Autonomy and learning: From school autonomy to student autonomy

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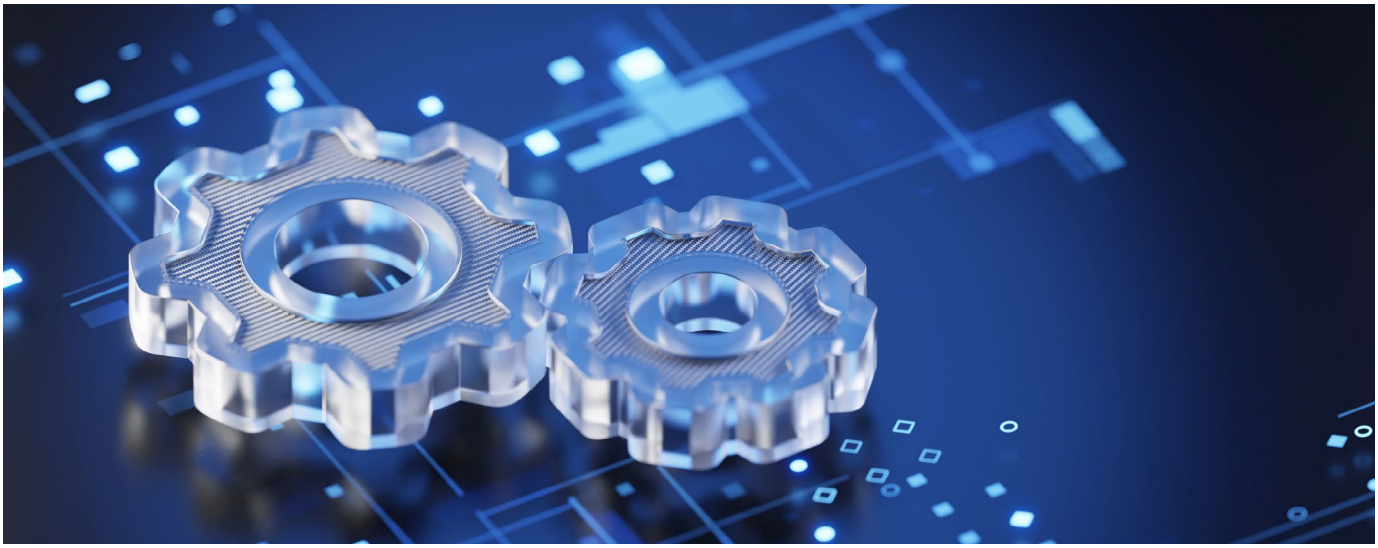

All schools in Australia are now self-managing. Or, to use the term often employed in the 21st century, all schools in Australia have autonomy.

How can this be?

Definitions and distinctions

We had better define our terms. In *The self-managing school*, published in 1988, we defined a self-managing school as one for which there has been significant and consistent delegation to the school level of authority to make decisions about the allocation of resources. Resources were defined broadly to include curriculum, technology, supplies, equipment, services, staff, time and finance. Decisions at the school level are made within a framework of system, state or national policies and guidelines. The school is still accountable to a central authority for how resources are allocated. Nowadays, we often replace "a self-managing school" with "a school with autonomy," even though, strictly speaking, no school is autonomous.

Now, 38 years later, it all seems so innocuous, almost "common sense." A few commentators declared that self-management would lead to the breakdown of public education, or even the privatisation of public schools. Neither occurred.

We make a distinction between two kinds of autonomy. Structural autonomy refers to policies that allow a school to exercise autonomy. All schools in Australia now have structural autonomy; and that led us to make the statements in the opening sentences of this article. But structural autonomy by itself contributes very little to outcomes for students; it is professional autonomy that counts.

Professional autonomy refers to principals, other school leaders and their colleagues having the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference, and this capacity is exercised in a significant, systematic, and sustained fashion.

The good news is that an increasing number of professionals are able to exercise professional autonomy. ACEL is playing its part in building capacity through its conferences, workshops, publications, including *AEL*, and online resources, as are state and territory institutions, along with ACARA, AITSL and AERO.

Purposes

The purposes of this article are to: (1) confirm the links between autonomy and learning; (2) provide a brief history, referring to our role in developments; (3) summarise issues related to autonomy, community, and choice; (4) review recent evidence about the work environment of teachers and school leaders along with implications for autonomy; (5) consider matters related to curriculum and 21st century skills with a focus on teacher autonomy; and (6) leave behind the idea of the school with autonomy — it is just the way we now manage our schools — and join with the increasing number of schools for whom autonomy means student autonomy.

Our conclusion

We complete the journey from school autonomy to student autonomy or, expressed another way, from the self-managing school to the self-managing student. We believe *The new self-managing student* can be written now. It will offer a new and exciting vision of autonomy, going beyond what has emerged so far in the 21st century as students have started to take charge of their own learning.

1. Autonomy and learning

There is one matter we would like to clear up before proceeding, namely, the link between autonomy and learning. In the early years it was not possible to show a link, if any, because there were no metrics available and some critics were opposed to comparing outcomes.

There is now a substantial body of evidence that confirms the link between autonomy and learning at the school level and under what conditions. Brian summarised this evidence in *The autonomy premium* (Caldwell, 2016), along with an account of an Australian contribution to the International Study on School Autonomy and Learning (ISSAL). He conducted studies of five government schools in three jurisdictions that system officers had identified on the basis of evidence as high performing. He was able to map the strategies that had led in cause-and-effect fashion to improvements in outcomes for students.

Summarising supporting research in countries with well-developed systems of education, Andreas Schleicher (2018, head of education at OECD, made it clear in *World class: How to build a 21st century school system:* "The data from PISA suggest that, once the state has set clear expectations for students, school autonomy in defining the details of the curriculum and assessments is positively related to the system's overall performance" (p. 109).

The most important in-school factor in accounting for student success is the knowledge and skill of professional staff — the teachers and their leaders. This is the professional capital of the school or, as Brian and Jess Harris (2008) referred to it in *Why not the best schools?*, its intellectual capital.

In the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools, Brian and Jess found four kinds of capital in outstanding schools. Intellectual capital referred to the level of knowledge and skill of those who worked in or for the school. Social capital referred to the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks involving the school and all individuals, agencies, organisations and institutions that had the potential to support or be supported by the school. We shall refer to these again. The others were also important, namely, spiritual capital (values, beliefs) and financial capital. David Gurr (2025) added a leadership dimension to each type.

2. A brief history

The need to dig deeper in confirming the link was suggested by our reading of a recent book entitled *School autonomy reform and social justice in Australian public education* (Keddie et al., 2025). It provided a review of developments and summarised studies of five schools. Its conclusion was "School autonomy reform, driven by neoliberal imperatives of marketisation, competition and efficiency, has fundamentally undermined social justice in education" (p, 257). In our view, the historical analysis is limited and the influence of market forces is overstated.

To illustrate the former, consider the first sentence in the review of developments in Australia. "While the Australian Capital Territory had an early flirtation with a version of autonomy envisaged as participatory decision-making through the establishment of school councils and administrative decentralisation ...." (p. 36). That's all the authors had to say about the ACT before going on to Victoria, even though the "flirtation" was the creation of the ACT Schools Authority in 1973. Did the authors not realise the significance of what they wrote? This was the establishment of the last system of public education to be created in Australia, and the designers of that system chose autonomy. Moreover, before then, ACT schools were run by the Commonwealth, whose Minister for Education had to approve the Authority, at about the same time he received the Karmel Report that recommended autonomy for all of Australia in the form of devolution. Nothing resembling "neoliberal imperatives of marketisation" (p. 257) can be detected then or now, not in the foundation document of the Hughes Report (1973); not in the work of the first CEO, Hedley Beare, famous in ACEL circles; and not in a case study Brian undertook in the ACT as part of ISSAL.

The book then continues to Victoria, and again it falls short. After a cursory reference to earlier developments, it refers to autonomy reform that began with a series of Ministerial Papers in the early 1980s. Correct! Now let us fill in the gaps. School councils were to approve the policies and budgets of schools within guidelines provided by the Minister. Principals and school councils had to be prepared for their roles and we, from Tasmania, were chosen for the task of supporting the program.

Two-day workshops were conducted throughout Victoria from 1984 to 1986. About 5000 principals, parents and, in the case of secondary schools, students, were involved, representing about 1200 schools. All materials from the 52 workshops were bundled together and then published in 1988 as *The self-managing school*. This book was a key resource in workshops for thousands of school leaders led by us, mainly Jim, in England and New Zealand. Let us be clear about what this means. Examples of good practice that formed the basis of extensive and successful workshops in Victoria in the 1980s were used in similar events in England and New Zealand in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Some background may be helpful before resuming the Victorian story in the Kennett years, especially to explain the examples that fill most of the pages in *The self-managing school*. These were among the outcomes of a Project of National Significance of the Australian Schools Commission that involved a partnership of the University of Tasmania and the Education Department of Tasmania. The project was conducted in 1983 and 1984 in Tasmania and South Australia. It involved the identification of highly effective schools, in a general sense, and in the way schools allocated their resources. Schools in Tasmania were nominated by senior officers who were provided with lists of indicators from the literature. Studies were conducted in schools that received the most nominations. The school that received

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the most nominations in both categories was a primary-secondary school in Rosebery, the only school in a mining town in the west of the state of which Jim was principal.

Rosebery had implemented a cyclical approach to goal setting, policy making, priority setting, planning, budgeting and evaluation, with clearly defined roles for a policy group (school council) and program teams (mainly teachers). A program was the normal way of organising the activities of the school; it could be a subject or it could be an activity such as the operation of the school canteen. Most programs were related to teaching and learning and the support of teaching and learning. The process was illustrated in an easy-to-understand diagram. Attractive features included that no policy should exceed one page, and no plan and budget should exceed two pages. Other features were (1) the remoteness of the school meant that it had large numbers of beginning teachers, (2) it was a relatively disadvantaged school, (3) the strategic approach to management probably explained its success in "closing the gap" in literacy scores so that it no longer received Commonwealth grants for this purpose, and (4) school council positions were highly sought after to the extent that polling booths had to be set up.

Another feature of the Project of National Significance should be described before returning to Victoria. The project called for the design and trialling of a training program, which was conducted in January 1984. Officials from Victoria attended and they invited Brian to design a program for that state, with Rosebery to serve as a demonstration school, led by Jim. The extensive workshop program described earlier then unfolded.

Now back to Victoria and the Kennett years. It is here that the political bias of the authors of the book for which this is a brief commentary raises a question in our minds about the objectivity of their project. Their labelling borders on ad hominem, as in "the economically rationalist premier, Jeff Kennett" (p. 37), (who had to lead a state close to bankruptcy, as confirmed in recently-released cabinet papers; and there are now, in 2026, about 100 fewer government schools in Victoria than there were after the Kennett cuts, even though the population is more than 60 per cent larger). There is no mention of the fact that Kennett's autonomy reforms were continued by the successor Bracks Government, after independent review, and that continue to this day.

3. Autonomy, community and choice

Another link we would like to confirm is between autonomy and community. Our work was aided by the model in *The self-managing school*. There were clearly defined roles for the policy group, notably the school council, the majority of whose members were from the school's community, broadly defined, and program teams, mainly teachers. There was almost unlimited scope for consultation.

We were able to take this to international scale in England and New Zealand. The Education Reform Act in England of 1988 included provision for a national curriculum and the local management of schools. These were tailor-made for self-managing schools as defined at the start of this article. Initially called local financial management, demonstration schools were found in Cambridgeshire, which had a long history of community involvement in public services, including schools, dating back to the 1920s. We were soon engaged and Jim, especially, on leave from the Education Department of Tasmania, was involved over about 18 months on an almost full-time basis, working under contract with Cambridge Education Associates.

In the late 1980s we were engaged in New Zealand during the second term of the Lange Labour Government when the Tomorrow's Schools reforms were implemented. David Lange was the Minister of Education as well as Prime Minister and was deeply engaged because a feature of the reforms was a board of trustees for each school. Most members were drawn from the community. Before entering parliament, Lange was a community-based lawyer with a deep interest in civil rights for the disadvantaged. We conducted workshops across the length and breadth of the country, drawing on *The self-managing school*. Jim returned for a series for the trustees' association.

We have presented the foregoing as though they were routine and uncontroversial. They were not. Reforms in both counties were contested in a general sense, politically, and in the academic community. We subscribed to aspects of the critique, for example, the way in which middle layers of system administration were decimated, removing structures of support for schools, but those related to self-management and autonomy we rejected, because of their acceptance by policymakers and practitioners.

Much of the critique stemmed from the fact that markets were created in school education. Expressed simply, parents could exercise choice and no longer had to send their children to the nearest school, the effect of which was that schools had to compete for students in many communities. It was alleged that too much time was taken in pursuing related activities that should be taken up in teaching and the support of teaching. This takes us into the territory covered by the recent book that we commented on earlier; which in our view overstated the impact of market forces on school autonomy.

We take the generally accepted view that students have the right to attend the nearest school but also have the right to attend the school of their choice, providing there is space available. Parents and students need information to help them choose a school. Schools have the right, indeed the obligation, to make that information available using whatever media they wish. This requirement is especially the case when the school is offering a specialisation. Increasingly, those media are digital and online and include data on student achievement.

Marketing should be pursued with integrity. Regrettably, that is not always the case. We acknowledge the challenges faced by government schools that, in many communities, are faced with strong competition from other schools, including non-government schools, and the difficulties they face in maintaining a sense of system in public education.

Has a school exercising autonomy worsened the allegedly harmful effects of choice? Has choice done harm to a school exercising autonomy? We suggest they are two different phenomena and to seek a relationship or causation is a variation of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* ("after this, therefore because of this") or a correlation that assumes a causation. We maintain our support for school choice which inevitably ensures a form of market in some communities.

We can now confirm what we know about the links between autonomy, learning, and community.

1. The primary purpose of autonomy is contributing to learning, so schools that aspire to success will make an unrelenting effort to use all of the capacities that come with autonomy to achieve that end.
2. There is a strong association between the mix and capacities of staff, and success in addressing needs and priorities in learning, so schools will develop a capacity to optimally select staff, taking account of these needs and priorities.
3. There is a strong association between the knowledge and skills of staff and learning outcomes for students, so schools will employ their capacity for autonomy to design, select, implement or utilise professional development programs to help ensure these outcomes.
4. There is an association between social capital and learning outcomes, so schools will utilise their capacities for autonomy to build an alliance of community interests to support a commitment to high achievement for all students.
5. Schools with autonomy will not be distracted by claims and counterclaims for competition, choice and the impact of market forces, but will nonetheless market their programs with integrity, building the strongest possible links between needs and aspirations of the community, program design, program implementation and program outcomes.
6. A key task for principals and other school leaders is to help make effective the links between capacities for autonomy and learning outcomes, and to ensure that support is available when these links break down or prove ineffective, including the sharing of good practice among schools.

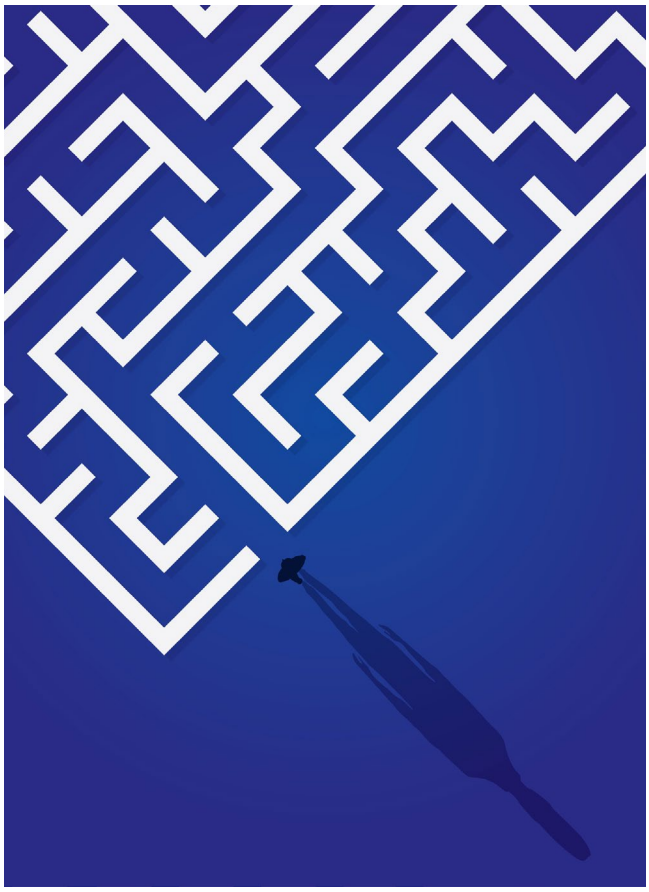
We could not help listening to the stories of the top-performers in NAPLAN 2025, especially those in highly disadvantaged settings, with large numbers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and not hear evidence of brilliant teaching and outstanding leadership, underpinned by strong community support – professional autonomy in action.

4. The work environment of teachers and school leaders

There are several factors which, on the basis of evidence, are negatively impacting the work of teachers and school leaders. By implication, these are almost certainly a constraint on the extent to which the benefits of autonomy can be realised. Moreover, seriously, conditions here may be worse than in comparable countries.

The findings of the 2024 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) conducted in 55 countries are pertinent. TALIS is conducted by OECD every 5 or 6 years and data have been gathered from principals and teachers at the lower secondary level. Australia's participation is managed by ACER, which also gathers data at the primary level. The following is drawn from ACER's summary of Australia's 2024 data that drew from representative samples of 359 principals, 359 schools, and 6000 teachers.

Aspects of the demographic data for Australia are interesting. For example, there was a significant increase in the percentage of primary teachers reporting 10 percent + school enrolment of students with additional needs (from 37 per cent in 2019 to 69 per cent in 2024. The same percentages for lower secondary were 36 and 66 respectively. Given that samples were representative, this suggests a dramatic change in school makeup or in the teaching force or both; in any event, a profound challenge for teachers and principals.



Also interesting, and which on balance we take as a positive, is the prior experience of teachers. At the lower secondary level, 62 per cent of teachers are in their second career compared to an OECD average of 25 per cent. In the same cohort, 42 per cent have non-teaching experience compared to 29 per cent in Estonia, a country with similar levels of autonomy.

The most telling comparisons, and the most pertinent for this article, relate to sources of wellbeing and stress. Four sources were identified and these, together with ratings for primary (% giving rating), lower secondary (% giving rating) and, for the latter (OECD) (% giving rating), are as follows:

Too much administrative work	64	69 (52)
Too much marking	38	50 (40)
Keeping up with curriculum and program changes	55	46 (34)
Maintaining classroom discipline	51	43 (45)

Overall, alarmingly, Australia had the second highest level of stress among OECD participants.

At the lower secondary level, 66 per cent of respondents reported using AI in the previous 12 months, though they were worried about student use. The corresponding number for primary was 47 per cent.

Related matters were canvassed by Brian (2024) in a paper for *Education Sciences*. For example, he cited the findings of the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey of a national sample of principals, conducted annually since 2011, results of which consistently showed high levels of stress and increasing levels of offensive behaviour such as threats of violence, actual violence or bullying among inordinately large numbers of principals (Riley et al., 2021). There are, of course, explanatory forces beyond the control of the school or principal.

Brian was especially interested in the association between the deterioration in the work environment and the trend to more autonomy for schools. He offered recommendations that accommodate the finding of TALIS 2024, with implications for autonomy, including (1) school leaders should have greater control over their work environment, (2) system leaders should remove many reporting requirements from schools, (3) there should be "organised abandonment" of outdated practices, (4) the potential benefits of AI should be realised, and (5) there should be more engagement of school leaders in planning for the future (including some of the exciting possibilities described later in this article). Each calls for a high level of structural and professional autonomy.

5. Curriculum, 21st century skills and autonomy

The OECD has been engaged in a project entitled the Future of Education and Skills 2030 (now 2030/2040), the most recent report being on Curriculum and Autonomy (OECD, 2024). It is concerned with curriculum flexibility, which is considered to have five dimensions related to goals, content, pedagogy, assessment, and instruction and learning time.

The report drew on international examples to illustrate how flexibility in curriculum can enhance effectiveness and inclusivity. Most examples from many countries featured a high level of student engagement. Critical factors included the importance of a system framework, including accountability and societal support. Australia was represented by staff from ACARA who provided examples of the system framework.

While the report contains no examples from the school level in Australia, it is clear many could be included. We have a national curriculum, but states have their own curricula, which must be consistent with that national curriculum. Schools make adaptations, which must be consistent with the State version, and teachers typically make further refinements to suit the needs of their students, consistent with the notion of professional autonomy. Expressed another way, school autonomy extends to teacher autonomy.

Australia is well placed for 2030, but we need to acknowledge, as does the OECD (2024) report, that "little is known about how a balance between curriculum flexibility and school and teacher autonomy looks in practice" (Chapter 4). We strongly recommend that you read the OECD report cited here, especially the school examples. They are inspiring!

We now turn our attention to the so-called 21st century skills. This takes us further into the realm of teacher autonomy and closer to student autonomy.

The following set was chosen for inclusion here, being those developed in a major international project (Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills):

Ways of thinking

1. Creativity and innovation
2. Critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making
3. Learning to learn, metacognition

Ways of working

4. Communication
5. Collaboration

Tools for working

6. Information literacy
7. ICT literacy

Living in the world

8. Citizenship – local and global
9. Life and career
10. Personal and social responsibility – including cultural awareness and competence

None of these is a subject in its own right, although a variation of 6 and 7 may be, and several may be explicitly included in the objectives of a subject and assessed accordingly, for example, problem-solving in mathematics. It is the others that may be included in one, some, all or none and that are proving especially difficult to assess, along with other skills that are often included such as resilience and entrepreneurship.

It is more than a decade since Brian saw 1 and 2 of the above list addressed in formative assessments in a Year 10 English class studying Romeo and Juliet in a high-performing autonomous school (described in *The autonomy premium*). As is typical for 21st century skills, a rubric was employed, being an assessment criterion broken down into a series of observable phenomena, with descriptions of different levels of performance. They were discussed with students in advance. In general, rubrics are suitable for self-assessment and may be generated with the assistance of students.

The approach to assessment for a particular skill is best determined as part of the school's overall approach to assessment. An example of how this can be addressed is provided by the University of Melbourne (n.d.) through its Melbourne Metrics program. A feature is the opportunity for university-school partnerships. Melbourne Metrics was a recipient of a 2025 ACEL Leadership Award.

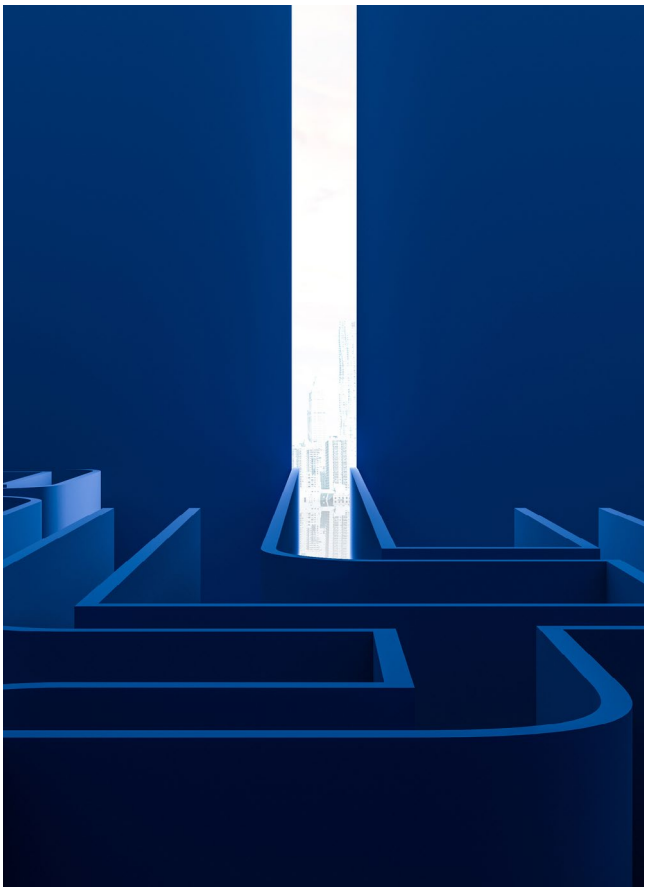
Approaches to curriculum and 21st century skills assume a high level of school and teacher autonomy and take us toward student autonomy.

6. From school autonomy to student autonomy

We complete the journey, so to speak, that began with *The self-managing school* in 1988, at the start of this article, and now conclude with what we propose as The new self-managing student in 2026. One does not necessarily lead to the other; but this is the "direction of travel" we propose. We revert to "self-managing" rather than "autonomous" to reflect our starting point and the prevailing literature on student independence.

The teacher had remained in charge in the traditional concept of "the self-managing student." But what if, in a new view, the student is in charge?

Here is an AI-generated[1] definition of the self-managing student: "A learner who demonstrates autonomous motivation to independently set learning goals, regulate their own cognitive and behavioural strategies, and take ownership of their educational progress *without requiring external direction or oversight*" (Anthropic, 2025). It is those words we have placed in italics that makes this a new view of the self-managing student.



The following commentary and illustrations *for the decade ahead* are consistent with this new view.

1. We recognise that many students, especially at the secondary level, are increasingly being turned off by formal schooling. Attendance levels are falling. Systems try to cope by banning devices from school – anything that might distract from what some students find boring or needlessly stressful (this is separate from the banning of under-16 use of social media). These devices are challenges to the assumptions underlying the purposes and structures of schooling in general.
2. Schools, as currently constituted, will still dominate and teachers will still be the largest professional class. Many students race ahead with new technologies, creating their own learning opportunities. These students take responsibility for their own learning, going beyond traditional ideas on "the self-managing student." Opportunities may be local, but increasingly they will be national and international. They find this exciting. There are no borders in the digital age.
3. For example, students register to participate in a group in an online educational platform using a unique face identifier. They may enter or re-enter at any time or move to another group. Groups typically engage in projects in designated areas of the curriculum and share progress in their agreed area of responsibility. Advanced search engines enable identification of projects or interests.
4. In a related example, groups use emerging technologies to conduct a session in a "room" surrounded by fellow participants, leaving behind old talking heads-style meetings. Participants speak different languages but converse because of instantaneous translation to one's own language.
5. A school, alone or in partnership, may host a project.
6. There is transformation in approaches to assessment, including the embedding of assessment in the process of learning itself. Students, where appropriate, choose the level of learning for which they seek credit and are assessed according to criteria specified for that level.
7. Australia is becoming a leader in AI in schools. Teachers and students gain confidence in its use, which is soon universal.
8. There are changes to the role of teacher, but that role remains paramount, supported by tutors and other professionals. They and trusted others may provide guidance to students, who nevertheless remain in charge of their learning in designated projects.
9. There are more opportunities for community involvement, especially business and industry where the use of AI and emerging technologies is virtually universal.

Equity of access to the new technologies becomes even more of an issue as the focus of autonomy shifts from school to student. This is a major policy issue in its own right. Leadership is critical in getting started, in policy formation, and in policy implementation. Leaders can shape the future and, as Donnie Adams and David Gurr (2026) concluded: "It could be a future where all students can thrive in a technology-rich, humane, and equitable learning environment" (p. 218). That said, it presents an extraordinary challenge to leaders at all levels, and a complex agenda for professional development programs and organisations like ACEL.

We believe *The new self-managing student* can be written now, for there are many green shoots. It will offer a new and exciting vision of autonomy, going beyond what has emerged so far in the 21st century. Students have started to take charge of their own learning.

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[1] Acknowledgement of AI Assistance: The authors used Claude, an AI assistant developed by Anthropic, to generate a definition of the self-managing student and to review the draft text for clarity. The authors reviewed, verified, and take full responsibility for all content.

[2] Supporting references for statements in this article are available from the authors.

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