

Julia Gillard takes the big stick to education's nanny state

By Andrew Bolt
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WITH enemies as bad as some parent groups, Education Minister Julia Gillard doesn't need friends like me.

The opposition to her plans to tell parents more about their schools' performance is so lazy as to be a sign in itself of a decline in school standards.

Gillard is of the Left, but realises it's a crime against poor children most of all to keep bad schools hidden.

Rich children at such schools have options, such as private schools, or parents able and keen to pass on their own good education to make up. Poor children, especially from migrant families, too often have neither.

Gillard wants now to do something about this that Premier John Brumby toyed with a decade ago when he led the Opposition and Gillard worked for him. Until teacher unions sacked him.

Gillard wants all state schools to tell parents how rich or ethnically diverse the schools' students are, as well as how many migrants, refugees and Aboriginal students are enrolled.

And here's the catch in her speech last week: "This should be supplemented by data . . . about the physical and emotional development of children . . . As a nation, we should then be tracking attainment, knowing we are in the powerful position of comparing like schools with like . . . If two schools have comparable school populations but widely varying results we would be able to ask the question why."

What! Reveal which schools teach well and which, gasp, don't? You'd think Gillard had just shot Bambi. A Bambi that can't read or do sums.

In fact, she claims she got the idea from a recent trip to New York where she was stunned by how much the city's Chancellor of Schools, Joel Klein, had lifted standards. Klein is cited by Gillard partly for his Leftist credentials, having been then-president Bill Clinton's pick as assistant attorney-general. But his methods owe more to his time as boss of publishing giant Bertelsmann, Inc. Check the superb website he's since created -- <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/default.htm> -- and the data he now demands from each school so parents can see what their child is getting.

Look up, say, Abraham Lincoln High. You'll find information on, say, the number of Hispanic and poor students, and how well they've done compared with the rest in the city. You'll find survey results on the school's commitment to safety and excellence.

There's absenteeism rates, and academic results for each year. The school gets an overall grade -- C -- and principal Ari Hoogenboom has published the (higher) target he's been set for 2009. And Klein knows what help he needs to make it.

It's data many parents would love. And, as Gillard said on radio, before hastily curbing her provocation: "(Klein) takes calls from principals that say, 'Next year I'm going to make sure my school does better'. And that's the kind of attitude you want."

Or not. Here's how the papers report the wall of opposition to Gillard's idea.

Victorian Education Minister Bronwyn Pike has ruled out this approach, making it clear she wants parents to have no access to comparisons between schools . . . Pike says parents should receive richer information about how their child's school is adding value . . .

Pardon? To give parents "richer" information we must deny them information they want most? In which other debate is it argued the less you tell consumers the better off they are?

Parent groups say they don't want that sort of information publicised anyway, because it could lead to a shame and blame culture and create ghetto schools . . .

What? Are they saying parents do not want information that they would, they then admit, actually use?

The Australian Council of State School Organisations executive director, Terry Aulich, described the Gillard plan as yet another half-baked idea dreamt up by bureaucrats and a handful of neo-conservative newspaper columnists.

Ah. So these parent groups represent not parents but an ideology?

The education system is an elephants' graveyard of innovation of ideas that were never exposed to scrutiny, Mr Aulich said.

So Aulich demands public scrutiny of conservative ideas but not public scrutiny of schools implementing the Left's ideas. Sounds awfully suspicious.