

## New South Wales

**EIGHTY** principals attended the recent 'Hands on Technology' (HOT) Conference held at the Australian Technology Park, in Redfern. The November conference had as its theme, 'Applying Technology to Facilitate Learning and Challenge Pedagogy'. The conference was jointly sponsored by the NSWSPC and the Department of Education and Training. Presenters included workshops on aspects of media design, web design, learning and teaching programs, new innovations in hardware and software, wireless networking, digital video, and a variety of other audio-visual equipment. Over two days participants were able to attend each of the workshops and have a 'hands-on' opportunity to use the programs and hardware, and to discuss practical applications in schools.

A reception was held with key DET personnel and members of the IT industry. This proved to be an excellent opportunity to exchange thoughts on future directions and affordability. When the evaluations have been collated, I feel sure that the overall recommendation will be that this conference should continue for a third year. Members of the NSWSPC Executive met with the now ex-Minister and had some preliminary discussions over:

- bandwidth;
- laptops for teachers;
- sport;
- the Leadership Centre; and,
- the Schools Frontline project –this is a proposal to give schools some money to polish up the school image.

These issues, and other ongoing projects, will now need to be placed on the new Ministerial agenda.

### Inquiry on Male Teacher Numbers

The Council is also involved with the Government In-quiry on Male Teacher Numbers. This Inquiry is due to present an interim report to the Minister by the end of November, just in time to feed into the budget sub-mission process for next year. The issues are bigger than just male teacher numbers. The report will develop around such themes as:

- selling the career of teaching;
- the status of teachers;
- career structures and opportunities;
- child protection issues; and,
- salary progression opportunities.

The recommendations are not known at this stage but will focus on the recruitment of teachers, issues of confidence in public education, the professionalism of teachers and their standing in the community.

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# A View of the Sea

**'Most Australians leave school with little more than a basic understanding of the sea, and the important issues affecting the marine environment . . . the main source of information about the marine environment in Australia today is television.'**

*State of the Marine Environment Report (SOMER) February 1995*

**BALLINA HIGH SCHOOL** continues to develop effective integrated environmental programs. Its recycling schemes for paper, glass and water, and the development of the school grounds as an environmental teaching and learning area, won the national school Tidy Towns award in 1998. The school is now enjoying a reputation for its exciting and innovative use of the marine environment to develop environmental and ethical awareness, not only in its own students, but in students from any schools wishing to use Ballina High's resources and expertise. Provoked by the SOMER criticism of formal education, and the fact that Australia now controls an area of the sea that is 1.3 times the size of its land mass, the school established a Marine Discovery and Resource Centre. This had the primary objective of *'enthusing students, and through this enthusiasm, develop in them a sound environmental ethic that will allow them to use, enjoy and protect all environments they encounter during their lives.'* We specifically sought to:

- use the marine environment and the interest it generates to change student attitudes, ultimately

leading to improved environmental performance by these students;

- provide high quality marine-based environmental education programs to students from across NSW;
- address the deficiencies found in the national curriculum by the SOMER;
- give isolated students the same educational opportunities as their peers who live on the coast;
- offer support, both in expertise, resources and professional development, to teaching and support staff in schools across the State;
- more effectively utilise the unique resources held at Ballina High;
- capitalise on the natural marine environments in the Ballina area and utilise them as effective teaching and learning tools;
- set up a pilot for similar Marine Education Centres, strategically located along the NSW coastline, to support isolated and western schools offering environmental education programs.

## Strong Community Support

Our courses are keenly sought by students and are heavily supported by the local community, both financially and with expertise. They are seen as worthwhile and relevant. The community also views our course as a means of encouraging young people to form positive and supportive attitudes to their marine environment and the ecosystems on which their town depends so heavily. The courses are based on the principle of ecologically sustainable prac-



tices and include considerable practical or 'hands on' activities. As well as our 'standard' Marine Studies courses in Years 9-12, we offer two modules of environmental work to pre-schoolers, seven to lower primary, nine to upper primary, twenty-seven to junior secondary and fourteen to senior secondary students. We have successfully capitalised on Ballina's natural marine resources, maritime industries and the expertise that manages and monitors these resources. Ballina High is situated within walking distance of coastal and estuarine ecosystems - students have ready access to open beaches, rocky shores, enclosed lakes, an extensive estuary and subtropical waters. Clean seawater for aquaculture is available within two blocks of the school. We are fortunate to have in town the District Offices of Waterways & Maritime Services Board, the New South Wales Fisheries Department and the headquarters of the local flotilla of the Australian Volunteer Coastguard Service. The regional office of the National Parks and Wildlife Service is fifteen minutes away at Alstonville.

### Multiple Formalised Links

The links the school has formalised with these organisations has removed classroom boundaries. The use of their staff to assist with instruction and practical fieldwork has given credibility and meaning to our programs.

A *Memorandum of Understanding* has been signed with Southern Cross University, in Lismore, that commits both institutions to share personal expertise and resources between the Marine Studies Key Learning Area at Ballina High School and the School of Resource Science and

Management at the University. Students and staff regularly use each other's facilities. A *Memorandum of Understanding* has also been signed with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, to provide staff, licences and permits for the operation of the Centre and to jointly manage the Richmond Marine Nature Reserve at South Ballina. Under this agreement, Years 9 and 11 Marine Studies students work with National Parks and Wildlife Rangers to maintain and improve this important estuarine marine reserve.

NSW State Fisheries also provides staff, licences and permits for the operation of the Centre Fisheries. Officers from the local office are regular visitors to the school. An agreement with NSW State Fisheries has been signed to allow Year 10 and Year 12 Marine students to monitor the sea urchin population at Lennox Head.

Ballina High Marine Discovery and Resource Centre has been granted special status by the Australia Museum. Under an agreement with the Museum and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, students and staff are permitted to retrieve dead marine mammals from local beaches, complete post-mortems, treat their bones and eventually reconstruct their skeletons.

Ballina Fisherman's Co-operative organises and conducts tours from the Centre through its seafood processing plant and instructs students in the post-catch care and treatment of seafood.

Australian Volunteer Coastguard Training Officers from the Ballina Flotilla deliver to, and assess, senior students for, the Radio Operators Certificate of Proficiency. As well, the OIC of the local MSB/Waterway Office delivers boating theory lectures and examines students at the





Centre for their NSW Boat Drivers Licence.

The formal links with industries, such as the Ballina Prawn Farm, local marine industries marina operators, commercial fishermen and scuba diving companies provides an invaluable source of knowledge, expertise and educational sites for student work placement.

Through the generosity of the local community and the hard work of our staff, the school has steadily accumulated an impressive array of teaching and learning resources. It has a laboratory dedicated to marine studies, which is considered a showpiece for the marine programs. It has its own fleet of five 3.66m. aluminium V-bow punts and associated safety equipment, powered by 8 horsepower Mariner outboards and a purpose-built trailer to transport them to venues, an interesting collection of CB radios and an impressive array of marine 'paraphernalia'. As well, the school, with the help of the local community, has set up an extensive aquaculture unit with over fifty tonnes of water in a variety of marine and freshwater tanks.

We have four ex-army all-terrain trucks used to transport students to field study sites, snorkelling and SCUBA venues and camping areas. These trucks are also used to recover marine mammal carcasses and in environmental field projects undertaken with NSW Fisheries and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

**Ballina High Marine Discovery and Resource Centre is keen to assist schools wishing to introduce marine education into their curriculum or teach their students on short or extended visits.** Our staff are highly qualified and experienced teachers, with backgrounds in marine science, marine and terrestrial ecology, and environmental interpretation and management. They have had national and international experience. All sessions, including our teacher training and development modules, have been designed to meet NSW Department of Education and Training requirements and Board of Studies syllabi outcomes. Our achievements, and the successful delivery of the Centre's modules and environmental programs, have only been made possible by the continual support of the NSW Department of Education and Training. Our staff administer the New South Wales Marine Teachers Association and regularly conduct inservice training courses for teachers. **The Marine Discovery and Resource Centre arranges for visits, including accommodation, if required.** This allows students to complete SCUBA courses, rock platform, estuarine and ocean studies, or any of the sixty modules of work offered by the Centre.

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## Helping Students Develop Social Confidence

**Is your school doing enough? JOHN MALOUFF and NICOLA SCHUTT suggest some additional activities.**

MANY schools today try to help students develop cognitively, athletically, musically, emotionally, and socially. These efforts follow widespread discussion of multiple intelligences, a concept made popular by Howard Gardner and Daniel Goleman. In the social realm, schools usually focus on helping students learn to follow rules and co-operate with others. Psychologists would say that the schools are working to minimise externalising (disruptive or annoying) behaviour. The other side of social intelligence or skills involves interacting in a confident, socially adept way with others. Schools often put less effort into helping students develop these skills. Students who have low social confidence often are labelled as suffering from shyness, selective mutism (e.g., they won't speak at school), or social phobia. Low social confidence in students tends to be associated with:

- anxiety that can interfere with a student's ability to concentrate on school work;
- being friendless;
- not gaining enough social practice to develop a good interpersonal style; and,
- rejection of the student by peers, once he or she reaches the upper primary level.

Some students who have low social confidence resist attending school.

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**In the long run, students who stay low in social confidence have increased risks of developing depression and substance abuse and experiencing substantial restrictions on relationship partners and careers.**

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# The 12 Good Habits of Effective Learners

**IN DEVELOPING good learning habits, teachers should be interested not only in what a student knows but also how the student responds when he or she doesn't know the answer. So what behaviour indicates the development of good learning habits? GRAHAME WAGENER provides some observed traits.**

**1. PERSEVERENCE.** Some learners quickly give up in despair if the answer to a problem is not readily found. How many times have you heard a student say, *I can't do this. It's too hard*. This statement shows that they lack a problem-solving strategy, a system, which can be used in problem-solving. This is where good learners demonstrate growth in their thinking ability, by using alternative strategies to solve a problem. If one strategy does not work, then the student uses an alternative. The teacher encourages perseverance and creates the right environment to experiment, take risks and try new approaches. Plenty of positive reinforcement is given.



**2. TAKING TIME.** There are times when a student will give the first answer that comes into his or her head, or will perhaps start work without fully understanding the instructions. The student may use the first

idea they have, without fully exploring the options. As the student learns to take more time to explore options and to consider the consequences for a course of action, the student will decrease the amount of trial and error used, and will become more reflective. The teacher can help the student take time to consider the options and to reflect on the consequences of a particular course of action. Students can be helped to plan their problem-solving and to plan a course of action in their mind, or more purposively, with a written strategy, even before they begin.

**3. LISTENING.** The ability to listen to another person's point of view and to understand their position is a good habit for an effective learner to develop. The ability to understand another person's feelings and emotions and to understand their body language, are both good habits for effective learning. The teacher can create an environment where students can work together to solve problems, thus creating a sharing, listening, understanding environment for effective learning. The teacher will know that the students are getting better at their listening skills when they begin to build upon each other's ideas.

**4. ALTERNATIVES.** There are times when students consider that one answer is the correct answer, without looking at the process by which that answer was arrived at. The student believes that the one way used to gain the answer is the only way to use when searching for the solution to a particular problem. When developing the habit of looking for alternatives, the teacher encourages the consideration of another person's point of view. The teacher encourages the student to state sev-

eral ways of looking for solutions to the same problem. There is plenty of encouragement to gain group consensus, resolve conflict and to express a willingness to listen to other points of view. Group activities are an excellent way to explore the various possibilities in problem solution. Brain-storming, mind maps, questions and questioning, thinking hats and CORT thinking skills are just some of the techniques that can be used to gather an array of alternatives.



**5. BEING AWARE.** Most of us are not aware of our own thinking process or our own preferred learning style. The teacher can develop good learning habits by making students more aware of their own thinking and getting them to describe the process involved when working towards the solution of a problem. This will help the student to list the steps involved and to create better neural pathways. The teacher can assist the student with an understanding of the thinking process, by giving the student more information about how the brain works and what actually happens when the brain starts work. The teacher is able to identify that the student is increasing their awareness of their own thinking process when they are able to describe what they know about a problem, and what they need to know.

The student is able to ascertain what is lacking and is able to produce a plan to get this information.



**6. CHECKING.** A great learning habit is to check the work that has been completed. This reflection greatly assists accuracy and instils a sense of pride in having done a good job. The teacher can observe students' increasing desire for accuracy when they are seen taking time to check over their work, and as they grow more conscientious about accuracy and clarity. The teacher can actively instil the habit of checking by asking a student to take back an assignment they have just handed in, and asking them to check it again themselves.

### 7. HABITUAL QUESTIONING.

The teacher needs to develop an environment where there is a shift from the teacher asking questions to the student asking questions. A good learning habit is to ask questions, be a questioner and develop a questioning or enquiring approach. The types of questions that are asked can become, over time, more probing. The student can use the 5 Ws strategy to help them with their questioning. The 5 Ws are: Who, What, Where, Why, and When. Sometimes it is useful to add H – How. If questions are also helpful – What if? – If that is true, then what if...? The teacher can encourage a student to practise their questioning when they are reading a magazine or newspaper, as there will be a number of articles that do not have complete facts or a definite conclusion.

**8. SEEKING ACCURACY.** A good learning habit to develop is to encourage accuracy in the spoken language, as well as the written. Often a student can use language that is confused or vague. As his or her use of language becomes more precise, there will be an automatic use of more descriptive words, more correct names, analogies, and more explanation for value judgements. The student will start speaking in complete sentences and give more support to their ideas. Both oral and written communication becomes more de-

scriptive and coherent. One way the teacher can encourage greater accuracy is to ask the student to write an instruction manual for an everyday household item. Have another student read this manual to see how accurate and user-friendly it is.

### 9. USING ALL THE SENSES.

In developing good learning habits, the teacher encourages the student to use all their senses in learning. More opportunities for learning can come when all the senses are engaged. When the learning pathways in our brain are stimulated, better learning takes place. The teacher can observe students using all their senses when they are touching and engaging with a variety of things in their environment. The teacher can further encourage different problem-solving strategies by the use of the senses when they incorporate a variety of strategies, such as role playing, visualising, interviewing, manipulating, experimenting, observing, data gathering, illustrating and model building.



**10. BEING CREATIVE.** All of us are capable of being clever and ingenious when that capability is developed. A good learning habit is to encourage this creativity. The teacher can do this by having the student think about different solutions to a problem, by examining alternative possibilities and exploring different angles. The teacher encourages the students to put forward their ideas for others to consider and then to learn from the feedback.

The students' curiosity increases as they explore more difficult problems and provide more variety in their responses. The teacher begins to instil

creativity by having students think about creative ways that things should look or be done. One approach would be for the teacher to start with an everyday item (e.g., a toaster) and have students question the way it is, and propose ways in which it could be different.

### 11. ENJOYING PROBLEM-SOLVING.

The teacher encourages the good learning habit of not only 'you can do it', but also 'I enjoy doing it'. It is important that the learning is fun and not viewed as 'hard' work. This is especially necessary for learning set to be done at home. With a growing sense of enjoyment, the student will soon become an independent learner, and will continue to learn throughout life.

### 12. LETTING THE PAST HELP THE PRESENT.

One of the main things that educators try to instil in learning is to have the student apply their learning to everyday experience. Teachers often express amazement when students are not able to use a past experience in the current situation. The good learning habit here is to encourage the student to learn from experience. The student is able to use one experience to assist in the learning of another.

The teacher encourages the student to explain what they are doing, in terms of the previous experience. The student calls upon their knowledge and experience to explain, support and solve each new challenge. The teacher can nurture this good learning habit by sharing their own variety of experiences, and how they have helped in different learning situations.

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## A Selective Debate

**CHRIS BONNOR reports on the anorexic state of the public debate on selective schooling in New South Wales**

ONE OF THE problems in the debate about selective schools in NSW is that, in a State with nineteen such schools, there hasn't really been such a debate. Nor has there been any systemic attempt to evaluate these schools in the total context of public education. Certainly, there is considerable discussion amongst principals but it is a discussion that generates as much heat as light. **We need to conduct such a debate in ways that will advance public education and opportunities for all students.** We also need to conduct the debate without placing our selective school colleagues 'under siege' and negating their achievements and the achievements of their students.

The dialogue between Ted Brierley and Ray Willis touches on some issues but a full debate needs more. Discussions about selective schools need to take place in the context of the total education landscape, and in the context of public education.

### Despite the Rhetoric ...

The landscape of schools in Australia is one in which there is substantial and increasing differentiation between sectors and between schools. **Despite the rhetoric about diversity and choice in education, this differentiation is overwhelmingly based on the income levels of families, reflecting such variables as occupation and residence.** The differentiation exists, not only in the total education landscape, but to some extent within public education systems.

Such trends invite a reaffirmation of the purposes of public education, in

particular, its fundamental role in building social capital. Ken Boston (NSW Director-General of Education) frequently cites US social philosopher, Robert Putman, who refers to the 'bonding' and 'bridging' processes in building social capital. Bonding builds relationships amongst people of similar characteristics and interests. Boston states that private schools, founded on religious and cultural affiliations, are very good at bonding. It is the process of bridging, however, which is far more important:

*'Bridging is accomplished when children and young people learn that common principles, values, norms of justice and reasonable behaviour are the means for understanding different points of view and getting on with each other. Learnt in public schools, these are the building blocks to trust so essential to a liberal society and economy.'*

The very designation or description of some schools as being 'private' or 'elite', by definition, reduces their role in bridging and their capacity to strengthen principles of social justice. Selective schools haven't created this problem: they are simply yet another illustration of how the 'bridging' capacity of public systems has also been reduced by some of the differentiation, which has developed within those systems over the last two decades.

### A Differentiated System

In any education system there is an ongoing need for appropriate, research-based restructuring of schools. The changing nature of the learning environment demands a reconceptualisation of the way we think about the way in which schools are configured and organised.

In its Futures Project, the NSW Secondary Principals' Council has encouraged the exploration of different types of schools, on the basis that no 'one size fits all' for education.

While changes have occurred in NSW, the place of appropriate research in such changes is debatable. These changes include the expansion of the number of selective or semi-selective schools, partly in response to perceived demand for places in these schools. The rationale has been that unsuccessful selective school applicants tend to enrol in publicly funded private schools. The fact that there are still many more selective applicants than places available suggests that this logic will see a continual expansion of selective school places.

Concern is most usually expressed by principals over changes which create tiers within the public school sector, grafted onto a total educational landscape which itself is highly differentiated. They are wary about changes that increase the potential for the residualisation of their schools. Depending on their own school context, principals might single out for criticism the selective schools, creative arts high schools, sports high schools, technology high schools or collegiate groups of schools.

**The creation of some of these schools has been positive and has added vibrancy to public education.** They all claim to have something to offer: every stage in this differentiation has been accompanied by claims (often well-founded) that the new school/system that is being created will result in improved outcomes for the students involved. Unfortunately, the corollary has never been demonstrated: **such initiatives have never been subject to the test of whether they diminish opportunities for any other groups of students, including those who remain in the majority of 7-12 comprehensive schools.**

### Catering for the Gifted

This is the most prominent basis on which some students are educated in schools other than comprehensive



schools. Gifted students are able to seek entry into one of a number of selective or semi-selective schools in NSW. Many of these schools have long been part of public education in NSW. Some have been removed or added at various times, reflecting contemporary views of the place of such schools. Most usually, the rationale has been that, although every learner is unique, some types of learners, such as gifted and talented students, need particular attention.

In effect, the response in NSW to the need to support such students has been largely to consider their needs in isolation from the needs of all students and offer them places in selective schools. (Strangely, such a separate education is not considered suitable for all other students with special needs.) As a consequence, these schools have a high public profile and are held up as proof that the Department of Education and Training's provision for gifted students is successful. Parents and gifted students 'vote with their feet' and engage in active competition (and coaching) to gain entry into these schools.

Local efforts to cater for gifted students in comprehensive schools are less highly regarded and seem to be less well supported. It is difficult to provide credible assurances to parents that their local secondary school is equally able to cater for all the needs of gifted students. While many local schools run good programs for these students, there are few properly resourced system and school initiatives which cater for gifted and talented students in any systematic way. There is little effective training and development, no targeted funding and inadequate consultancy support.

It is this perceived absence of a viable alternative to selective schools which impacts on the debate in the short-term: in the absence of well-regarded effective local provision for gifted students, any argument that

public education systems should not include selective schools is difficult to sustain.

### Need for Serious Debate

At the same time, once such assurances about effective local provision are provided, there needs to be a serious debate on models of provision for such students. The agenda for such a debate must include the advantages and disadvantages of separate provision for gifted students. Such a debate needs to take into account the research about selective schools, including data which points to substantial achievement of students in selective schools. At the same time, such a debate should consider the needs of, and opportunities available to, all students.

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**Some principals might argue that abolition of selective schools would recreate the critical mass of gifted students in every local school, which would ensure effective provision.**

**However, it would also drive students out of the public education system in NSW, a system that is showing signs of rebuilding, and simply cannot afford to create any further impetus for middle class 'flight' to the publicly-funded private sector.**

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There are other options that can be explored in the short-term. If selective schools have something to offer in the education of gifted students (and many do), they need to disseminate this to other schools. A successful precedent for this was created in NSW by the establishment of technology high schools in the early

1990s. Some of these schools operated successfully as lighthouse schools for over a decade, hosting visits, seminars and modelling new approaches to technology education. The fact that technology high schools generally no longer retain their distinctive identity is partly a result of successful dissemination of features of these schools throughout the public education system.

There is arguably a similar need for closer links between selective schools and other schools. Such links might include:

- short-term student placement;
- joint classes and/or after-school opportunities for gifted students;
- teacher exchange;
- seminars for teachers of gifted students; and,
- online learning links between different schools.

Cynics would argue that all selective schools have to offer is a large number of bright students whose achievements bear little relation to school practices. The reality is that what selective schools have to offer varies within and between such schools, reflecting the variety within and between most schools. Certainly, it is neither productive for comprehensive schools to continue to 'cry poor', nor for selective schools to continue to exist as islands in the public education community. It is time to do something meaningful and enriching for gifted students and, in the process, make sure that our public education systems strive to serve, and maximise opportunities, for all our students.

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## State of the Nation

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

### New South Wales

OUT WITH one John and in with another. John Aquilina has been replaced by John Watkins as Minister for Education. Some have suggested that the new Minister has been appointed because he has a more approachable personality, will give a better public image and is a better listener, especially to educators, and not, as previously, to bureaucrats and minders.

It is hard to say if the new Minister will change the entrenched politicisation of education, as many would be eager to see, or if there will just be a new face mouth-ing much the same. At least some of the NSWSPC executive feel that, so far, Minister Watkins has proved to be a listener, even if the real agenda is to avoid controversy and disputes between now and March next year (election time). Some of the issues that have been raised with the new Minister include:

**Higher School Certificate.** There are a number of issues here, with a NSWSPC submission being sent to the independent review chaired by the head of ACER, Geoff Masters;

**Years 7-10 Curriculum Review.** The development will proceed but there has been a delayed time line for English and Maths 2002. Science will have reduced content. Schools will have twelve months to consider syllabi and prepare pedagogy; and,

**Technology.** The Minister agrees with the NSWSPC that bandwidth is the most important issue.

**This is because the success of everything else, for instance, laptops for teachers, depends on the provision of adequate bandwidth.**

On a side issue, the NSW Public Accounts Committee has come up with the novel idea that the School Student Transport Scheme, currently run by the Department of Transport, should now be run by the Education Department, with principals in charge of selecting and financing bus services. If this comes about, one of the core responsibilities in the education of children will be to learn how to run buses and bus timetables. This may well be a future requirement when selecting educational leaders on their merit!

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# State of the Nation



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

## NSW

**THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL** of Education and Training and Managing Director of Technical and Further Education in New South Wales, Dr Ken Boston, has been named as the Senior Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) of Britain. Dr Boston has the clear task of ensuring that all qualifications meet the highest standard and the examination blunders that have plagued the Exam Board, Edexcel, cease. Dr Boston is not a stranger to conducting systemic re-organisation and it appears he will begin his new job in September with a review of the entire British examination and testing system.

During the middle of June the NSWSPC held their annual conference at Leura, in the Blue Mountains. During the conference council members were addressed and farewelled by Dr Boston and given a friendly 'fire-side' talk by the Minister. Keynote speakers addressed research in Teaching and Learning, Productive Pedagogy, the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning, Supporting Students at Risk and Principal Welfare. One of the key workshops involved council members working on an evaluation of the SPC *Preferred Futures* document. The involvement of all council members in the *Preferred Futures* Project is regarded as being essential, especially if NSWSPC is to take a proactive and leading role in shaping the direction of education for the future.

Some of the key strategic options include:

- the political/education interface;
- changing leadership;
- schools as learning environments;
- learners and learning;
- curriculum and credentialling; and,
- technology in learning.

Once the process of deciding on priorities is completed, a 2-3 year strategic plan will be developed, along with an appropriate media and promotion strategy.

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# NSW Forum on School Safety

**Recent school violence in Sydney resulted in serious injury to students (including lung repair surgery), a number of arrests and a media 'feeding frenzy'. GRAHAME WAGENER provides a report on a community forum held to address the problem.**

NSW Ministers of Police and Education and Training recently convened a Forum in immediate response to a particularly disturbing incident between students from two Sydney metropolitan schools. Press coverage of the incident had been frenzied, so much so that a representative of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council felt compelled to email the membership, expressing outrage at the degree of media misrepresentation. This has become so bad that an accidental injury to a student, at a different Sydney high school, was automatically described as a 'stabbing', when it was nothing of the sort. The issues discussed at the Forum were wide ranging. They included: gang activity; the need to build stronger communication links between parents, principals and police; the problem of truancy; issues relating to the transportation of young people to and from school; crime prevention in schools; the influence of peer pressure on crime; and the teaching of personal and community responsibility. The Forum was jointly chaired by Minister Costa (for the police) and Minister Watkins (for education).

Representatives from a wide range of interested stakeholders were also included. In opening, both Ministers made reference to the complex so-

cial problems we now face. However, at the same time, it was clearly stated that violence will not be tolerated and that schools must be safe places. Forum participants were given a presentation by the Director of the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, which included some assorted but nevertheless interesting figures.

- Year 9-10 males and Years 8-9 females constituted the most represented groups in the 5,178 students who had reported an assault in the period 1995-6.

- Police data in 1997-2001 shows that assault increased in schools by 30%. In the wider community, however, there was only a 15% increase over the same period. (Please note that these figures represent the *percentage rate of increase* and are completely separate to the *total number* of assaults in schools and the wider community).

- By far, most assaults by young people occur off school premises. In 2001 police data showed that the recorded rate of assaults by 14 to 15-year-olds *on school premises* is 183 per 100,000, while the recorded rate for 14-15 year olds *off school premises* is 1,394 per 100,000.

- It is clear that there is an increase in the number of school assaults involving a weapon and subsequent police intervention. In 1991 there were fourteen assaults with a weapon on NSW school premises where police were called (this represents a rate of two incidents per 100,000 student population). In 2001 there were 68 assaults with a weapon on school premises, where police were called (representing a rate of 9 incidents per 100,000 student population).

- Police data from last year shows that where a weapon was used in school assaults, it was a knife in 52.9% of the cases reported. Iron bars were used in 17.6% of school assaults and a rock (including bricks) in 11.8% of cases. Only 1.5% of school assaults with a weapon involved a firearm.

- An analysis of last year's police data also shows that the highest assault rates on school premises in NSW were in the North-Western, Northern, Mid-North Coast and the Far West areas. In Sydney itself, the highest levels of assault on school premises were in Blacktown, Outer South-West Sydney, Gosford-Wyong, Outer Western Sydney, Fairfield-Liverpool and the Canterbury-Bankstown areas.

- Last year 86.4% of assaults on school premises were conducted by a single offender. Only 8.7% involved two offenders and only 3% involved three offenders.

- Police records for last year show that 20.9% of assaults on school premises occurred on a Thursday, 19.7% on a Tuesday, 19.6% on a Wednesday, 19.2% on a Friday and 15.9% on a Monday.

- Records for last year also showed that 65% of assaults on school premises typically occurred between 9a.m. and 3p.m. However, 21% of them occurred between 3p.m. and 6p.m. On weekends 18% of assaults on school premises took place between 6p.m. and 12p.m.

## An Undeniable Increase

Assaults on school premises are becoming more prevalent. However, most involve little or no physical injury. Fortunately, it is still true that youth assaults occur far less often on school premises than elsewhere in the community. The vast majority (95%) of school assaults involve no weapon, although weapon use has increased. Also, it was reported that



**vast majority (95%) of school-based assaults were not gang-related.** While each of the representatives at the Forum were given an opportunity to have input, perhaps the most telling contributions came from the student representatives. Two, in particular, made an impression. The first spoke at length about the morale of her fellow students after being constantly bombarded by media reports about their school allegedly being a centre for gang recruitment and a distribution point for drugs. She emphasized how safe she felt inside school, and insisted that there were no gangs in the school. Further, she was not aware of any drug involvement. This student also felt that her school had been unfairly labelled by media because of its location, rather than on the basis of any hard evidence.

The second noteworthy student address concerned the personal. The student described how he travelled by train to a certain key station and, from there, travelled by bus to school. The train station is a known trouble spot and has been for many years. It has become even more troublesome lately because of the large volume of students passing through and the increase in expensive devices they now carry. This boy apparently felt so threatened at this transport junction that he felt compelled to transfer schools. His address confirmed that violence in and around schools, including transport junctions, was part of the broader community problem of youth assault.

### Plan of Action

The most important part of the Forum came in the afternoon, when agreement was reached on a plan for action. Here are some of the key features.

- **Taskforce VAR** (the naming of the taskforce does not have any special significance other than the fact that the NSW Police are currently

naming taskforces after rivers!) is to be permanently established and will have specific responsibility for physical security, curriculum/programs; transport; and investigations.

- A new **Safety and Security Directorate** (SSD) will be established in the schools portfolio. One of the chief functions of the new Directorate will be to improve the personal safety of students and staff, as well as the physical security of schools; provide a direct link to, and support for, taskforce VAR; include an Action Response Group to provide critical incident advice and support to schools; and provide forums for students to contribute to the solutions.

- A new **Priority Action Program** to be trialled in public schools identified as having a concentration of 'at risk' students. One of the early intervention principles would include extra staff to implement new staffing models, such as team teaching, smaller class sizes, as well as the provision of special education and behaviour teachers and support staff.

- Taskforce VAR will establish protocols for the information exchange between NSW Police, school authorities, parents and principals, with special consideration being given to truancy, violent behaviours, participation in gangs or suspected drug use or alcohol abuse.

- Police, school authorities and the Department of Transport will determine those transport routes and links worst affected by gangs, violence and criminality. These areas will come under increased scrutiny.

- The Department of Education and Training will advise all public schools of the existing right of principals and teachers to search students' possessions, where reasonable suspicion exists.

- The state-wide provision and placement of school counsellors will be reviewed, with a view to increasing resources.

- The role of police Youth Liaison Officers will be reviewed.

- The **Young Offenders Act 1997** will be amended, so representatives of a school community can attend youth justice conferences, if appropriate, at the discretion of the conference convenor.

- Legislation and guidelines relating to truancy, suspensions and expulsions will be reviewed.

The Forum determined to reconvene on August 2 to consider progress and make any amendments necessary to the plan of action. Given the events in Germany in late April, it is imperative that Taskforce VAR, the Action Plan, and the associated training, curriculum implementation, reviews, resource implications and strategic co-operation be undertaken and put in place as a matter of priority. School violence in the USA has resulted in the development of a wide range of programs, many of which we can learn from. Increasingly, it is being recognised that a national educational campaign needs to be conducted on the influence of violent movies, TV programs, violent interactive arcade video games and handheld games. In 1996 a leading researcher of the influence of the media on young people made this hopeful prediction:

*Ultimately, in the face of all this evidence, the deglamorization and condemnation of violence in the media are inevitable. It will be done in simple self-defence, as our society rises up against the enabling of the violent crimes that are destroying our lives, our cities, our civilization. When it occurs, this process will probably be similar to the deglamorization of drugs and tobacco that has occurred in recent years, and for much the same reason.* (Grossman, 1996, p.330)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## New South Wales

ON 26 AUGUST the 'Editorial' of the *Sydney Morning Herald* read thus:

*'The public education system has been steadily bleeding over the past three decades. Professor Tony Vinson, in his recent report, concluded that teachers in government schools are undervalued, underpaid and overwhelmed by curriculum change and extra duties and that many school buildings are seriously inadequate.'*

This clearly indicates the impact that the initial reports of the *Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW*, chaired by Tony Vinson, is already having. **The Vinson Inquiry is like a Royal Commission into public education.** The \$500,000 Inquiry is funded by the NSW Teachers' Federation and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations. It is underpinned by the key provision of the Education Act (NSW): *'the principal responsibility of the state is the provision of public education'*. In the section on background information about the Inquiry, it stated:

*'It is therefore critically important that government has clear strategic directions for the future of public education and that these directions are well understood. Short-term thinking by governments more concerned about the electoral cycle than the future of our society has an economic, social and individual cost. Indeed, the State Government has abrogated responsibility for such an Inquiry.'*

While the Vinson Report will undoubtedly have significant long-term impact on the future direction of education in NSW, the Report is sure to be an immediate source of debate in the upcoming State election, to be held in the middle of March 2003. Already, the Minister has been quick to announce the Government's position on several of the recommendations of the Report.

Issues that will dominate the education debate in the lead-up to the State election include:

- teacher supply/teacher quality - the response so far is the Interim Committee on the Institute of Teachers (mainly to do with Teaching Standards); the Joint Committee on Quality Teacher Provision; the Casual Teacher Plan;
- the nature of school/schooling – the selective/comprehensive debate and the ability of all schools to cater for the needs of all students; and,
- industrial issues – salaries; class sizes; T&D for teachers; technology; and the physical condition of schools.

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