that part of our faith is caring for others and loving others and helping them in a whole range of different ways. But it's also a matter of working appropriately, and with integrity in schools. We understand that we're guests, and we understand that we're operating in a secular system. We want to operate there long-term.

Ian Townsend: Scripture Union is a Christian youth movement that's been raising money for school chaplains for 20 years. Last month in Queensland it raised \$600,000 to employ more chaplains, on top of what the government's doing. Earlier this year there were 200 school chaplains in Queensland. At the start of next year there'll be 500.

Tina Robinson is a chaplain at the Alexandra Hills State High School in Brisbane, and she also oversees the chaplains at a number of local primary schools.

Tina Robinson: Primary school chaplains are meeting the same needs as high school chaplains are, and it's amazing some of the things that kids are going through. Kids are going through the same broken home situations; there are primary school children who sadly are self-harming and doing a lot of what we would regard as teenage behaviour. They live in a world where everything is at their disposal, through the internet, through the stuff they watch on TV, so they're exposed to a lot of vices very early. And what they're needing is just extra support to actually cope with what the world is flooding into their young minds and the need for pastoral care is certainly there for primary schools. And in a lot of ways prevention is better than the cure. If we can be supporting kids when they're younger, hopefully, in the long term we'll see less issues as they get older.

Ian Townsend: Scripture Union is the employment agency for chaplains in Queensland. It's embarked on a big recruitment drive and Tim Mander says it's employing retired people in their 60s to young people in their 20s. What they have in common is that they're all Christians.

Many parents are uncomfortable with this because it's not clear what the chaplains do or what contact they'll have with their children.

The Queensland Teachers Union says it's simply a cheap way of employing more school counsellors.

The union's president is Steve Ryan.

Steve Ryan: Our concern is though it's a cheap and can sometimes be quite a difficult way of addressing something where we believe trained guidance counsellors would be far better placed to address the majority of problems that occur. So we have real concerns that this is just a stop-gap measure and simply won't work, and I guess it's another example of short-term measures being used to address quite serious and long-term problems.

Ian Townsend: But really, most schools are short-staffed and short on funding. When a child comes to school upset, a chaplain can take the stress off a teacher who has a class to teach, not a child to comfort.

Tim Mander from Scripture Union agrees that some schools don't specifically want a chaplain; they want any help they can get.

Tim Mander: Oh yes, there's no doubt there'd be an element of that. Our teachers do a fantastic job, but they are too busy to be able to deal with a lot of these more personal issues that kids have. And so chaplains are people that aren't tied to a curriculum, aren't tied to a timetable, that can respond to some of these needs, and so many kids are referred to the chaplain by teachers and by the principal when they realise that extra help is needed. And you're right, there is a great need for that extra support and this is one of the areas where that can be provided.

Ian Townsend: Tim Mander.

Extra support is certainly something that stressed public school principals seem to need, too.

Deakin University in Victoria has set up a centre of Educational Leadership and Renewal, designed to help principals cope better with the increasing workload of running a school, all the extra things principals now need to do to run what is effectively a medium-sized business.

School principals in Victoria have the country's highest rate of burnout. As we heard, 40% of them have a work-related illness.

We heard earlier from Victorian principal Andrew Blair about autonomy; about State governments putting school budgets into the hands of principals. He also says the only way to do it is to give principals better training in business management.

Andrew Blair: There needs to be both a much stronger preparation of school leaders across the country to prepare for autonomy, there needs to be a close monitoring of principal health and wellbeing, and clearly most importantly, out of all of this, there needs to be what we would term an intelligent autonomy, which is we don't want every principal to be out repairing gutters or doing guttering contracts or plumbing contracts or lawn mowing contracts. This must come with resources. You need business managers; you need personal assistants to run these quite large organisations in some cases. There are schools in Victoria that have got 3,300 students now, 300-plus staff, very significant budgets.

How big would the budgets be for schools like that?

Andrew Blair: That would be probably in the area of \$25-million, so we're talking big money. And you need support to do that, obviously.

Ian Townsend: We can expect more of these big schools in the future. Victoria's already there. In Adelaide there are plans to amalgamate primary and high schools into super-school campuses with thousands of students from kindergarten to Year 12.

The Queensland government's just announced an \$850-million initiative called *Schools of Tomorrow*, to merge 27 schools. The idea is to make the most of economies of scale, to have a large efficient head office that can apply some muscle to getting private as well as government funding.

But all this is leaving the small primary school behind. Even now, many public primary schools are struggling to even apply for the government grants that they're entitled to.

Leonie Trimper from the Primary Principals Association.

Leonie Trimper: I mean when you look at a primary school, the infrastructure is not huge. If you're lucky and big enough, you might have a deputy. In some cases they're not full-time. You'll have a

front office; you'll have a finance person that probably was a parent who started off doing small jobs in the school and now is looking after the finances in the school.

So you don't have a big infrastructure. But the compliance now, most of the money we're getting from governments, are tied grants and there's just a huge amount of paperwork, sometimes way beyond the money you receive. I know of one school that received a grant of \$500 and they actually worked out that the compliance they had to do was going to take them, with the people involved in the school, a lot more than \$500. So they actually tried to give the money back.

Ian Townsend: Did they succeed?

Leonie Trimper: No, they didn't. So you're finding a lot schools now saying, 'Well look no, no, can't do it, won't bother'. And I think that's a bit sad because they're probably the children in need.

Ian Townsend: Leonie Trimper.

THUNDER/RAIN

Ian Townsend: It's storm season in Darwin. It's hot and sticky, and still. In the middle of the day there aren't many people out and about. Most people are inside in the air-conditioning.

It's in Darwin that the body representing public school parents, the Australian Council of State School Organisations, is holding its annual conference.

P&Cs have long been the backbone of public schools, manning the tuckshops and selling cakes, raising money when there's no government money to fix a building or build a swing.

But this group's become more professional in recent years. It represents the parents of more than 2-million children and Education Ministers take notice when the Council of State Schools wants to talk.

When the P&Cs met in Darwin recently at the Crown Plaza Hotel, the talk was all about how to get more businesses and community groups involved in schools.

The P&C movement itself is very big business. Mandy Stevens is a P&C member, a parent of two primary school children who's set up shop outside the conference room to sell her fundraising booklet. It lists all the businesses that can help P&Cs organise that raffle, or fete or chocolate drive. Mandy Stevens has already sold 40,000 copies of this booklet around the country.

Mandy Stevens: We did a survey this year actually. We had about 1,000 responses, so if you extrapolate that across the country, the average P&C would raise \$40,000 in a year. And that would range from the smaller groups to the larger schools, particularly private schools, who get quite corporate about their operations; they can raise hundreds of thousands of dollars. But yes, the average is \$40,000 so you spread that across the 10,000 to 12,000 schools out there and it's \$400-

million.

Ian Townsend: That's \$400-million raised by school parents and spent on things like air-conditioning and sandpits, teacher's aides and paintwork.

Now a turnover of \$400-million puts the P&C movement into the big league. To give you some idea, one of the biggest brand names in the country is the Australian Football League or AFL, and it has an annual turnover of about \$270-million. In fact, the AFL was also at the Darwin conference of P&Cs.

The sports sponsorship market in Australia is worth one-and-a-half billion dollars, and the various football codes - the AFL, the Rugby Union, Rugby League and Soccer - are all currently battling for a bigger slice of that.

Dean Warren (from conference speech): are places saying, 'How can we help work with you to help kids get to school. Programs only Kickstart and deliver ...'

Ian Townsend: The AFL was in Darwin promoting its partnerships with schools. The AFL also offers schools around the country curriculum advice. It produces a sophisticated curriculum package which includes a DVD with tips on how teachers can use AFL statistics and AFL stories in their maths and English classes.

The AFL's national participation manager is Dean Warren.

Dean Warren: Our development officers do service schools in all states and territories, and we're launched a number of different programs this year. One is a school ambassador program where we're looking for a school ambassador, a teacher in every single primary school across the country to become the Australian football advocate in that school if you like, to help to make sure our curriculum resources are available and other teachers within that school know they're available, and other teachers within that school know they're available, to obviously get kids participating in inter and intra school competitions. So yes, we've got a fairly detailed program if you like across not only curriculum, but physical activity components as well.

Ian Townsend: Why are you doing this? Why is the AFL doing this? I can see the obvious - you want to help, but there must also be an interest in getting the AFL brand name out there as well.

Dean Warren: Oh, no doubt. Australian football is our country's only indigenous game and it's a game that's got cultural significance here in Australia. And our view is that even if kids don't necessarily play it, they should understand it. It's our only, as I said, only indigenous game, so we just want all kids, boys and girls, across the country to understand our game and we can do that through curriculum in class, but also providing them with the opportunities to participate as well. This teacher ambassador initiative is one thing that we really want to enhance and roll out further. Our ultimate goal is to have one in every primary school across the country.

Ian Townsend: The AFL's very careful with its messages; its programs no doubt help schools, especially those struggling for all the resources they can get. But the AFL is a brand, and it does expect something in return; a higher national profile.

The executive director of the Council of State Schools, Terry Aulich, says the AFL is exactly the sort of partnership schools are looking for and parents generally support it.

Terry Aulich: We, in a way, do a reality check for schools and in conjunction with schools. And the AFL itself doesn't really want to go out and just market for its own sake. Sure, their accountants would love to have lots of backsides on seats around the country, they want obviously, their advertising to be worth something and they want to be able to sell their media rights. But at the same time, they also have a genuine obligation which they feel; it really comes through at every level of the AFL, towards the communities that they service.

Ian Townsend: At the conference, the AFL was applauded.

And really, the schools can get a lot out of it. They can get footballs and coaching advice. The AFL pours a lot of money into schools; up to \$3-million into the Northern Territory each year, for example.

Schools around the country are already well down the corporate road and many have sponsors and partnerships with businesses.

But there are dangers. In the UK some large publicly funded schools were encouraged by law to get sponsors. They're called academies and they've been dogged by controversy.

Andrew Blair, from the Principals Association, was also at the Darwin conference.

Andrew Blair: There were some examples where under those arrangements the business partner is required to put up to \$AU10-million on the table to be part of the board and some academies were receiving those funds from, for example, fundamentalist religious groups who wanted to have specific impact on curriculum. Now, that should be avoided at all cost. So as there are arrangements in all states and territories about where sponsorship monies can come to schools; obviously that would be applied to business partnerships. So you wouldn't be taking money from Tabcorp or wherever, you know the kind of groups that you wouldn't be accepting money from. So I think those kind of policy parameters need to be in place.

Ian Townsend: Most state governments have rules about sponsorship. In Victoria, for instance, the Education Department encourages sponsorship, but the sponsor must show it is actually helping students. If a sponsor pays for a new building at a school it can have naming rights. In fact, the only thing that's not allowed is sponsorship that promotes gambling or smoking.

The Business Council of Australia is also taking a keen interest in schools for another reason.

News report on radio: The nation's school system is stuck in the 1960s. That is the conclusion of a report prepared by the Business Council of Australia. So that's Australia's 100 leading Chief Executives believe there are shortcomings just about wherever you look. Guy Templeton was a member of the BCA Education Task Force. Guy, good afternoon.

Guy Templeton: Good afternoon, Gerard.

Gerard: What are the major shortcomings in the national schools system, Guy?

Guy Templeton: One is that a significant number of young people fall behind in their learning during their earliest years and become disengaged and never catch up. So they achieve only minimal education outcomes. And the second problem is the shortage of young people with the knowledge and skills required where there's a demand in today's economy. So engineering, financial services, and a number of the traditional trades.

Ian Townsend: What all this means is that public schools are slowly being corporatised, bit by bit. There's a feeling in government and business that schools should be doing much more to help the economy, to produce better citizens, a skilled workforce.

There's a lot more of this debate to come. But where does this leave the public primary school?

Andrew Blair.

Andrew Blair: I have a view that schools across Australia have been probably a little too inward focused to meet the 21st Century needs. They need to be more outward focused and they need to build partnerships, they need to build opportunities which are context sensitive for their students. So what might work in Byron Bay would be something quite different than in Port Headland.

Ian Townsend: The world is changing fast and there's an increasing expectation that all schools will have to change just as quickly to keep up.

Andrew Blair: If you think about the call from the Business Council of Australia for industry to become more closely aligned with schools, it's part of an increasing dialogue in the country which says schools are a focal point but no two schools are alike, and each school has the capacity to build programs by creating partnerships that will meet the needs for their local students. So it throws pressure on school boards, school councils, school principals to have a set of skills which actually broker and develop new partnerships and new opportunities. It's different work from where we were in the 1960s for example.

THEME

Ian Townsend: Background Briefing's co-ordinating producer is Linda McGinness, research Anna Whitfeld, technical operator Timothy Nicastrì. The executive producer is Kirsten Garrett. I'm Ian Townsend and you're listening to ABC Radio National.

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