



Issues, Trends and Developments Affecting Principals and Principals' Groups in Australian States and Territories

New South Wales: NSWSPC

WHEN THEY write up the recent history of public education in New South Wales, the Year 2000 may prove to have been an historical watershed.

At least five critical events took place in the month of October alone, events which may have an impact for many years to come. Some of these, and other significant achievements during 2000, arose in part out of the NSWSPC Futures Project, not only out of its recommendations but out of the enhanced standing which it gave to secondary principals as serious key players in shifting the agenda in NSW education. There is even more to come.

1. Executive Restructuring - We Did It!

Following years and recent months of intensive work, the NSW Secondary Principals' Council executive restructuring proposals are to be implemented. Gone is the (very old) '81 period' rule, to be replaced by the establishment of head teacher positions according to a staffing ratio. Second deputies are to be placed in schools over 700, at a cost of some head teacher positions, many of which were due to disappear anyway. The designation of head teacher positions is now largely a school decision. The proposals were both supported and, in some cases, further improved in last minute discussions with the Department and the Teachers' Federation. Colleagues in NSW will certainly acknowledge the work done by John Hardgrove and Mark Anderson, amongst others.

2. A Coalition of Anger

It may be too early to make this judgement but the Commonwealth 'SES Funding' legislation has created a coalition of opposition which may well derail David Kemp's agenda and hopefully force a revision of his manic campaign to destroy public education. In NSW the Union has certainly driven the opposition with a series of forums on school funding. The campaign has been joined by others, including parents' groups and principals' organisations, groups which only six months ago would have seemed to be unlikely 'bedfellows'.

Even more significantly: the Director-General, Ken Boston, has clearly and publicly stated his passionate opposition to the proposed Commonwealth legislation and the EBA.

3. Restructuring the Department of Education and Training

Ken Boston is moving quickly on another front: a significant restructuring of the DET. There are now five portfolios, one of these being Quality Improvement, with the task not only to improve the organisation itself but also to promote public education. The other portfolios see Schools and TAFE separated, with the remaining two being Corporate Services and Planning and Regulation. Each portfolio will focus on performance and organisational improvement, as well as on policy development and operations. While the DG has underplayed the significance of this restructure, it reflects his desire to move Bridge Street to implement an agenda being developed in increasing consultation with the NSW Secondary Principals' Council.

4. Inquiry Into Public Schools

Minister John Aquilina has launched a year-long inquiry into the public funding and accountability of 'private' schools in NSW. The inquiry, to be headed up by veteran public servant, Warren Grimshaw, was met with a chorus of approval from the public education lobby and a mixture of derision and scorn from significant (publicly funded) private schools. Leading the charge on behalf of the latter has been Headmaster, Tim Hawkes, of The King's School, in Sydney, who has probably been bruised by recent criticism of his school's potential largesse, courtesy of David Kemp. **While everyone else knows that the playing field is uneven, they also now know that the lion's share of playing fields seem to lie within the leafy grounds of The King's School.**



5. Career Enhancement

Are you tired, burnt out and not performing? If the answer is in the affirmative (in your professional life, of course) then the DET may give you \$50,000 to simply go away. This scheme, which will be familiar to some interstate readers, provides a retraining grant to those who made the wrong career decision to enter teaching. It is a most commendable scheme but unfortunately the Minister sold it in a way which annoyed the tripe out of every teacher over 45 years of age. Four hundred 'places' will be offered in what may be just a first round of this 'reverse merit' scheme.

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New South Wales

GOVERNMENTS are not adverse to the favourable headline or three and education ministers don't mind the odd glow of complimentary publicity. The current Minister and Government have proven adept at media management and, in the earlier years, were happy enough to generate headlines at the expense of schools and public education. Annual reports, for example were a way of forcing schools to account, basic skills tests would smarten up teachers, big school bank accounts were examples of principals hoarding public funds, and so on. They have mellowed in more recent times, aided by a comfortable majority in parliament and a little gentle persuasion from various stakeholder groups.

Then along came the school massacre that never was and never was going to be. A boy in a large Sydney school wrote a few threatening thoughts in his diary about his teachers and some students and his scribbles were discovered by the school. The principal took appropriate action and generally both the school and the police kept the issue in reasonable perspective. Clearly the boy needed (and received) the type of counselling support that we provide for our young people each and every day.

Minister John Aquilina thought the incident deserved a higher profile and, with nothing more than the public interest at heart, made a statement in the Legislative Assembly. To feed the inevitable media frenzy, the Government's spin-doctors injected a non-existent gun and a few massacre details into the story. To cut a long story short, one media adviser was forced to fall on his sword, the Minister disappeared on a (pre-arranged) overseas visit and the media hacks went to work on the real story. On his return, John Aquilina was subject to a media massacre, which would make lesser mortals curl up into a permanent foetal position.

Meanwhile, the Minister and the DET came under fire, following release of proposals to restructure schools in inner Sydney. Changing demographics and school choice have left several schools facing inevitable closure. Rather than see the situation drift, the DET produced a package that combined some closures (and property sales) with re-badging and refurbishing of the remaining schools. The advantage of the package lay in retaining the proceeds of school sales for the benefit of other schools in the area. The package includes some odd new designations for quite successful schools and the expansion of an unproven 'semi-selective' school model. Inevitably, it was the proposed school closures which generated the greatest angst, with some school communities somehow managing to claim a strong attachment to the local school, while sending their sons and daughters elsewhere.

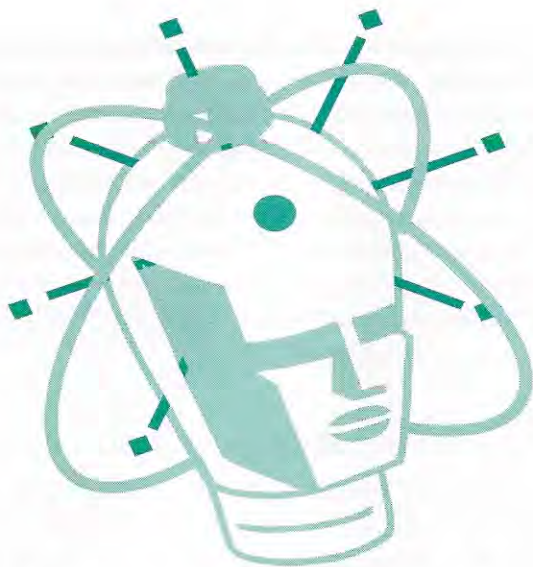
Unfortunately, all of this controversy erupted at the same time as both the DET and the union launched separate (but complementary) promotion campaigns for public education. The campaigns have been accompanied by professional advertisements running in prime TV time and a few high profile functions, with more scheduled later in the year. May saw the launch of 'Priority Public', a new lobby group for public education, amidst continuing and quite unprecedented agreement amongst public education stakeholders.

The next few months should prove interesting as we await the results of the Grimshaw Review into the funding and accountability of (publicly funded) private schools.

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The Learning Online Project

New South Wales principals have taken a proactive stance in their quest to learn more about the potential of online learning. Here, CHRIS BONNOR explains a joint project being undertaken by the New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council and the University of Technology, Sydney.

THERE ARE a number of learning online projects operating in Australia, each one bravely venturing out into a new frontier, and each with something to offer as we struggle to understand what is meant by 'learning online'. The NSW Secondary Principals' Council has initiated two projects, each with universities as partners. The first is being organised jointly by the University of Wollongong and the Curriculum Services Directorate in the Department of Education and Training (DET). The second is being operated directly by the Council, with the active support of the University of Technology, Sydney. This Project is a co-operative arrangement, between groups of schools, to teach a portion of some Higher School Certificate subjects. Three to five-week topics have been identified, in business studies, legal studies and economics, to form the basis for a pilot project.

The origins of both projects go back to the NSWSPC's *Futures Project*, which was completed in 1999. This huge undertaking involved the majority of principals in NSW working together to determine their priorities for education in NSW over the coming years. The Project has created considerable interest and certainly enhanced the profile of secondary principals in that State. Signifi-

cantly, the NSW Department of Education and Training has now funded a secondary principal to work in the Department to organise and promote a range of activities, under the auspices of the *Futures Project*. Amongst these activities are the two online learning projects, as well as a range of other activities.

Acting Now in Online Learning

Pilot projects, such as these two in NSW, are certainly searching for the ways in which online learning might add value to student learning outcomes. A more thorough understanding of online learning issues can only develop out of trialling a range of models. The NSWSPC/UTS project, for example, is able to realise a number of advantages.

1. It tests the water *now* in online learning. An organisation such as the Secondary Principals' Council is able to be more flexible, and use its networks, to develop and implement projects in a shorter time frame.
2. It quickly highlights many issues in online learning, for example, educational and resourcing issues, technology (especially bandwidth), industrial issues and teacher expertise.
3. The initiative means that the Council is more effectively able to contribute to the development of online learning throughout New South Wales.
4. It will develop principals' understanding of e-learning issues earlier than will system-wide initiatives.
5. It is low cost and 'do-able'. In the process, it can bring dispersed schools and students together to optimise resources and assistance. The teachers in the NSWSPC/UTS project have been especially keen for their students to know about standards of work and achievement in a larger 'classroom'.

Setting up the NSWSPC/UTS Course/s

1. For Teachers

In February 2000 the Co-ordinator set up a workshop, for the subject teachers involved in the Project to learn online about learning online; and *Blackboard*, the online platform (www.blackboard.com). Ten teachers enrolled in this course and tested most features of the *Blackboard* environment. Their use of the site (as 'students') was gradually extended, starting with course announcements, then student pages, then 'homework', and so on. The teachers' work on this course has revealed issues, some of which are detailed below. Concurrent with the *Blackboard* course, the Co-ordinator distributed essential paper-based material, such as the UTS learning guide *pro*

forma (a proven template for ensuring that self-managed learning is efficient and effective), and *Blackboard* guide notes. Teachers were assisted by the Project Co-ordinator, who visited each school to assist in enrolling students.

2. For Students

In March the Project Co-ordinator set up the three student course sites (see below) and teachers started enrolling their students. While staff were usually able to do this without help, it proved most useful for the Co-ordinator to visit each school and speak to both students and staff. In order to enrol, each student needed an email address. Around 90% of students already had email addresses. The students actually enrolled in courses before the course content was developed at the workshops early in April. (This situation was likened to going into a classroom and waiting until the teacher arrives). While 'waiting' in this way, the students from different schools started developing their home pages and emailing each other around NSW. They may not have realised it, but the teachers (as 'instructors') were also on the same email list and received mail sent to the whole group. This certainly exposed teachers to the email 'street speak' used by young people. Students also have their first homework in the form of a 'webwise quiz', aimed at familiarising themselves with the online platform.

Participating Schools

As the Project planning evolved, there was a turn-over of participating schools: one teacher had a long-term illness; the apparent level of work involved deterred another. Three schools joined the business studies project just two weeks before the teacher workshops. This proved to be interesting, as the teachers concerned had to quickly learn about the *Blackboard* environment and contribute to the content of their courses in a compressed period of time. The participating schools included two rural schools and four city schools. The teachers displayed a very wide range of skills in working on computers and in an online environment. Two teachers, in particular, have very low skill levels and it will be interesting to see how long they last through the Project. In their capacity as 'students' in the initial course, the teachers not only experienced life as online learners but canvassed a range of online learning issues, including the following.

- Access to computers. Solutions offered by teachers in the online forums included: flexible use of learning guides (not all students have to be online at once); use school time mainly for those students without access at home.
- Slow access speed. This was also discussed online by staff. Solutions include keeping the tasks simple, flexibility with progressive (but not final) deadlines, run the course over a longer time (simultaneously with other topics at school).
- The timeline – teachers were anxious to get started on writing the units. It is only after making a start that they felt they could understand the scale of the Project.

Other concerns emerged as the workshops unfolded. One teacher wanted a separate email address for the purpose of the Project; another wanted to involve only a small number of students initially, and only extend it later to the whole class. Others remained very concerned about issues such as access to computers. The issue of bandwidth remains unresolved in NSW, with computers in schools slowing considerably at various times of the day. The Co-ordinator spent a whole day at one rural school to enrol just 20 students.

Funding Issues

The Project costs mainly consisted in getting the teachers together in Sydney to plan the units. The cost of the workshops mainly included travel and accommodation and amounted to around \$7,000. The Project is actually quite low cost – the emphasis is on what is possible now by groups of teachers using available resources, technology and bandwidth. The Secondary Principals' Council made funds available for the project. The Department of Education and Training in NSW helps resource the Council's *Futures Project* and UTS has contributed its expertise and resources free of charge.

Online Learning Issues

During the development period, groups of principals contributed to, and discussed, a number of online learning issues that the Project would need to overcome. Many of the following points were also emphasised (in different forums) by Shirley Alexander from UTS and Toni Downes from the University of Western Sydney:

- most 'e-learning' is just repackaging;
- students and staff are not as e-literate as we think;
- students experience overload, become confused and their learning can become ineffective, hence guidance is essential;
- e-learning doesn't make up for poor skills;
- downloading (just like photocopying) doesn't equal learning;
- we don't really know much about how computers help learning;
- computers and e-learning needs to add value to face-to-face interaction;
- web resources can be severely flawed, and students need to locate, comprehend, use, create and be critical of text;
- students need authentic work tasks and need to be engaged;
- online learning must not be an environment for more of the same current discipline-based approaches; and,
- teachers will need to adjust to new languages, such as the 'street speak' of young people.

While the current Project still has a couple of months to run, many of the issues above have already been appreciated by the participating teachers.

Course Development Workshops

Staff brought to the workshop their ideas on how much of the *Blackboard* site they believed was appropriate to use and which tools had proven to be most useful. They needed to have thought about what aspects of a proposed course should be online and what should be classroom-based. They also brought along their own programs, resources and useful web addresses. The program for the two-day workshops included:

- a review of progress;
- reflection on *Blackboard* and what we have learned and the manner in which we did (or did not) learn;
- the online topic – where do we want our students to be at the end of it?;
- online and off-line strategies – based on the best from the learning guide;
- development and arrangement of materials; and
- using the *Blackboard* instructor's facility.

Staff were assisted at the workshops by Professor Geoff Scott and Ross Trembath, from the University of Technology, Sydney.

The Product

At the time of writing, the course details are nearly finalised, with the topics to be taught in May-June this year. Each topic includes a range of online and offline learning opportunities. The legal studies topic, for example, is built around an assignment due at the end of the six weeks. The task involves choosing an issue (e.g., minority groups) and investigating the disadvantage encountered by women and the legal and non-legal means used to address this disadvantage. Students are asked to choose a variety of sources and perspectives. While the end task is an essay, the teachers were concerned to monitor the progress of students throughout and, in particular, the sources and resources they will use. Students are to complete a source analysis report each week and also keep a log of their learning experiences throughout the topic. In the learning guide to be issued at the start of the topic, students will be encouraged to complete an online competency quiz; enter a live chat session with other students and teachers at a set time once each week; start and join 'discussion threads' in the online environment; and email other students and seek advice from teachers in any of the participating schools. Teachers are interested in using other features of the *Blackboard* environment with their students, including:

- the group pages (students have been allocated to their school groups but they will also be grouped across schools, according to the issue/s they are studying);
- the student calendar, which will include due dates for assignments etc.; and,
- the chat site, which combined chat with visual presentations.

Features which probably won't be used to any great extent

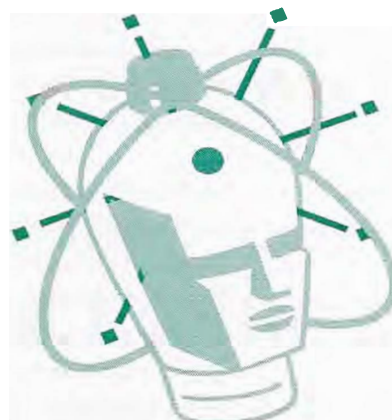
include the online gradebook and the student drop box (for the submission of assignments). It is also unlikely that group work across schools will develop to any great extent, although the business studies teachers have planned to display the best of group work from each school on the site. In this pilot project, students will still essentially submit their completed work to their own teacher. It is highly likely that use of the online features will vary from school to school and at stages throughout each topic. The issue is not that opportunities such as online group work aren't valued – it is just that teachers want to keep the project manageable (and simple).

What Happens Next?

The Project is being thoroughly evaluated, with a focus on the extent to which participation 'adds value' to student learning. The evaluation will include both students and teachers and will draw heavily on the reported experience of both groups and the quality of the work submitted for assessment. Teachers, as well as students, are to keep a log of their learning experiences through the course and the teachers will participate in a teleconference at the end of the topic. **Should the Project prove to be a success, the NSW Secondary Principals' Council may seek the establishment of grants for similar online learning communities across New South Wales.** Already the Project has illustrated many of the issues yet to be resolved, if online learning is to continue to develop in New South Wales schools. **At the urging of principals, the DET in NSW is conducting a review of online learning and related technology issues.** As Toni Downes has pointed out, the starting point needs to be a vision built around student outcomes. Institutional capability and system capacity then needs to be designed to serve that vision. That is a considerable challenge!

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Mr Chris Bonnor served ten years as Principal of Asquith Boys High School in northern Sydney before taking up his current position as Co-ordinator of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council Futures Project. He is currently Deputy-President of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council. He can be contacted by email on Chris.Bonnor@det.nsw.edu.au or cbon@one.net.au





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THE ISSUE of school security has had some media coverage lately, resulting in the Minister announcing security upgrades for some of the schools that featured. Where the Minister's bucket of money comes from in these circumstances is anybody's guess. However, it is quite possible that some of the money has been made available through the number of projects (notably those that were part of the Promoting Public Education campaign) that have been put on hold since New Zealander Judith Aitkin was appointed to the Senior Executive. She did not last long. Aitkin was originally headhunted for the position and, upon arrival in April, commenced to shift a number of comfort zones in the bureaucracy. Her short stay in the organisation possibly reflects the difficulty and frustration of instituting change. The stone walls of Bridge Street could well be a symbol of managing and implementing the change process.

While the Minister is in the counting house, he may eventually have to support the need to increase the Department's bandwidth to schools. **The current band-width is totally inadequate, forcing NSWSPC to en-sure that the matter is on the MCEETYA agenda.** There are a number of other issues current with NSWSPC. Council has been involved in a series of con-sultations with the Teacher Education Review Taskforce that resulted in a discussion document being issued. The document contains a preamble outlining the core pur-pose of a NSW Institute of Teachers and the proposed functions of the Institute. Council has also commenced planning for AESOP (An Exceptional Schooling Out-comes Project). It is hoped that 50 schools will partici-pate in a study to determine what constitutes 'Outstand-ing Educational Outcomes'. Other initiatives include: Psychological Health Policy; Teacher Assessment and Review Training; and consultations on the revised Code of Conduct, the Special Education Policy, and the Infor-mation and Communications Technology Strategy. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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