

Principals in *Cyberspace*



Internet Access On the Cheap (well – relatively!)

Many who read this column will be contemplating just how, in these cash-strapped times, they are going to provide Internet access to as many students as possible for the least amount of money. To be truly useful, we need to have it connected to a large number of computers to allow many students and teachers access at the one time. There are Rolls Royce solutions, such as ISDN connections to fibre optic networks running through your school – but for many of us these are not possible.

There *is* a solution!

At Mosman High some years ago we invested in a network of 15 computers (MS-DOS 486 machines running Windows for Workgroups on a Novell Network) for our library. The network is connected to a CD-ROM stack – a jukebox of CD-ROMs – so that anyone on the network can access CD-ROMs such as Encarta or one of the many other titles available. There are also many other resources stored on the hard disc of the file-server, the computer ‘in charge’ of the network. It is surprising just how effectively the network operates – even when all 15 machines are being used the rate of access is quite acceptable. The almost continuous use of the network, either by class groups booked in by their teachers or by individual students for research before and after school and at recess and lunch, has proved the high price we paid was justified.

Most of this will not be news to you. I know many schools have installed similar networks with the same impressive results. However, you may be surprised to know that you can gain very similar results on your network for the Internet for a smallish investment.

The idea of connecting the library network to the Internet occurred to us quite a while ago. The problem appeared to be speed. How could 15 computers on the network all access the Internet at the same time? Would we need 15 phone-lines and 15 Internet accounts with an Internet service provider? This would prove very expensive. Were there faster connections?

Normal phone lines can transmit data at a maximum of 33.6 kilobytes per second (soon to be up to around 56 kb/s). ISDN, which transfers data as digital signals, does so at several times that rate, and would seem to be a much better solution. However, when I last priced this option, it would have cost over \$700 per month which for us was out of the question. A connection to the Telstra or Optus cables, which transfer data at millions of bytes per second, would have been wonderful. However, at the time of writing and at the time we wished to connect the network, this option was not available.

This left us with the humble telephone line. The question then arose – could 15 computers on a network access the Internet simultaneously through one relatively slow 28.8 kb/s modem?

How is it so?

Modems send and receive information in little packets. When you are receiving information from a site in, say, the USA it is being sent in little packets all addressed to your computer. Your computer collects them and, when enough have arrived, assembles the information and displays it on your screen. It should therefore be possible for more than one computer at a time to be connected to the Internet through the one modem, as long as the packets are addressed to each computer. This, I discovered, can all be achieved.

All you need is one computer which is set up as an internet ‘proxy’ server which connects the network to the Internet via the modem and directs (I believe the term is ‘routes’) the flow of information to and from each of the computers on the network. To set up the proxy server with all of the necessary software to do this cost about \$3,000 (not including the cost of the modem or the computer).

And it works!

Yes, even with 15 computers accessing the Internet through the one modem, the system operates quite well. It can be slow, but not unacceptably so. Speed is clearly a function of how many are logged on at once – the fewer computers the faster it runs.

We have also had the proxy server set up to store web sites accessed each day. If a class is taken to the library to look for certain information, the chances are many will access the same sites. Once one has done so, the site loads very rapidly for others. Teachers

can even come to the library beforehand and access the sites their students are going to use so that as little time as possible is wasted waiting.

The information students and staff can access is astounding. There is a great deal of rubbish out there, but there is also so much of value that none of us can afford to have students miss the opportunity to access it and to learn the skills needed to search for and find that which is truly useful.

Investment and training

Those of us from NSW state high schools have been supplied by the government with a computer with built in 28.8 kb/s modem plus a telephone line to be dedicated to Internet access. We have also been supplied with unlimited access time on the Internet. If you are not as lucky as your NSW colleagues, then don't despair – the costs we are talking about are not astronomical. A modem and a decent computer to act as proxy server can be had for around \$2,000 and an unlimited time account with an Internet service provider in most

cities cost \$30 to \$50 per month. For many country areas, of course, costs are much higher due to the need for STD phone calls. If you don't have a network such as the one described, add around \$40,000.

What I have outlined represents a sizeable financial investment. To make it worthwhile, more money has to be spent, this time by investing it in your staff. Many teachers do not feel confident using computers. They are acutely aware that many of their students know more about computers and the Internet than they do.

At Mosman High we supply teachers with training and time on the Internet in a non-threatening environment with no students present and with colleagues who are at a similar stage of learning. Netscape Navigator or the Internet Explorer, the two most popular programs used to access the Net, are very easy to use. Several hours is all that is needed to get started.

We are also providing them with two sets of web addresses to access:

1. Search engines to help them find

information or have their students find information (see 'Principals in Cyberspace', *PM*, December 1996).

2. Addresses of sites relevant to the subjects they teach.

Hopefully this will help propel teachers and students onto the information superhighway and towards the adventures that await them there.

Web addresses to help teachers

The following two web sites contain lists of addresses for most subject areas and can be jumping off points for your staff. Subject area links at:

http://webpages.marshall.edu/~jmullens/subj_areas.html

This gives a very extensive series of addresses for all subject areas.

NSW Board of Studies site: **<http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>**

Once you access the home page, click on 'Links to other sites'. This connects you to a series of pages with addresses to sites for most subject areas.

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even more, they want their jobs to provide fulfilment and happiness or they will be off to find another field for their talents. Boredom, junior status, exclusion from influence and decision-making and slow progress up the pay scale will all turn a generation Xer away from teaching to more stimulating and rewarding occupations.

How can aging baby-boomer principals swallow their irritation and harness the talents of this new generation of teachers?

Manners – do they matter?

The young teachers who plonk themselves down in the principal's chair, call their seniors by their first names, contradict parents and challenge board members do not see themselves as being rude. Old-fashioned manners seem hypocritical to them and their style is to be honest, often unwittingly causing offence. It's hard to teach them manners but they are alert to learning the skills that will win them advancement.

Showing how school etiquette allows relationships to function smoothly will often do the trick. Don't expect humility or obsequiousness however. Senior staff will have to earn respect.

Utilise their skills

Manners may be one of the skills young teachers will add to their portfolio to make themselves more attractive to future employers.

Principals can take advantage of Generation Xers' keenness to learn new skills by enlisting them to teach others, for instance, to bring older teachers up to speed with information technology.

Give them opportunities to do different tasks in the school and move them round frequently as part of their training. Record the tasks they have done and the level of proficiency they have learned, to add to their dossier of skills.

The school will reap the benefits of their knowledge and energy while they will feel challenged and recognised.

Variety is the spice

This is the generation brought up on sound bites, video clips and fast food. If fifteen seconds is too long to wait for a hamburger, six months doing the same thing will seem like a prison sentence.

Schools by their nature are full of variety. Emphasise this aspect to your young teachers, show them how they are able to employ their ability to multi-task and keep them interested and stimulated by incorporating change and variety in their routine. Older teachers feeling stuck in a rut may also enjoy a more lively atmosphere in the school.

Involvement in decision making

Take advantage of youthful confidence by inviting young teachers to be part of school committees and decision making. They bring fresh perspectives, new knowledge and different skills. Put them to work together in teams and prepare to be amazed at the solutions they come up with.

Generation X teachers expect to help to make the decisions and hate being given orders that they have had no say in. On the other hand, they want to know exactly what they should be doing and the standard the school expects of them. Vague and generalised praise is not enough; they want concrete rewards and frequent recognition of their progress.

Have some fun

Lighten up. Young teachers want to enjoy themselves at work and play. If the school is boring, they will look elsewhere for a job. Use their ideas for humour and fun to enliven school assemblies and routines.

Each new generation brings its own perspectives. The school that is open to new ideas and change will find that Generation X can enrich everyone's lives.

After all, what these young teachers want is little different from what everyone wants from a job.

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What of the future?

This type of connection, with many computers connected to the Internet through a single phone line, must be viewed as a temporary solution and a transitional phase. Hopefully, before too long, we will be using cable modems which access data from the optical fibre networks being laid around the country. Soon we could be zooming along the information super-highway in Porsches rather clattering along in Model T-Fords.

Next Month

Addresses of sites like those above, containing many links to subject sites useful to our teachers, would be well appreciated by all. Please send in your discoveries so we can all share them.

Contributions may be sent by e-mail to: stavert@zip.com.au or by regular mail to: Bruce Stavert, Mosman High School, Military Road, Mosman NSW 2088

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please ensure all responses to this article should be submitted to Bruce by 8 June 1997. Length: up to 200 words.

New South Wales



Tabloid media harp on exposure and coverup

Hardly a day goes by without another exposure of 'failure' or sensationalised cover-up in our papers.

In January the tabloid *Telegraph* front paged a Year 12 photograph of a western Sydney government school under the headline 'The Class We Failed'. The story ran for weeks and was based on the fact that the school had the lowest Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) in the state. When one student was quoted as saying he had to share textbooks the Minister made an extraordinary announcement that he would conduct an inquiry into the financial management of the school. The inquiry, now completed but not yet released, seems to have found the school is a good school and is well run. Surprise! The media does this every year. For the *Telegraph* below 50 percent is headlined 'failure'. This type of exposure makes politicians in opposition bay for blood while politi-

cians in power cover themselves. To hell with teachers and children, especially the poor and the disadvantaged.

A little later the police royal commission heard allegations of sexual encounters with young girls by a teacher called T9 whose behaviour allegedly was covered up for more than a decade. A secondary principal was found dead the day before he was to answer questions about the alleged cover up. In this case the Department swiftly moved to revise and re-issue policies related to the notification of child sexual assault as well as policies related to improper conduct of a sexual nature by teachers.

All this is damaging public schools at a time when the federal government is offering financial incentives to the middle classes to go private.

Much more common is the cover up of inefficient and dysfunctional teachers who retard and sometimes damage young people in their care. Fear of union backlash, fear of court cases

alleging victimisation, and fear of lack of support from senior bureaucrats have all helped principals cover up. We let classes taught by such teachers get smaller, we transfer the problems, we tinker with allocations to avoid student and parent complaints.

Perhaps some good will come out of our present problems – a simplified set of procedures that will support principals who choose not to cover up the dysfunctional and the inefficient, for example. We need to do this to compete with private schools and to ensure public schools take steps to ensure quality teaching.

Of immediate concern is the need to provide support for principals and schools unexpectedly thrust into the spotlight of the media or legal systems. Support needs to extend to families and must be provided in a proactive way. Too often a big system protects itself and its political masters rather than the people in frontline schools.

Jim Harkin is President of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council

Principals in *Cyberspace*



Free e-mail addresses for all? Try The Rocket

You may be contemplating how you are going to supply all your students and staff with an e-mail 'mailbox' of their own. Some of you may already be doing this. Unfortunately, e-mail solutions may be expensive. You'd be entitled to ask, why should I want to embark on this route? And, how much will it cost?

There are many answers to the first question. The answer to the second can be – no cost at all!! Read on.

What is e-mail?

E-mail is electronic mail. You can send, via the Internet, typed messages and much more to other persons around the world provided that they have an e-mail address. As an example, I type this column on my computer at home in Chatswood, a northern suburb of Sydney, and e-mail it to the editor.

There is no need to print it onto paper at all. I do not have to buy stamps, put it in an envelope or drop it into a letterbox (a dangerous occupation – my wife broke her leg late last year posting a letter!). It is very straightforward once you have your Internet connection.

How do you e-mail?

There are special programs designed just for e-mail such as Eudora Pro or Pegasus Mail. These have all sorts of bells and whistles and can be purchased on-line – simply log on to the sites below and you can download them. There's no need to buy the shrink-wrapped cardboard box (mostly full of air) at the computer store. Eudora Lite, a cut down version of Eudora, is available free.

For Eudora <http://www.qualcomm.com>

For Pegasus <http://www.pegasus.usa.com>

However, it isn't necessary to buy these purpose-built programs at all. Versions 3 and onwards of both Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer contain their own e-mail programs. These have fewer bells and whistles but are quite adequate.

E-mailing is very simple. Once logged on to the Internet, open your e-mail program – usually through the click of the mouse – type the address of the recipient or recipients in the box provided, type your message in the message

box (it can be as long as you like), and hit the **Send** button.

This dispatches the message to the computer of your Internet service provider (ISP) which then sends the message on to the recipient's ISP. The next time the recipient checks his or her mail, the message is downloaded onto the recipient's computer ready to read.

Files, such as this column, are sent to Melbourne as attachments (side boxes) to an e-mail. The British principals' magazine, *Headlines*, wished to reprint some Principals in Cyberspace columns – the text was sent to the publisher in Britain as an attachment to an e-mail. Very simple and cheap.

How can we use e-mail?

There are many exciting ways that e-mail can be used in schools.

Language students can e-mail students in other countries. This is marvellous for both their language development and their understanding of each other's cultures. For years our students have written letters to students in Italy, France and Japan. Now they can send messages back and forth easily, cheaply and quickly using e-mail.

Class projects can be facilitated by e-mail. For example, students of Fahan School in Tasmania conducted an award-winning Internet project on Indonesia.

They gathered much of the information through direct e-mail contact with people in Indonesia.

Importantly, the Internet is about communication between people. We should be encouraging our teachers to build projects into their teaching programs that bring our students into contact with people from other schools and other countries.

Principals should, in fact, be in contact with each other via e-mail. State principals' associations could send newsletters to all their members this way, thereby reducing costs and saving on our forest resources.

The same message can be sent to many people at the push of a virtual button – it is just a matter of setting up the address book in the e-mail program so that it groups together all of those who should receive the same message.

Very soon even the Board of Studies in NSW will be getting in on the act by trialling a method in which schools will send the entries to various certificates by e-mail direct from their databases.

Mailing lists

Mailing lists are another important use of e-mail. One type of mailing list involves a group of people contributing to the discussion of a topic of common interest. Members e-mail in their contributions which are then mailed to everyone else registered on the mailing list.

All of this is done by a computer program (Marjodomo or Listserv are examples) at the computer address to which participants send their contribution. There are great number of mailing lists and there is an etiquette surrounding their use.

You can search for mailing lists, learn more about them and how to subscribe to them at:

<http://www.liszt.com>

The other sort of mailing list is one that regularly sends you information but to which you do not contribute.

An example is the Scout Report. Every week you can receive this report which contains reviews of Internet sites to a wide range of educators as well as sites of general interest.

Learn more about it and how to subscribe at:

<http://scout.cs.wisc.edu/scout/>

Rocketmail – free e-mail address for everyone!

You can probably see that it would be desirable for all of your students and teachers to have their own Internet addresses. Now there is an inexpensive way to do this.

A service called Rocketmail will provide all students and teachers, and anyone else, with their own e-mail address – free of charge. That is correct, it costs nothing.

Read all about it at:

<http://www.rocketmail.com>

Rocketmail is web-based, which means that it does not require a special e-mail program to access it. You access it direct from your web browser, such as Netscape or Microsoft Explorer. This confers two very big advantages to it:

1. You can read and send e-mail from any computer connected to the Internet anywhere in the world, not just from the computer connected to your Internet Service Provider, simply by logging on to the Rocketmail web address. You can even remotely check your e-mail at your ISP providing you have enough information about that service.
2. Students who register a Rocketmail address can retain the same e-mail address when they leave school. Adults who change Internet service providers will not have to change e-mail address.

Is it secure? It claims to be. You register a user name and a password when you initially register.

You must then supply these every time you access your mail.

It has a spell checker and some of the usual features of e-mail programs such as the ability to send attachments and the ability to store your address book.

The drawback is that Rocketmail is funded by advertising.

When you register, you and your students must fill in some details about interests. When you collect or send e-mail, a frame about two by eight centimetres above the e-mail window containing advertising tailored to your interests appears. It is no more intrusive than any other advertising we see on the web.

However, there are ethical issues about giving advertisers access to our students that require discussion with staff, students and parents.

The tremendous advantages of zero cost and ease of access, in my opinion, outweigh any arguments regarding the rights and wrongs of the small amount of advertising to which a student will be exposed.

However, you and your school community will need to make up your own minds. Take a look at it for yourself at the above address.

Next issue

I hope to be able to report on developments on the educational use of the Internet gleaned from the International Principals' Confederation in Boston.

Contributions may be sent by e-mail to: stavert@zip.com.au or by regular mail to: Bruce Stavert, Mosman High School, Military Road, Mosman NSW 2088

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please ensure all responses to this article should be submitted to Bruce by 13 August 1997. Length: up to 200 words.

New South Wales

Council involvement leads to proactive links with Department

Organisations are constantly changing to meet ever shifting demands and expectations. Which state could guarantee that the structure and constitution of its principals' association would last two years?

The June annual conference of the Principals' Council saw principals almost unanimously endorse a subscription increase from \$120 to \$300. There was not one speaker in opposition. In the past two years there has been the development of a role for an administrative secretariat costing about \$20,000 a year.

This year we faced an operating deficit for the first time because of this and other costs including the increased ASPA affiliation.

Looking ahead we face a further increase for ASPA and the need to resource a professional secretariat for

about two days per week to assist with policy development and co-ordination of interaction with the Department of School Education.

Where the Council sits in the educational politics of the state is now really interesting. We are closer than ever to the Department despite frequent disagreements. We have a resource contract worth \$184,000 in 1996-97 for training and development, presidential release and clerical support. The success of our reference groups has ensured that Departmental policies and procedures have often had proactive input rather than reactive comment from principals. These days it is relatively rare for the Council to learn of an initiative when it is announced. Being close does not, however, mean being controlled. We are also drawing closer to the Teacher's Federation with regular dialogue and consultation with the senior officers of the union. Early dialogue with the union often prevents problems and the rhetoric of principal-bashing at union meetings (or unionbashing at

principals' meetings) is diminishing. Quite clearly principals see their Council as about as important as their union which costs only a little more. It is interesting that, unlike other states, there is no strong move to incorporate deputy principals. This may come in time.

The main issues in NSW remain the McGaw proposals to reform the Higher School Certificate with the white paper due soon: bullying, harassment and school security and the inability of the Department and the Federation to sign a new staffing agreement which was actually supposed to be signed last November. Principals are involved in discussion to revamp the procedures for dealing with ineffective teachers. These need to be simpler, shorter in some cases and accompanied by support and training and development for those middle managers who have day-to-day carriage of the process.

Jim Harkin is the President of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council.



Principals in *Cyberspace*

Sites, sites and more sites. A wealth of principal-focused material lies at the tips of your fingers. There's no excuse for remaining in the dark – treat yourself and surf 'til you drop on some of the fabulous web sites pre-censored and rated for your convenience by our resident cyber-guru, BRUCE STAVERT.

Since the last issue of *Principal Matters* I have attended the third International Confederation of Principals Conference in Boston. I had hoped to report to you on new developments in cyberspace gleaned from the experience. Unfortunately, there is little to report, since the conference did not focus at all on this important and growing aspect of education. It was, however, an excellent experience, especially the opportunity it provided in meeting principals from around the world and the exchange of ideas on many subjects.

I travelled to Boston with a group of principals from NSW on a tour organised by Noel Beddoe of Warrawong High School. As part of the tour we met with educational officials in Washington and New York and visited Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Maryland. This is a school of around 3,000 students, and something of a showcase school for technology. It has an impressive number of computers, which are upgraded each year. Internet connection in the school library extended to only 18 computers, which does not seem sufficient for such a large school population.

I was also surprised at the lack of public access to the Internet on my travels. In Washington I was able to check my e-mail (at my Rocketmail address – see my last column) at a cost of \$1 (US) per minute at our hotel! Even so, this service was not available at the other hotels in which we stayed.

Web sites for principals

The focus of this and ensuing columns will be web sites useful to principals. For each site I have included a brief description and a rating of its usefulness. The rating scheme is as follows:

Bomb: A waste of time. Don't bother looking!

1 hat: If you have absolutely nothing else to do, take a peek.

2 hats: Definitely worth a look, or good for others on your staff. Pass it on.

3 hats: Very useful to principals.
Add it to your bookmarks now.

I insist on examining bomb sites simply to save you wasting your time should you come across them in your travels.

NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals).

Address:

<http://www.nassp.org/index.html>

This is a US site, which I have mentioned before. The following are a list of some of the services offered here: Career services, Communications, Contest and activities, Conventions, meeting and travel services, Corporate partnerships, Development and assessment, Editorial services, Government relations, High school services, Learning skills, Homework hints, International Confederation of Principals (ICP), Legal services, Membership, Middle level programs, Network directory, Partnerships international, Principal's public relations network, The principal technology network, PR tips – Public relations for principals, Staff listing, Student activities and urban services. If there isn't something on that list that would be of use to you, I'd be surprised. As well as these, there are links to other sites of interest to principals. While very US-centred, it is a must for your bookmarks. I regularly revisit it.



Education Week on the Web

Address: <http://www.edweek.org/>

This is a weekly education magazine for principals, also very US-centred but very worthwhile. This is not the full version of the printed magazine to which you can pay to subscribe. You can find all the weekly and daily education news from the US, browse or search for archives, link to the sister publication, *Teacher Magazine*, look for jobs, read special reports, and browse a section on products and services to further investigate articles of interest in the edition using links to related sites on the web. Well worth a weekly look.



Principal's Academic Village Library

Address:

<http://bobcat.lee.h.s.k12.ky.us/pav/library.htm>

This is a site from the Kentucky Department of Education. Much of the information is relevant only to principals in Kentucky. However, its middle school resources section contains some links worth exploring, and its section, School Leadership: A Profile Document, allows you to 'select the dimension of leadership practice which is of particular interest', and then gain guidance as to how to improve. An interesting site, but poorly laid out and only marginally relevant.



Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council

Address:

<http://www.edprog.tased.edu.au/apapdc/home.htm>

This site is of direct relevance to Australian principals and their professional development. Contents include: the APAPDC charter, constitution and history, Current and future projects, Professional development activities, Principal competencies, Previous, current and emerging educational issues, Technologies, Publications,

Papers, and Useful links for principals. The Useful links section is most impressive – it would be worth bookmarking for this section alone. A new section, Chat line for principals, enables you to contribute via e-mail to discussion on topics such as the EdNA project and the civics curriculum, and to propose future projects for the APAPDC. This form of communication between principals is to be encouraged and represents the way (I hope) of the future – principals using the web to overcome the physical distance between them in order to express opinions and debate issues. Congratulations to John Laing and the APAPDC for this site.



Education Policy Analysis Archive

Address:

<http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa/>

This is an interesting site for several reasons. First, it is possible to be placed on an e-mail mailing list and receive a brief abstract of the paper published each week. You can see how to do this at the site. If you are interested in an article, you can then look it up at the site. Many of the topics tend to be related to tertiary education; however, occasionally an article of interest to high school principals is published. For example, two articles – 'Markets and Myths: Autonomy in Public and Private Schools' and 'Where Have all the Teachers Gone?' appeared earlier this year. Papers dating back to 1993 can be accessed. I find it is worth remaining on the mailing list for the occasional gem.



Phi Delta Kappan

Address: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan.htm>

This is the web presence of the reputable educational journal, *Phi Delta Kappan*. Articles from the journal are made available, making

this a very valuable site indeed. The usual features of this site include the articles available online (up to four articles per issue, with articles both from the current issue and from the previous 12 months), a table of contents for the current issue, and a list of previous tables of contents. Many of the articles are directly relevant to principals. I highly recommend this site.



Australian Journal of Education

Address:

<http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/AJE>

The *Australian Journal of Education* publishes articles on contemporary educational issues and educational research from scholars around the world on a wide range of educational topics. The problem is that all you get on this site are the titles of the articles in the current issues and some previous issues. There is a very, very brief description of each article in an editorial section, as well as information on how to subscribe. If you are searching for an article on a particular issue, this will help to guide you to the issue you need to look up in a library. For many of us, however, this makes the site little more than a commercial, as we do not have ready access to the journal itself. Surely it is time that this journal followed the example of *Phi Delta Kappan* and made available on the web at least one article of interest per issue. Rating depends on your access to the journal itself.

Contributions please!

Do you have any favourite sites that other principals might find useful? Do you know any that might attract the attention of principals but are actually a waste of time? Please send me the title of the site, its address, a brief description and a rating, using the above scale. All contributions will be acknowledged. I look forward to hearing from you.

Contributions may be sent by e-mail to: stavert@zip.com.au or by regular mail to: Bruce Stavert, Mosman High School, Military Road, Mosman NSW 2088



Of drugs, rigour and accountability

About a year ago the Premier, amid liberal use of words such as 'rigour' and 'accountability', announced that an annual report was to be submitted by each government school. It must have skipped his minders' attention that schools have been doing this for years.

The first sample of reports issued by the Department of School Education (DSE) included copious comparisons of school results against state averages. It was greeted with anger and derision by principals and ran into bans by the teachers' union.

The most recent agreed model for reports is more reasonable but principals were stunned by the news that they had to rewrite their 1996 report according to this new format. In the interests of uniformity (control?) the DSE provided a template which makes the whole exercise resemble a colour-by-numbers activity.

Drugs and schools – who calls the tune?

Despite the relative safety of our schools the occasional drugs story generates excitement. One recent celebrated case saw the school council of one school engaged in guerilla warfare with the DSE when two offending students were to be readmitted to their school after a drug-related suspension. The Premier and Minister allowed the DSE to slog it out with the parents on the school council.

After all, school councils are a creation of the previous government and the current approach seems to be to neither confirm nor deny their existence. Certainly it never has been the role of councils to make policy on suspension and exclusion on drugs, or any other issue, and the DSE has hurriedly clarified its policy on such matters.

Changes to HSC

The McGaw inquiry into the Higher School Certificate has survived as the government's white paper which gave a tick – dare we say a mark out of 100? – to most of McGaw's recommendations. Gone is the Tertiary Entrance Rank which has fed the annual media frenzy comparison of schools.

Principals and others have largely supported the changes while wondering how some escaped the attention of the more feral talk-back radio hosts. Among the welcome changes is a shift to standards-referenced assessment which has somehow been linked to a rule that fails any student who scores below 50. Some subjects have disappeared so phrases such as 'back to basics' and (you guessed it) 'rigour' have been thrown around with gay abandon.

Barry McGaw suggested abandoning the School Certificate but, instead, the government will strengthen the Year 10 tests on which it is largely based. They will be shifted to the end of the year and include a test in Australian history/geography/civics. This created mild panic among schools which were in the middle of subject selections for the very group of students to be first affected by the rule changes.

We all accept that the exam 'tail' wags the curriculum and organisation 'dog'....but the dog does need a little time to adjust. Meanwhile the addition of civics has stimulated a host of fairly basic questions such as what, where, when and how, not least the issue of what is going to go to make space?

Chris Bonnor is Principal of Asquith Boys High and a member of the Principal Matters editorial board