In this paper I suggest that public schools in New South Wales in the future ought to increasingly become key social and educational centres of communities (OECD, n.d.). The “public” character of such schools would not just be evident in their funding source, governance structure and student enrolment policies but, critically, in the careful and deliberate way in which such schools identify and address the learning needs of their communities. In this future, schools would be functionally integrated with other education and service organisations such as early childhood education centres, post compulsory Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, and universities. In some communities this integration may extend to providing education related services, such as libraries and internet services, in collaboration with other state and local government bodies.

Another way of describing this future is to consider public schooling in terms of social capital. Social capital, in this context, refers to the knowledge, relationships and attitudes that contribute to the experience individuals have of being members of communities. The development of social capital is effectively the development of the goodwill and sense of belonging that defines a community. Public schools have always had the responsibility for building social capital. Public schools in the future should more consciously focus on building the social capital of the local communities that they serve. Conversely, such schools will need to draw on the tangible and intangible resources of local communities if they are to succeed. In this future, communities will regard their schools as community centres and valuable community resources.

In order to achieve this goal it is likely that there will need to be a further shift in resources and authority from State offices and toward school regions and to schools themselves in order that they may better be able to respond to and work with their communities. Schools and school regions will need to develop programs and offer services that are tailored to the specific context and needs of the communities that they serve. As there are a range of different communities in NSW with varying educational and social needs and varying levels of existing educational infrastructure, it is also likely that the forms of schools and the types of programs that they offer will deviate further from the standard school model that has been provided up until recent times.

It is important to point out though that the devolution and variation of school programs and types proposed in this paper are not ends in themselves. These should be regarded as possible means by which the community and public goals of the government school system are achieved. In this sense then this paper is not to be seen as a critique of centralised, bureaucratic government schooling, rather as presenting a case for public schools to embrace a particular “local community” character and culture. The paper starts with an interpretation of the history of public schooling in NSW which argues that the “public” purposes and not the shape and form of schools were originally intended to be the defining characteristics of public schools. Next, examples of the forms of school and program variation and community embeddedness being advocated are provided. These examples include projects and innovations involving schools in NSW as well as from other parts of Australia and overseas. From these examples and from recent literature on public schooling some specific features of these community embedded schools are outlined. Finally, some of the challenges for the State, for the Department of Education and Training and for schools and school regions that will need to be addressed in achieving further local embeddedness will be presented.

Historical Background

The centralized provision of public schooling is not a universal feature of public schooling. In the vast majority of western democracies, public schools derive much of their public character from their decentralised, district-based responsibilities, and their democratic governance structures. School
Districts are more directly accountable to their local communities and in countries such as Canada and the USA, they derive much of their income from local taxes. To illustrate the extent to which there is variation in the forms and structures of public schooling in western democratic countries, in 1997 in Ontario, Canada the provincial government introduced Bill 160 which, had it become law, would have created a public school system like that which exists in NSW where much of the decision making authority would have been centralised. Teachers went on strike for several weeks, supported by the community, arguing that the Bill was a direct attack on public education in that it was usurping power from the democratically elected local school boards (Valpy, 1997).

Following several “experiments” with local control, and with different state level education boards, policy makers in the mid 19th century opted for a centralised provision model of public schooling in NSW. William Wilkins, who was to become the State’s first Director-General of Education prepared an influential report which concluded that the specific conditions in mid 19th century NSW, meant that a centralised system was likely to be the most effective and efficient. Wilkins argued in particular that local communities were not fit for the task of running schools as most of the population, particular in rural NSW were illiterate (Barcan, 1965, 1980, 1988).

The path to the system of public education that exists today in NSW did not just have to be made through the issue of centralisation and local control. A much larger and more contentious matter had to be resolved.

Henry Parkes, who is more frequently acknowledged for his important role in Federation, arguably made a far greater contribution to the development of public schools as we know them today. In numerous speeches Parkes identified a range of reasons why the “state” should intervene in the provision of schooling and further, why it should require its citizens to attend. These purposes remain compelling and are almost exclusively “public”. They were public in that they were seen to be the pre-requisite for a civil and democratic society. They were intended to develop the “knowledge, values and loyalties that form the foundation of . . . liberal democracy” (Caldwell & Keating, 2004, p. 1).

While most agreed with these sentiments, the means by which they could be achieved was hotly debated for several decades. In this debate, Parkes’ approach up to the late 1870s was different to that of other 19th century opinion leaders in that he was in some sense anticipating the “third way” arguments of the current Blair Government in England—namely that the policy goals and not the means of achieving those goals are the most critical matters for the state. Parkes’ view, best captured in various speeches' in the mid 1870s, was that the internecine fighting among those proposing a single, state run system of schools, such as the Baptist minister and Sydney Morning Herald editor, Greenwood, and those of the Catholic Bishop of Sydney, Vaughan, who characterised public schools as “seed plots of immorality” missed the point that the fundamental interest of society was in ensuring that the aforementioned “public goals” were met, namely high levels of attendance, high levels of achievement— at the time these were conflated, as they sometimes now, as measures of literacy, and the contribution schools make to the development of a civil and just society. Parkes argued his pragmatic “third way” in reply to those who wanted an even tighter restriction on denominational schools by claiming that many of them were “as efficient as public schools” in achieving these “public goals”, that there was little to be gained and much to be lost if the “extremists” had their way (Morris, 1969).

Thankfully the bitter sectarian past has now long gone, and the 1880 Public Instruction Act was a clear settlement of the dispute in favour of a centralised, free, compulsory and secular system of public schooling. Unfortunately, what remains in some influential quarters in the education community in NSW is a tendency to still view variation and difference within and across school systems as inherently problematic. A number of people directly involved in public education seem opposed to or at least wary of differentiated provision of school services. Nearly all of these people are also beneficiaries of the mid-20th century form of public schooling, the period in which the form of public schooling become the most standardised under the Wyndham scheme, and see little reason why it should be changed. Others, while recognising the need for variation argue that it will be costly, inefficient and impractical.
From the early 1960s the comprehensive high school, based on a model developed in England in the 1950s and championed by the then Director General of Education, Sir Harold Wyndham, was with a small number of exceptions, the single model for the provision of public secondary schooling in the State. Comprehensive public schools had a number of advantages. First, they provided a curriculum that it was claimed could cater for a range of student interests and abilities within the one school. Second it appealed to the egalitarian values of the broader Australian community by bringing students with a range of abilities together in the one school. Third, from a systems point of view, the comprehensive school was efficient and economical to administer as it was a “one-size-fits-all” operation that could be resourced on the basis of clear formulae and staffed accordingly. Buildings and teachers could literally be moved anywhere within the State!

Despite its clear advantages, serious problems with the NSW model of standard provision of schools have emerged in the past 20 years. The first, and most fundamental problem with the comprehensive high school is that it requires that there is no alternative to it! While there has always been the alternative of non-government schools, within the public system, following its introduction in the 1960s there was virtually no alternative to the comprehensive high school. Wyndham’s resignation as Director-General of Education occurred because the government of the day allowed, after extensive lobbying, the survival of some of the academically selective schools which had preceded the Wyndham scheme.

The tendency for the more academically able students, students with particular sporting and cultural talents and interests to leave comprehensive high schools in favour of selective high schools, performing arts schools, sports high schools, technology enriched high schools and various other forms of specialised public schools has been evident since the introduction in the late 1980s of these schools. This coincided with the relaxation of zoning rules which had until then effectively forced children to attend their nearest public school. Also evident has been the drift of students away from the public system to the non-government system. The majority of these students have gone to low-fee non-government schools, set up to serve particular religious and ethno-cultural groups. This trend away from government schools in general and comprehensive public schools in particular has been widely described in the literature (e.g., Marginson, 1993; Reid, 1998; Vinson, 2002) and is often referred to as “residualisation”.

While, in theory, one way to solve the problem of residualisation might be to reduce the variation of schools within and across school systems, such a move would clearly not be well received by the community who by their actions have shown support for variation.

Another way of looking at this problem with standard provision is that it appears to not have addressed the educational needs of an increasingly pluralistic and diverse society. One might argue that standard provision was “invented” at a time when community opinion was in favour of assimilation of difference and that variation of school types and educational programs within the public system might now better reflect the multicultural diversity of the population. Cultural difference though is just one of many dimensions on which difference is evident among the school age population. Educators have become increasingly aware of the learning needs of gifted and talented students and of students with special needs. Issues of developmental readiness and awareness of various learning styles further serve to differentiate the student population and need to be addressed by educational programs (Masters, 2005). Finally, perhaps the most striking differences relate to geography. While visiting schools in western NSW recently I heard some teachers refer to “the sandstone curtain” to describe graphically the difference between the city and country and particularly the invisibility to policy makers and the DET of problems rural schools face. Children in rural and regional areas do not enjoy many of the educational benefits that children in the city can take for granted, such as inexpensive access to educational services and resources. Even within Sydney, socio-economic and cultural differences that impact directly on student learning needs, interest, readiness and support are evident between different suburbs.

Invariably, where the public school system has engaged proactively and constructively changing schools to address specific student and community needs, these efforts have been successful. In their

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1 Sydney is surrounded by sandstone rock formations.
successes they have encouraged others to experiment and diversify. There are several excellent examples of this. In this section some of these innovations are described.

**Examples of Successful Innovation and Responsiveness**

Bradfield College is part of North Sydney TAFE. It caters for students who were “failing” in regular high schools. It provides a Yr 11 and 12 program based on adult education principles and has provided an education pathway for students, many of whom are, according to their teachers, academically very capable. Located within a few kilometres of Bradfield are two of the most academically successful schools in the State - North Sydney Boys High School and North Sydney Girls High School. Each of these schools has achieved remarkable success as measured in terms of the large numbers of students seeking enrolment and in the academic results that have been achieved. Government schools in the North Sydney precinct are a clear example of one form of successful adaptation to local needs and conditions.

Another example of successful innovation in response to particular local needs has been the establishment Northern Beaches Secondary College. Several northern beaches high schools were facing increased competition from non-government schools and a public selective high school at Manly. The northern beaches project has brought these comprehensive high schools and the local TAFE Institute into a collaboration designed to maximise the educational opportunities for young people on the peninsula. The Freshwater Education Centre, an integral part of the College, comprises three partners, the Freshwater Senior School Campus, the Northern Sydney Institute of TAFE and the University of Technology, Sydney. A unique aspect of the College, and there are several other similar colleges in NSW, is that each of five schools offers a senior curriculum. Students at these schools are still able to access specialist TAFE and school subjects from Freshwater. Enrolments at the Freshwater Senior campus have reached capacity within two years of its official opening. The quality of the facility, the culture of the campus based on adult learning principles and other flexibilities suited to the needs and capacities of senior students as well as the breadth of curriculum offerings are, according to the senior staff of the school, the reasons why Freshwater was able to attract 260 new students in 2005. In February 2005, in recognition of its curriculum development and offerings across the five campuses, the Northern Beaches Secondary College received from the Federal Education Minister the Outstanding National Achievement Award for Excellence in School Improvement. Part of the success of this project has been the close involvement of the local community. Warringah Council, the Harbord Diggers Club, the Manly Warringah Rugby League Club and countless other organisations have become closely involved in the activities of the College. This is a clear example of the community embeddedness being advocated in this paper.

There are many other examples of success stories around NSW. There are small central schools working in Aboriginal Communities, such as at Goodooga that have remade themselves as integral parts of the local communities, providing educational services and support, including internet access to the whole community. There are extensive TAFE/School/university partnerships at Coffs Harbour, in Western Sydney and at Dubbo, with excellent new campuses and facilities. Other examples include specialised schools in Sydney and the major regional centres that cater to the communities needs for specialisation in performing arts, technology enriched education, academic specialisation and so forth.

Caldwell and Keating (2004) describe a large number of examples of variation and innovation within public school systems in Australia and overseas. In some of these cases, particularly in England and recently in Victoria, private providers have assumed responsibility for running under-performing public schools. Public-private partnerships of the sort advocated by Caldwell and Keating (2004) appear to have had some success. However, they are clearly not a necessary requirement for successful innovation as has been evidenced by the NSW experience of successes with the types of innovation described above.

What is evident from the NSW examples that I have studied and from Caldwell and Keating’s (2004) work is that new structures and arrangements comprising secondary schools, TAFE colleges, universities and other education providers are becoming increasingly common. Also clear is that many of the innovations are in the form of changes to curriculum and pedagogy rather than resources and infrastructure. This is particularly evident in local curriculum developments in vocational education and training, often in partnership with local employers and industry.
Another area of innovation has been in programs designed to better meet the needs of learners in the middle and senior years of schooling. This has seen teaching the “middle-years” slowly emerge as a specialisation among teachers. Teachers in this area teach across a wider range of subjects and focus on the pastoral and developmental needs of young teenagers. House groupings of students sustained over the first few years of high school, the explicit development of peer support networks, mentoring programs for younger students, timetabling which sees students based in “home” rooms for many of their classes are all examples of this type of curriculum and pedagogical innovation and responsiveness. The needs and of learners in the senior years of schooling have been recognised and addressed by some schools in the adoption of adult learning principles in classrooms and in modifications to school rules and requirements. Examples of this include the use of peer and negotiated learning, an emphasis on problem solving and the development of research skills, classes being timetabled outside of regular school hours and subsequently, the requirements for attendance being modified.

Less common, or perhaps less publicised, have been developments in primary schools that have seen the integration of early childhood services with regular K-6 schools. In some rural communities the primary school has become the focus for the delivery of community and educational services, with community health and welfare services working closely with schools. A number of formal, funded pilot projects are underway in primary schools in NSW. Some are funded by the Department of Community Services (DOCS) while others involve Federal agencies. This type of interagency collaboration is being increasingly researched and reported on in the literature and would seem to have particularly application in specific communities of NSW.

**Public Schools as Community Resources**

From each of these vignettes and descriptions of successful pedagogical and structural changes certain elements and issues emerge. While detailing all of these is beyond the scope of this paper, some of the issues need to be at least identified in order to outline what public schools as community resources in NSW might mean for schools, the DET and for government.

The focus in each case above has been on the specific learning and broader needs of local communities. The innovations that have been successful have addressed these needs. While in some cases this has involved radical changes, in other cases these have occurred within “standard” schools. The point being made in this paper is that the problem is not the comprehensive high school or standardised provision per se but rather in the “systems” capacity for adaptation of standard school structures and curriculum to local contexts. When the standard school form as a means of achieving the goals of public schooling becomes confused with public schooling, then serious problems emerge as “one” means of achieving the goals of public schooling can effectively act as a barrier to “other” means. The emphasis in public school administration at the State and regional level should be on local needs of communities and not on standardisation as an end in itself.

Another feature of these innovations is that they have required leadership of school and communities at the local level. The capacity for flexibility and freedom to innovate have been necessary pre-requisites to these changes. Importantly, the expertise that has been applied to these changes has been both within the local education community and the Department more broadly. The key feature of this leadership then, at least as it appears to me, is that it has been broadly distributed within the schools themselves, the Department, and in some cases, within the wider community. Distributed leadership then, emerges as a feature of successful innovation in NSW public schooling. Further, new research on sustainable leadership (Hargraves & Fink, 2005) suggests that not only is successful and sustainable leadership shared, it needs to be developed and supported at the system level. Succession planning, leadership development and educational leadership as community activism all represent rich challenges and opportunities for public schooling.

A third issue is that while it is the case that existing structures have allowed for these types of developments, people directly involved in them sometimes express frustration at the difficulties that they have faced in managing to negotiate the changes through the Department, the Teachers Federation and various stakeholder and interest groups. If a culture of innovation and local
responsiveness is to further develop in the public schools in NSW, then the successful local changes that have occurred to date should be closely studied with a view to identifying and removing unnecessary obstacles to further innovation. Considerable work should be done to develop policies that facilitate innovation and local responsiveness while at the same time address “real” accountability and quality concerns. Recent changes in areas such as staffing where principals will be able to select staff from a “pool of qualifying candidates” (Education Review, 2005, p.2) and where principalships will be open to applicants from other systems and States are a potentially positive step in focussing attention on local needs.

A critical issue in many of these changes has been the provision of resources. In its recent work on educational futures, the OECD has noted that, in order to support some of the changes being advocated in this paper, “significant investments would be made to update the quality of premises and equipment in general, to open school facilities to the community, and to ensure that the divides of affluence and social capital do not widen” (OECD, n.d.). Given the financial constraints that governments face, this is likely to be a key challenge for policy makers in encouraging further renewal and innovation within public schooling.

Perhaps the most obvious matter that will need to be addressed is that of the professional preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers. Teachers’ will need further expertise in working with children, parents, particular communities and with related professionals and paraprofessionals in this emerging role for public schools. Such expertise is widely acknowledged as a key element in the success or failure of attempts at innovation. Ongoing professional development throughout teachers’ careers is essential to develop the individual and organisational capacity and responsiveness. Attention will also need to be paid to the recruitment of teachers with particular attributes to particular communities.

Finally, the community character of the examples that I have given here is not evidenced solely through listening to parents and the particular needs that they articulate. This is what I would consider, in its extreme to be an example of “private” schooling where the parent and child are at the one-time recipients of the educational service and also to a large extent dictate the sort of service to be provided and by whom. While public schools need to work in close and mutually supportive partnerships with parents they can never be parent run schools effectively only accountable to the parent body. Broad public and community accountability and responsiveness are the defining characteristics of public schooling and will be needed if schools are to be valued and supported as community resources.

**Conclusion**

This paper is supportive of the trend that has emerged in recent years in NSW that has seen the beginnings of a move from public education as comprehensive schools to public education as a comprehensive system of schools. Recent successes in public schooling both in NSW and elsewhere have been evident where schools have responded to the specific educational needs of increasingly diverse learners and communities. This paper has advocated that these innovations and adaptations become a key characteristic of public schooling in NSW in the 21st century.

Some specific cases where alternative approaches to schooling appear warranted are in the areas of Aboriginal education, in communities with high levels of disadvantage and in communities with a high proportion of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The DET’s recent review of Aboriginal education (DET, 2004) has recommended that specialist schools be establish to serve Aboriginal communities and that these schools be staffed by teachers specifically trained for that purpose. The public schools that will emerge if these recommendations are implemented will obviously be different to the “standard” model of school in a number of key elements but, I would argue, they will be fundamentally public in the purpose and character.

The challenge as I see it for the NSW Department of Education and Training and for the NSW Government is to review is practices and policies and to modify these in ways that further enable community embeddedness and responsiveness. The need for further flexibility in staffing and resourcing are likely to be key features of this important work as will leadership development and the professional development of teachers. Equally important and no less challenging will be the
development of formal structures and mechanisms for community engagement and involvement. These will need to guard against the narrow interests of some parents and lobbies and ensure broad community engagement.

These proposals are offered in the belief that the purposes of public education that were being developed and refined 150 years ago are still valid and important in the development of a just and civil society, in the development of a rich social capital. The future lies in a commitment to achieving these purposes in a post-assimilationist society, one that values diversity and recognises the educational demands such diversity makes upon the State. This goal should be embraced in a spirit of optimism and urgency.
References


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1 See for example Parkes’ Speech on the Education Question and his election speech of 3 December 1874. The speech that is most interesting though is the one made in 1875 in reply to Dibb’s motion against the 1866 Act.