

Sustaining Quality Schooling

THE New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) has been very active with its latest project. This has recently changed its name from Sustaining Our Schools to Sustaining Quality Schools so that it would be a more positive, inclusive statement. The SPC executive and representatives from all regions held a great two-day workshop in Canberra last term to develop the project at regional levels. There are ten regional groups who are developing plans to work with their regional directors to promote public education and a rationalisation of schools. This will be confronting but it beats bleeding to death slowly.

There are also several state teams from the SPC working on particular initiatives. SPC President Chris Bonnor has developed a series of eight articles which can be usefully adapted for school newsletters. They can be found on the NSWSPC website at: <http://www.nswspc.org.au/documents/default.asp?a=showdocument&document=129>

The SPC is planning a two-day conference in March to bring together all the plans and planners, and keep the pressure upwards. In a strange way, NSW principals have been inspired by the state education minister, who told them at their June conference that she did not want to get ahead of public opinion, so that was taken as an invitation to influence public opinion.

The NSW Government has been under siege in recent weeks, and there is a general feeling that the Government will undertake nothing adventurous in education until after the next election in March 2007, no matter how much change might be required. In fact, the long-awaited Grimshaw Report Mark 2, highlighting the inequities of current funding policies for both government and other schools, has finally been released, but there is no stated intention by the Government to act on any of its recommendations.

Another controversy has been in special education. Department plans to rationalise support classes for students with disabilities were flawed and inconsistent, and only after the SPC assisted with genuine advice was it possible for this area to be defused for 2006, with obvious benefits for students and schools.

The 2006 school year has begun with controversy over the 'Back-to-School' allowance. This was introduced as a sly political move by former premier Bob Carr, with all families receiving a cheque for \$50 at the start of the school year, regardless of family wealth. The inequity of this approach has been highlighted in the media, with principals indicating that the funds should be given direct to the schools where it is most needed.

The internationally publicised race riots in Cronulla and other suburbs have also produced the usual political response of putting responsibility onto schools. The premier has said that schools will have to teach even more values and train children not to spit. The extra values to be mandated were 'respect' and 'responsibility', but Jane Austen might have suggested 'Pride and Prejudice' as the political values inherent in this education debate.

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The Sustaining Quality Schools project

In mid-2005 the NSW Secondary Principals' Council established a project to lobby for changes in policies that impact on the viability and success of public education. CHRIS BONNOR describes the Sustaining Quality Schools project, which is now a joint initiative of the NSW Secondary Principals Council and the NSW Primary Principals' Association.

FOR over a decade secondary principals in NSW government schools have led educational change. In the process they have become key drivers in moves that will change the face and operation of public education in NSW.

Background to the project

But something seemed to change in 2005. What was it and why have NSW principals widened the scope of their advocacy for change to go beyond public education to the whole landscape of schooling?

It is often argued that principals occupy a unique place in education. Unlike many others, we combine a micro-view of our schools with a macro-view of the contexts in which we operate, including our own school systems and the total education landscape. In the process we not only feel and live the issues and tensions created in the lives of young people, we also experience, at first hand, changes in the delivery and structures of schooling.

This means that we are keenly aware of the way in which these structures serve - and also fail to serve - the best interests of our students, the school and the wider community.

All principals see schooling as the key institution, beyond the family, that shapes the future for the majority of young Australians. Our schools are transmitters of culture, values and beliefs and are critical agents of socialisation. We know that schools have a civic function in shaping Australian society and preparing students for lifelong learning and participation in an emerging global society.

Given the 'barometer' character of such a role and our commitment to public education, it was hardly surprising that government school principals would eventually react to what they increasingly see as the marginalisation

of their schools and communities, a situation created by the privatisation of education.

Reshaping public education

For many years, principals across Australia have devoted considerable energy to reforming public education 'from within'. Principals in NSW point with considerable satisfaction to improvements in technology, a greater focus on school leadership, site-based professional learning and the development of a system-wide draft framework for quality teaching and learning.

However, much of what passes as 'reform' in all school sectors has been depressingly familiar. Even leaving aside the Commonwealth agenda, 'reform' has been both driven and accompanied by ramped-up accountability, prescribed curriculum, benchmarking, incessant testing, monitoring and blaming, accompanied in the worst cases by compensatory patching and cost-cutting. When driven to it, the role of government seems to be to provide some reassurance to articulate and aspirant parents nervous about standards, the wellbeing of their children and their future, in the midst of economic and social restructuring and constant change.

An interesting observation of the 'reform' agenda comes from the Education Foundation, the Melbourne-based organisation responsible for (amongst many other things) 'Back to School Day'. In an insightful pamphlet (1) based on a UK Demos Report, the Foundation has raised the significance of deep-seated structural problems. As Tom Bentley, from Demos, puts it:

'the effort to improve education outcomes has usually focused on finding levers and incentives to improve the effectiveness of schools themselves. This is a worthwhile goal. But it has tended to screen out a set of factors that are far more influential on education outcomes, perhaps because of an implicit assumption that they cannot be controlled. They include private/public mix, social geography, social class and mobility, income and wealth differentials, culture and community involvement'. (2)

Many observers, including principals, are increasingly seeing the agenda to constantly improve schools, against all other odds, as masking fundamental social and community realities that are harder to change and are creating long-term damage to Australia's social capital.

Observers such as the Education Foundation and Demos don't let public education 'off the hook'. Indeed, the Foundation points to academic/social differentiation within public education (partly created by the presence of academic and postcode-selective schooling) as an essential part of the problem.

In another sense, public educators have also failed to recognise or develop strategies to cope with the dramatic rise in private schooling. We continue to see education, and public education in particular, as a 'common good' that contributes to a broad 'common wealth' of the community and nation. We believe in the critical social bridging that links and knits together often very different families and communities.

This view is certainly not shared by those who see education as a private or 'positional good' which can, and should, be purchased. Increasingly, parents are told that schools that are referred to as 'private' are better able to provide the educational advantage they seek for their children. In the process they expect, and are given, public financial support for what amounts to a private choice.

The increasing challenge for government school principals is to provide the level of assurance about quality, innovation, opportunity and wellbeing that many parents seek from private providers. However, it is also their right and responsibility to create and engage in a debate about those aspects of public policy in education that are regressive and don't adequately or fairly serve all communities.

It has certainly never been possible to review, debate or make decisions about public education or any other schools/sectors in isolation. Public education doesn't exist in a vacuum – policy-making must always acknowledge the wider context of schools and the operation of all schools in receipt of public funds.

Accountability is not enough

Much of the effort in trying to place schools at least on the same playing field (leaving aside for one moment the slope of the field) has focused on accountability. Some States have legislation in place that places additional accountabilities on any school receiving public funds.

Legislation in NSW details requirements for the registration of a non-government school, including provisions for:

- professional standards for teachers;
- adequate educational facilities;
- student welfare and child protection;
- a discipline policy based on procedural fairness; and,
- annual reporting.

It is fair to say that the new accountability regime in NSW was, with some exceptions, generally supported, or at least not actively opposed, by government-funded private school groups. They saw the legislation as a manageable opportunity to put to rest the accusation that they weren't accountable.

However, by its nature, school 'accountability' is about answerability and liability for what schools do. While enforcing some changes in practice, the accountability process has left untouched critical questions about what schools should be obliged to do in exchange for public funding.

Selection, choice and advantage

Across Australia, the manner in which publicly-funded private schools are permitted to operate has created a new landscape of schooling: one in which substantial advantages accrue to most of the private schools while disadvantages accrue to the rest, including government schools and some private schools.

The most fundamental problem is created by the use of selection and sorting mechanisms by schools to ensure that, contrary to the claims made by choice advocates, choice of schools essentially becomes choice for schools. While 'selection' is not exclusive to private schools, the charging of fees simply enables schools to act as agencies to sort the school-age population on the basis of socio-economic status. The inevitable result is the creation of layers of schooling between and amongst schools, both private and public.

This is not permitted in those countries in which faith-based and other government-funded private schools operate as an integral part of the state's overall provision of schooling. It is interesting that the biggest debate over the Blair Government's school 'reforms' has focused on the role of discrimination and admissions policies in the creation of inequities between schools. At least in England there is such a debate.

There has been little attempt in NSW, or elsewhere in Australia, to investigate the extent to which the provision of public funds carries an obligation to fulfil a public charter of responsibilities. The situation is arguably the reverse: Australia is at odds with other OECD countries in the extent to which publicly-funded private schools are able to combine private resources (and a different set of rules) with government funding to cater for private choice and thereby achieve a competitive advantage, particularly over the public system.

Obligations and operations

This advantage is particularly evident in the manner in which schools operate, especially in the day-to-day practices that form a large part of the working lives of school principals. It is the differences in the operation of schools, particularly in student welfare and staffing, that

are most often mentioned by parents who make a choice between schools. These differences impact on:

- selection and enrolment of students;
- suspension of students;
- expulsion of students;
- discrimination on basis of sexuality, disability, gender or age;
- appointment of staff;
- dismissal of staff;
- school uniforms;
- fees and contributions; and,
- properties and maintenance (3).

One obvious challenge is for government schools and systems to change practices to become more competitive. It is certainly true that practice in many government schools and systems has only recently developed a more competitive edge. However, the scope to change is limited for a public system that is legally required to be inclusive of all students and families. Put brutally: because we **must** enrol everyone, we include the very students and families that some parents are prepared to pay money to avoid, and we create rules and frameworks that cater for these students.

We need to ensure that the provision of public funds, to schools of all types, is accompanied by comparable rules. No school should be allowed, by default or design, to avoid catering for students from low income families, indigenous Australians, students with disabilities, students from one-parent families and students whose families may not profess a religious faith.

There is no doubt that many private schools do operate in ways that reflect a commitment to social justice and equity. However, the inescapable result of our present rules and structures is that we have a public school system which disproportionately caters for the above groups and which, increasingly, has to shoulder the burden of supporting young people and communities which are in danger of being marginalised. The non-government schools that do their share of the 'heavy lifting' would certainly welcome greater commitment from those who choose otherwise.

Lobbying for policy change

In mid-2005 the NSW Secondary Principals' Council established a project to lobby for changes in policies that impact on the viability and success of public education. In previous years we have had measurable success in project-based advocacy for policy change, including a futures project and another project built around our view of the desired role of the principal in public schools.

The Sustaining Quality Schools project is now a joint initiative of the NSWSPC and the NSW Primary Prin-

cipals' Association (NSWPPA). It has a dual focus, linking statewide policy initiatives and changes to the regional organisation of schools. The statewide initiatives include:

- the frameworks and policies for public education, including the current legal and regulatory frameworks limiting educational provision in NSW;
- positive publicity, media and promotions strategies, to raise public education issues with the community of each school;
- future structural options, especially for local comprehensive schools;
- strategic networks and partnerships, including with other schools and community groups; and,
- primary-secondary transition process, with all the implications this has for market share.

While statewide initiatives will be important, the core of this project may prove to be local initiatives. There are significant differences between, and within, regions, making local strategies and responses essential. Regional teams have been appointed, and have gathered very rich information about what principals see as their regional strengths, key issues and challenges, future, capacity, barriers, and possible regional strategies.

Regional teams have spent time developing proposals to raise at regional forums and with regional directors. The focus has been on priorities and strategies focused on hard decisions that will need to be made in the next few years. It is interesting that, while government and DET reaction has been (unsurprisingly) muted, there is strong support for local involvement in the vexed issue of the rationalisation of the provision of schools, both public and private.

A new kind of advocacy

From an early stage it was decided that the issues surrounding the project were significant and should be raised within our school communities. These issues have been raised through articles published in school newsletters, in part to balance the presentation of educational issues in much of the media. These articles (4) addressed issues such as the following.

- **Who does the heavy lifting?** A tale of two countries: how schooling arrangements in Australia defy common sense and disadvantage many schools, both public and private.
- **School myths and realities.** A tale about (tall) tales: unpacking the myths about public and private schools: enrolments, staffing, curriculum, values and more.
- **Doing well at school.** Giving our students the edge: the differences between schools, especially surrounding student achievement.

- **Our schools - value, values, valuable.** Serving our parents and communities: tackling the values debate, again unpacking myths and suggesting some realities.
- **Bridging communities and building a nation.** Questioning the nation-building capacity of an educational landscape dominated by faith-based schools.
- **Asking the hard questions to develop long-term solutions.** Posing critical questions that require public discussion and resolution.
- **Dollars and sense.** Unpacking the funding debate: what is the argument for funding 'private' schools and how well does it stand up to scrutiny?
- **Sustainable schools for all.** It is time to restore the balance: tentative suggestions and policy ideas towards creating a sustainable landscape of schools.

The articles are accompanied by a brochure and a PowerPoint presentation addressing the same themes. A survey of secondary principals at the end of last year indicated that most were publishing the articles. Interestingly, while the initial public reaction was most commonly no reaction at all (something quite familiar to principals) there was also strong support from communities and almost no negative or adverse reaction reported.

Strong advocates for public education argue that the articles don't go far enough and make too many concessions. Certainly, the whole project represents an attempt to create a different debate and style of advocacy. Amongst other things, advocates try to avoid establishing any victim status for public education, pointing out that there are many victims in the current structures.

Different advocacy needed

There is certainly a need for a different advocacy. The educational policy agenda in Australia has been set largely by advocates for a publicly-funded choice of schools. They have effectively appropriated to their purpose words such as 'choice', 'competition', 'private', 'excellence', 'exclusive', 'values', and more.

In responding to this agenda, the public education lobby has largely **not** been successful. Our response has been characterised by calls for more resources for public education, a focus on the divide between rich schools and the poor schools and repeated reference to the same prominent, private schools as examples of system failure. Strategies such as these have made little impact on the key aspirant middle class, the group whose votes and choice of schools have, and will, continue to influence policy.

By raising significant questions, the Sustaining Quality Schools project is contributing to new frameworks, ideas and language in an effort to shift the public debate, create new agendas and change policy.

What do we want?

It is too early to define all the policy directions and priorities that this project will eventually adopt. Principals are increasingly aware that public policy (or the lack of it) on school establishment, accountability, operation and funding is a minefield. Years of *ad hoc* planning and lack of coherence in our federal system of government have, for far too long, stood in the way of effective change.

The NSW Secondary Principals Council is committed to the essential primacy, in a democratic society, of schools that are accessible to all, inclusive and secular. In providing educational opportunities for students, the first responsibility of government is to provide and fund such schools to the highest possible standards.

We believe that any school receiving public funds must address the same community expectations in terms of curriculum, accountability and operational practices as are required of our public schools. This must embrace the frameworks, rules and procedures that govern the day-to-day functioning of schools, including curriculum implementation, management practice, enrolment of students, student welfare, discipline and presentation, employment of staff, and compliance with legislation and regulations.

What we have at the moment is not sustainable.

Notes

1. *Education Foundation Equity, Excellence and Effectiveness - Moving forward on schooling arrangements in Australia.* A discussion paper from the Education Foundation's Case for Change Working Party. April 2005.
2. Bentley, Tom, et al., *A Fair Go: Public value and diversity in education*, Demos Report, May 2004.
3. For a full comparison of operation in all these areas, see page 13 of the Senate report on Commonwealth Funding for Schools (2004) at website: http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/completed_inquiries/2002-04/schoolfunding/report/index.htm.
4. These are available at website: www.nswspc.org.au/documents



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Government in hiatus

THE NSW Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) has had considerable success in pushing for improvement in state schools but not

as much in recent times, especially where resources are required. This has certainly created new levels of frustration for principals.

New South Wales is now in the pre-election 'lock down' phase, where anything that is raised that might impact on policy goes into a big holding tank called 'possible ALP election policy'. This phase used to last for three months but is now up to a year - the election is not until March 2007! This makes life difficult. In private, principals have run into the brick wall of no resources, and if principals raise issues in public, they just give the government the jitters, with little chance of policy change.

In the public arena, the SPC is supporting the priorities of the Public Education Alliance (of teachers, principals and parents) because the 2003 election showed that these were influential. The SPC is also trying to challenge and change public opinion through the Sustaining Quality Schools project, also mentioned in this edition of *Principal Matters*.

The SPC is also scrutinising its own priorities, organisation and relations with the Department of Education and Training. How many priorities should it have? Is the previously successful model of reference groups matching DET directorates still the best way to go? The SPC is doubling its membership fees to \$660 in a month's time, so there is even more pressure to make sure that it is relevant, responsive and effective. Meanwhile the SPC is forging ahead on some well-known priorities:

- staffing of hard-to-staff schools - the DET and government talk about averages but these mean little to a remote school that can't get a maths teacher;
- like ASPA, the SPC uses Zoomerang surveys with significant success. Despite good enrolments, a recent survey revealed an alarming 'white flight' trend in both rural and urban areas;
- incompetent teachers - the processes are fine for those who cooperate but useless when they, or others, subvert the process;
- the Sustaining Quality Schools brochure is hitting the schools (copies have been sent to principals' organisations in each State);

- principal welfare is becoming quite significant again - the lead taken by NSW in this area is threatened by resource cuts, and,
- promoting public education – finally, after many years, the Government has agreed that several principals should be empowered to act as official spokespeople.

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‘Teo Torriatte’: let us cling together



CHRIS PRESLAND discusses the intangible personal qualities that are needed to successfully lead a school.

IN 1976 the rock group, Queen, released a little known but beautiful song, much of it sung in Japanese, entitled *Teo Torriatte*. Loosely translated, this means ‘*Let us cling together*’. Apart from the intrinsic beauty of the song, it’s the chorus that has always stayed with me. There is great wisdom in the words for all leaders. In English, the key part of the chorus is as follows:

*In the quiet of the night
Let our candle always burn
Let us never lose the lessons we have learned.*

The central point of this article is that the best school leaders, those with the greatest levels of resilience, have a sound balance between their technical skills and their sense of individual purpose. They are keenly aware of what drives them; they are passionate about

their beliefs and they draw upon these two things in a very conscious way, as a source of strength, when they need to access the courage to confront the ongoing challenges of educational leadership.

When everything goes wrong

Some time ago I saw a European TV advertisement for IKEA furniture. There was a disheveled young man, recently having stumbled out of bed, still naked, drowsily eating a slice of toast. Just as he was about to bite into it, it sagged in his hand and fell apart. A split second later, he looks up and notices the milk boiling over on the stove. As he jumps up to get that, he drops the toast and simultaneously kicks the table leg, which becomes detached and the table starts to fall. He grabs the table with one hand to stabilise it and, as he does so, the cupboard door at head height opens. He bangs this shut with his head and, as a result, it becomes detached from the wall. With his free hand, he grabs the cupboard, the other hand still supporting the table, still naked of

course, and realises that he has dislodged a tea towel which has landed on the stove and is starting to burn. Because his hands are full, he uses his mouth to pick up a carton of milk in an attempt to pour it over the fire. Just as he is about to achieve this goal, he looks out the window and sees his Volkswagen being hauled onto a tow truck. The scene cuts to him running down the road, still naked, after the tow truck, looking back towards the window of his flat, with smoke streaming from there, obviously in two minds about what to do next.

The advertisement ended at that point, with an IKEA logo and some reference to buying new furniture. The link wasn't clear to me, as it was in another language. However, interestingly enough, I do see some extraordinary parallels between what happened to the young man and the joys of school leadership.

Not so long ago my own school community experienced an even more intense rollercoaster ride than usual. The stabbing murder of a female student, and the associated media focus on this, was followed by the unrelated shooting of a male student, on the night before the funeral of the murdered girl. This second victim, a popular year 11 boy, was shot being a Good Samaritan, trying to protect someone in a wheelchair who was being accosted by another adult. The student bore the full brunt of a shotgun in his abdomen, lost both legs and, to this day, is still fighting to rebuild his life.

At the time, I was getting around on crutches, with one leg in plaster, after snapping my Achilles tendon. By the way, throughout all of this, our school had no counsellor, so the bulk of the ongoing support for students, staff and families fell heavily upon our wonderful teaching and ancillary staff. Not long after this, school life settled down again and we won a series of awards for school improvement, including recognition in the inaugural National Awards for Quality Schooling. Beyond all of this, our school data (both cognitive and non-cognitive) started showing significant improvement, despite the associated challenges of an extremely low socio-economic environment. Now that's what I mean by an emotional rollercoaster. For many school leaders, one way or another, that rollercoaster never stops!

What motivates us?

There are some fundamental questions that I believe need answering, in order to uncover what it is that drives us to 'keep on keeping on', in sometimes very challenging circumstances. I use the term 'uncover' quite deliberately. Our sense of self and our personal belief structures are already there. The question is whether or not we are sufficiently aware of them and are able to bubble them to the surface when the going gets tough.

The questions are seemingly simple. However, it's surprising how many people struggle to answer them succinctly, and how little time we afford ourselves for self-reflection and the analysis of who we are as professionals. The link back to *Teo Torriatte* seems clear. How do we ensure we '*never lose the lessons we have learned*' unless we take the time to reflect upon, analyse and internalise those lessons?

In many of the workshops I deliver on leadership development, I ask participants to focus upon the following questions, as a starting point. It never ceases to surprise me that, for many people, it is the first time they have ever tried to articulate such things for themselves. It reminds me that, amongst the plethora of leadership training programs on offer, there are many that focus on technical skills. However, self-awareness, wisdom and resilience, which are always present in the best of leaders, are not qualities in which people can be trained. Below are the questions I begin my workshops with.

- What do you see as your strengths of spirit?
- What drives you as a professional?
- What do you believe are the fundamental rights of staff and students in terms of learning and participation?
- How do you use these understandings to create a sense of community in your work teams?
- Can you identify two significant people or events that shaped your professional thinking?

So, what of a great system?

There are great school leaders. Some principals are better than others, in specific contexts. There are great schools and, generally, a great school has a great leader as well, as a lot of other talented people. However, if systems are to achieve greatness, then we must move beyond pockets of excellence. We need to establish means by which we can identify, benchmark and share quality practice. It is not uncommon, in this age of the resurgence of economic rationalism, to hear calls for 'strengthened accountability' at all levels. While this has some palatable political gains, there is little empirical evidence to show that strengthened accountability can ever be produced without strengthened commitment. Strengthened commitment comes from high levels of collaboration, communication and genuine involvement in a developmental process.

There is an abundance of research to show that highly effective schools are likely to have highly effective school leaders. Conversely, there is a shortage of evidence to show that accountability processes that have no developmental basis will lead to highly effective

school leaders. The key question for a system therefore becomes: 'How do we identify quality accountability processes and, once identified, how do we share that quality practice?'

These claims draw great strength from the research and views of UK educationist, Professor David Hargreaves. In his paper *Education Epidemic*, he argues that many systems are hampered by a narrow, restrictive concept of measuring school improvement. 'We need to understand the deeper cultural and structural underpinnings of schools that make them effective . . . The quality of a school is explained in terms of three concepts – intellectual capital, social capital and organisational capital'.

Intellectual capital refers mainly to the knowledge, skills, capabilities and competencies that are a part of the organisation at all levels. Much school improvement data is generated from this area, in a fairly narrow perspective. However, if we can mobilise this form of capital at every level, we can generate new ideas, new knowledge and successful innovation.

Social capital refers mainly to the trust and relationships that 'govern' the organisation and which form the basis of its 'culture'. High levels of social capital are more likely to lead to sharing and networking and, consequently, to a more dramatic improvement in organisational effectiveness. A school that is rich in social capital has a strong sense of community and purpose.

Organisational capital refers to the knowledge and skills about how to make better use of both intellectual and social capital. Great schools ensure as many people as possible are given opportunities to have input into leadership and decision-making processes, in order to increase and mobilise the school's intellectual and social capital.

A new hope

There are many frameworks that can assist school leaders to analyse their personal strengths and needs. In my view, two of these are particularly useful, in that they place knowledge of self at the core of the technical skills necessary to fulfill our responsibilities. The Australian Principals' Association Professional Development Council (www.apapdc.edu.au) has developed a set of five propositions which guide their leadership development programs. Central to the model is the belief that leadership starts from within and that, unless we have a clear sense of what guides our own thinking, we are unlikely to be able to dramatically influence others. Similarly, the NSW Department of Education (NSW DET) has developed a School Leadership Capability Framework (www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/leadership) with a focus upon five domains, at the

core of which is the relationship between the personal and interpersonal domains. In an even more progressive manner, NSW DET has linked this with its principal appraisal system. In so doing, it acknowledges, rightly so, that the supervisory process of principals involves high levels of collaboration. At the same time, it also acknowledges that the developmental process is a balance between pressure and support.

Our schools can be great and our systems can be great. However, in order to be so, the educational leaders amongst us need to stand up and be counted, to be public about what we stand for and provide our political leaders and bureaucrats with demonstrable proof of the positive things we achieve in schools in Australia, every single day. If we understand ourselves well enough, and we understand what we are trying to achieve in our schools, we can draw upon this understanding to inspire others and to sweep away the seemingly ever-present storm clouds of pessimism and defeat.

As my wife often reminds me, 'In the midst of a dark storm always stand true in the lighthouse of your own integrity'. The challenge for many people, though, is to understand themselves fully, in order to use that integrity as a lighthouse.

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Australian Principals' Update

NSW

Mr Jim McAlpine

EDUCATION continues to be a hot topic in New South Wales, with hardly a day passing without the Sydney broadsheet and tabloids raising a school issue. Most of these are ephemeral, with only a few lasting longer. Some attract ongoing debate, such as the new Federal Government's reporting requirements.



Grades A to E are not universally supported in NSW, especially by those who enjoy educating children, and the discussions have been extensive. The Teachers' Federation, while not supporting them, has not banned them, leaving individual schools and teachers to adopt their own approaches. The NSW Department of Education and Training is obliged to implement them in return for billions of dollars of Commonwealth money, although the timeframe is causing problems in providing secondary schools with reporting software that will have the simple grades but also continue to provide quality information that supports student learning. Once the software is developed, there may be time for principals and teachers to be trained in its use before reports are due at the end of the year. Meanwhile, principals will be doing their best to meet the letter of the requirements without degrading the students.

Debate also continues over the Federal Government's determination to impose benchmark testing in the odd years of schooling, 3, 5, 7 and 9. New South Wales has its own testing regime that assists students, parents and

teachers in improving literacy and numeracy. Professor George Cooney has recently released an interim report into assessment, and the findings are instructive. He has suggested that the federal requirements for tests are not curriculum-based and may be detrimental if they are imposed without them reflecting the curriculum that students learn from. The NSW Minister, Carmel Tebbutt, has welcomed the Cooney report. At the MCEETYA meeting in July she will be calling on the Federal Minister, Julie Bishop, to delay the tests until 2008 so that they can be effective. Tests that are imposed sooner are likely themselves to be failures and, if discredited by the profession, they will have no useful purpose. It will be interesting to see if the Federal Minister is prepared to adopt an educational rather than a political approach on this issue.

The NSW Secondary Principals' Council has a new executive, and the decision by Chris Bonnor and Judy King to conclude their many years of service on the executive of the SPC is a significant change for this important organisation. Both Chris and Judy have played an instrumental role in promoting public education, and their contribution to education in NSW and beyond cannot be underestimated. The good news is that they will continue their work behind the scenes to support the SPC.

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OH&S: supporting great expectations

Three south-eastern States appear to have legal expectations in terms of OH&S compliance that are not matched by the financial support, training provision, release time and resources needed in schools, concludes STEPHEN ESLER

THIS study was undertaken as the result of a leadership fellowship that was awarded by the NSW Minister for Education and Training. The author spent four weeks in May 2006 looking at key aspects of Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems (OHSMS) currently in use in state education systems in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia. The aim was to compare these systems with their NSW equivalent. While the similarity between each of the States became obvious, there was a clear benefit in sharing the strengths of each State in this perplexing field.

Background information

The study compared the leadership management systems used by schools in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, in responding to Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) issues. The aim was to go beyond OH&S basics (hazard identification, risk assessment, risk control and consultation arrangements) to the actual management system employed to plan, record, track, assess, report on and monitor OH&S issues as they arise in school settings. The project was timely. In 2005, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) OH&S Unit released a new management system for schools. The results of this project provided a valuable comparison with other States, as NSW moves to fine tune its new OH&S management system and the impact of this on school leaders.

OH&S is a crucial leadership area for NSW schools in light of changes to the OH&S Act 2000 and OH&S Regulation 2001. These changes, and explicit delegations arising from the 2002 salary agreement for teachers, require that principals, as workplace leaders, accept responsibility for safety issues, injury management and rehabilitation. The development of organisational frameworks in the area of OH&S is daunting for principals with limited experience of non-educational issues.

It is necessary, however, to manage systems and processes that ensure a safe and secure workplace to underpin the educational focus of the school. Without a practical and accessible OH&S management system, this task not only threatens to undermine the educational leadership role of principals, it also places them and other workplace leaders at potential personal risk of WorkCover fines. More importantly, it jeopardises the safety of staff, students, parents and contractors who have a legal entitlement to a safe workplace.

OH&S is a complex task that involves managing resources to achieve educational goals in a safe environment. However, it is one that many principals are hesitant to engage with. Until the release of the 2005 system, NSW principals had been supported by limited training and checklists of documents, activities and audit materials related to various aspects of OH&S.

Research methodology

AS/NZS 4801:2001 is the standard for the development of OHSMS in Australia. It is supported by AS/NZS 4804:2001, which includes general guidelines on principles, systems and supporting techniques. The standard is applicable to any organisation that wishes to implement, maintain and improve an OHSMS; assure itself that it conforms with its stated OH&S policy; demonstrate such confidence to others; seek certification/registration of its OHSMS by an external organisation and make a self-determination and declaration of conformance with the standard.

These guidelines describe a systematic management approach that can assist in meeting legal requirements and will lead to sustained improvement in OH&S performance. They do not specify the format of OHSMS to be used but primarily establish a framework for enabling independent external audits and reviews of an organisation's OHSMS. Given the 'checklist' nature of this type of audit tool, one serious limitation of this standard is that it can lead to 'paper compliance' to the checklist items and fail to develop a genuine culture of safety and the elimination of workplace injuries. Nevertheless, AS/NZS 4801:2001 provided a useful starting point for this project, in that the broad principles in its OHSMS model, based on continuous improvement, contain essential elements for developing a national perspective.

In the project, data was collected through two surveys. In Part A, the standard's elements were presented as a series of 24 questions in table form. Staff at both head office and school level responded at interview to these questions, allowing data that illuminated each State's OHSMS with reference to AS/NZS 4801:2001 to be gathered quickly. This format also allowed presentation of data in a form that enabled easy comparison between the States. In Part B, these questions were supplemented by 20 questions that focused on the more operational areas of OH&S management in schools. From these responses, a general operational summary of each State's response to OH&S issues was formed.

In each State, contact was made with its education department's OH&S unit and interviews organised with key personnel. In order to validate the data generated by these interviews, I contacted, where possible, the Australian Secondary Principals' Association representative for the State and arranged to visit their schools to conduct the same surveys. Since the essential data was derived from OH&S directorate personnel in each State, there was no necessity to interview school-based staff. However, bureaucrats have been known to make claims about school support materials that, at times, principals might query. Some sort of validation, by interviewing at least one principal in each State, therefore seemed to be justified and necessary. The key research questions in this study were to determine the extent to which the OH&S management systems of the various States conformed to AS/NZS 4801:2001 and whether the particular OH&S 'system' supported schools in an operational sense.

The findings in Part A showed discrepancies in the responses from DET and school staff in all States. In Tasmania and Victoria, formal OH&S management systems have not yet been made available for school use, although Victoria has contracted the process of site inspection and implementing a school-based OHSMS to a private company and the process is continuing. The Victorian directorate staff were determined to see a practical OH&S system implemented.

The OHS Directorate staff in South Australia had, by far, the most sophisticated OHSMS, supported by excellent online training modules and a thorough auditing system. All the States had components of a system that had been issued to schools or made available to them through the internet. The lack of a formal management system rendered some aspects of the questionnaire redundant, because AS/NZ 4801 assumes that a system is in place. Nonetheless, the survey did unearth interesting responses regarding OH&S management. All respondents acknowledged their department's commitment to school safety, as well as some planning,

implementation and evaluation components. School personnel were unable to answer some questions that referred to senior management practice. In general, it would appear that while state office OH&S officers have detailed implementation plans in place, there is some way to go in communicating these plans to schools. Principals generally reported that, although resources were available to them through policies, manuals, direct advice or through the internet, they were largely responsible for OH&S on site, without adequate training or resources to remedy problems that emerged from hazard reports and school-based risk assessments. The shortage of money and the expectation that principals would just manage the OH&S issues as they arose was a common theme. In the absence of a practical OHSMS, this task appeared daunting to those principals interviewed.

The short answer to the first key research question is that education systems in Tasmania and Victoria do not have an OH&S Management System that conforms to AS/NZ 4801:2001. As mentioned above, Victoria is moving towards this position and South Australia's system does conform to the standard. Tasmania's size clearly influenced the level of support available, but the practical support given by telephone and printed manuals was greatly appreciated by school staff. Every State has a commitment to school safety and is moving towards development of a system to support schools, a position claimed by the responsible OH&S officer in each state office, and acknowledged by at least one senior principal. All the States visited had substantial elements of an OHSMS but these elements were sometimes fragmented and had not been integrated into a recognisable and practical management system in the sense of the standard. The second question of operational support revealed that the level of support varied but, commonly, a lack of resources (both finance and time) and a system expectation that schools would manage OH&S concerns within existing school budgets was of great concern to principals.

All States appear to have legal expectations in terms of OH&S compliance that are not matched by the financial support, training provision, release time and resources needed in schools. Principals in all States need to be wary of the tendency of their departments to regard OH&S support materials placed on the internet as satisfying compliance requirements and rendering their schools safe.

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Australian Principals' Update

NSW

Mr Jim McAlpine



THE most important date on the education calendar is now 24 March 2007. That is when the next state election will be held and, until then, a cone of silence has descended on educational/political matters. Principals' associations have to be guarded in what they say in the public arena for fear of creating a reactionary position from politicians who, in other times, might have looked favourably at propositions. Behind the scenes, principals are trying to influence the opinions of the major political parties so that on 25 March there may be a chance of improvements in educational support. The NSW Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) is continuing to plan its implementation strategies for its Sustaining Quality Schools project, and is hopeful that there may be some bipartisan support for some of these approaches. One of the most significant public education conferences was held in Sydney in September - the Cornerstones Conference. This was planned by the Public Education Alliance, whose members include the NSWSPC, the Primary Principals' Association, the Federation of P&Cs, the NSW Teachers Federation, and the Public Schools Principals' Forum. Keynote speakers included John Ralston Saul, Geoffrey Robertson, Professor Margaret Vickers, Professor Peter Doherty, Ross Gittins, Lyndsay Connors, Professor Tony Vinson and Heather-Jane Robertson. This was a great opportunity for the 550 delegates to hear supportive and chal-

lenging ideas, and to reflect on the future directions of public education. The conference was enhanced by the participation of media people as chairpersons for various sessions, including Jenny Brockie (SBS), Maralyn Parker (Daily Telegraph), Quentin Dempster (ABC), and Gerard Noonan (Sydney Morning Herald). The website for the conference, www.cornerstones.org.au, has further details, and will also include session notes for those who were unable to attend but are interested in the ideas.

The Commonwealth Government continues to have a major impact on the current education debate in NSW and in other States, and the ability of the Federal Minister Julie Bishop to dictate outcomes is assisted by her control of the funding arrangements. Some of her new ideas are, in fact, old hat in NSW. Maralyn Parker, in the *Daily Telegraph*, pointed this out very effectively in an article on 13 September, in which she indicated that the State was way ahead on such matters as teaching history, external exams, compulsory English and the professional development of teachers. No doubt the Commonwealth Government will continue to push its agenda while it controls the purse strings, and NSW will need to anticipate other directives and directions that will come from Canberra. Both state and federal elections in 2007 should ensure that principals have the opportunity to use calm reason to influence future policy directions.

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Beginners luck: is it enough?



A cross-sectoral national survey will reveal whether the support offered to preservice and beginning teachers in Australia is adequate, says JIM McALPINE.

RECENT surveys suggest that more needs to be done to ensure that teachers are better prepared in their preservice training, and that the support they receive when they first start teaching is vital in retaining them as valuable members of the profession. The Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA), a professional body representing secondary principals from government schools across the nation, has been conducting extensive surveys over the last three years on beginning teachers. Survey results have been used to inform the profession, as well as the political decision-makers.

The first survey of new teachers was conducted in 2004. More than 600 teachers in their first three years of teaching participated, with responses coming from all States and Territories. Fifty per cent of the respondents were in permanent positions and 40% were on contracts of at least one term. Worrying for those who want their children taught by qualified teachers was the information that 44% of these teachers were teaching at least one class in a subject for which they were not trained. Respondents were also asked to comment on their preservice training, and the most valuable part was considered to be the time they spent in schools. Quite a few critical comments were made concerning preservice training, and no one university stood out as being an exemplar. New teachers perceived that their training was inadequate preparation for class-

room practice. The House of Representatives Review into Teacher Training and Recruitment was presented with the survey's data in the hope that teacher training institutions will evaluate the content and nature of the courses they offer.

Beginning teachers did comment positively on the value of the support they received from colleagues in schools. This rated highly and was considered more useful than the induction programs that were provided by employing authorities.

These surveys have been considered so useful that all Australian principals associations have decided to conduct a national one across all sectors, led by ASPA. It has been designed with input from government, primary, independent and Catholic principals groups, and will be in schools shortly. The information it provides will allow for informed responses when the Commonwealth Government's Review is completed. Feedback in aggregated form will be provided to universities, education departments and schools to assist with their evaluation of training and induction strategies. Only aggregated results will be given to the media, and individual school and system results will remain confidential. The profession, working together across sectors in this way, should ensure that improvements do occur for all new teachers, and for students in schools.

Details on previous surveys can be read on the ASPA website at: www.aspa.asn.au.

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Curriculum conformity: the latest control mechanism

THE current debate on the curriculum being taught in Australian schools follows a pattern of increased control by the Federal Government of what takes place in classrooms. The process of manipulating the debate is also familiar: the Prime Minister makes an outlandish statement, and a couple of days later the Federal Education Minister comes out with a policy initiative, suitably attired. On one occasion, John Howard described the curriculum in Australian schools as being 'incomprehensible sludge', and two days later Julie Bishop revealed her plan to control what is being taught in all classrooms. As usual, this is accompanied by dubious data and abusive comments aimed at the profession.

Julie Bishop replaced Brendan Nelson earlier this year, and there were high hopes amongst educators that there would be a more informed approach to education policy development. Schools in all sectors had tired of policy being dictated by anecdote, based on whoever had got in the minister's ear at a Saturday fete. The new minister had a reputation for being informed by data and research, but the latest foray indicates that the Nelson approach continues strongly.

Previous examples of exercising control by funding blackmail include the so-called Australian values diktat, with schools from all sectors being required to display a poster of Simpson and his donkey in order to receive funds for the four-year period. Those who had monitored the values demonstrated by the actions of Federal Government politicians over several years enjoyed the humour that this irony evoked. This debate also began with the Prime Minister using a slow news period during the Christmas holidays to abuse every public school in Australia for not teaching values. Compulsory flag waving was also part of this debate, with schools being given a very generous \$1500 if they erected a flagpole and asked a member of the Liberal Party to bless it at a promotional ceremony. The fact that public schools had been flying the flag regardless of political whim since time began was overlooked by the media mates of the PM, who saw this as a chance to stick the boot into those who had the temerity to teach.

The control agenda has now extended to the ways teachers are required to report on student performance. Unless teachers use the grades A to E on the biannual student reports, then billions of dollars of Federal funding will be withdrawn from States or systems. What doesn't concern the politicians or their media supporters is that there is a dearth of research to indicate that

this will enhance student learning in any way, and may, according to some research, lead to a loss of motivation for a significant number of students. Mind you, this shouldn't worry the Federal Government; they can always ask a right-wing think tank to commission one of the reliable rent-a-researchers to provide findings that will substantiate any prejudice.

Teachers have become accustomed to being held responsible for many things, and no matter how much they add to the education of children, there will always be politicians who ignore data and can find that nearly half the population is below average. The best way for ministers of education to address this growing problem of perception seems to be to introduce more regular testing. It sure beats providing support for teaching and learning resources, and the results can then be used to hit even more teachers over the head. Benchmark testing is now another element of the funding lever, and from 2008 wonderful learning time will be interrupted by testing in all the odd years (3, 5, 7 and 9). The aspect of this regime that beggars belief is that the testing won't be based on what the students learn and study. Still, it has been tried in the United States so therefore it must be good, even though the 'No Child Left Untested' program of George Bush has been an abject failure in improving performance and has increased the inequities in their educational outcomes. Once again, funding is everything, and the States and systems have been forced into agreeing to it. Control over funding has enabled the Commonwealth Government to ride roughshod over states, systems and schools, regardless of the Australian Constitution giving power over education to the States. The Prime Minister controls the House, the Senate and the resources of the Australian taxpayer, so he can ignore the Constitution and impose his view of the world on children and schools.

The curriculum being taught in schools is the current topic. This will no doubt be followed by more of the Prime Minister's utterances against educators and/or public schools, and Julie Bishop will design yet another education policy to lead us further into the 21st century. States and systems will sign-off in return for the funds, and the only ones to suffer will be children and schools.

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