



ABOUT A DECADE ago I joined a study tour of New Zealand schools. At that time my pre-reading was somewhat inadequate and one of my first requests in Auckland was to speak to an officer from the Department of Education. 'But we don't have a Department of Education' came the response from my host principal. My subsequent flood of questions ranged from critical issues such as 'who then reads the suspension return?' to trivial matters such as curriculum and staffing.

Like George Bernard Shaw returning from the Soviet Union in the 1930s, I came home glassy-eyed, proclaiming that I had seen the future. Other pennies also dropped: 'so this is what Caldwell and Spinks were on about'. I had become a SMS (self-managing schools) convert and set about introducing elements of SMS in my own school. Remember: this was in the early 1990s, a 'Prague Spring' time for self-management in NSW. Alas, it was not to last. The system began to centralise again, aided and abetted by the paranoia of a shaky new government and, of course, the inevitable restructure - but that is all another story. Like most principals I remained committed to greater autonomy for schools and the flexibility it provides. Indeed, our Principals' Council Futures Project in NSW is underpinned by a belief in SMS. Issues of resourcing and equity do worry me, but when residualisation occurs even within a residualised school system, what price does equity have?

The Jury is Still Out

Then along came Tony Townsend in the last issue of the journal, hotly followed by Brian Caldwell and David Gurr in this issue. Now, there are sharper minds than mine in this whole debate, but Tony Townsend's caveats about SMS deserve serious

Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom!

The Self-Managing Schools Debate

CHRIS BONNOR reflects on the ongoing self-managing schools debate and stresses the importance of further research, analysis and debate. Readers are urged to respond, by writing an article for the next issue of the journal.

and close scrutiny. His claim that a direct link between SMS and improved student outcomes has not been proven should at least raise the collective eyebrows of the jury, and even send them scuttling back to the jury room. It is a welcome debate and there are hundreds of us watching, some with an almost voyeuristic interest in the politics within and between various university education faculties. In a sense, the progress of millions of students awaits an outcome, and the odd career or two may also be at stake.

Research Must Be a Priority

If the claims for SMS can be challenged then the best and most recent research needs to be cited amongst the evidence. If it doesn't exist, then such research must be a priority for universities and school systems. In responding to such a challenge, it is not convincing to express hurt and/or to cry 'foul'. Accusations of selective quoting do tend to ring rather hollow when even Caldwell and Gurr (in this issue of the journal) have different interpretations of at least one piece of research they cite. It is also less than convincing for advocates of SMS to imply that it is apparently appropriate for schools because it is widely accepted by all political parties, as well as in the corporate and military world. Nothing could be more designed to set off alarm bells in my mind. For all that, I still believe that SMS creates the best possible management infrastructure in which schools can maximise opportunities for our young people, both now and especially in the future. But the causal link between SMS alone and student learning outcomes still seems unproven. It is more than just a 'holy grail' but it is too early to give it the status of gospel.

Let the debate continue!

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NSW: NSWSPC

JUST WHEN we think we can cope, along comes something else to disturb the comfort zone. This time it was 'The New Award' proposed for teachers (including principals) in NSW, launched on DET's website, prior to any processes of consultation or negotiation. It proposed CPI level salary increases in return for a 'grab bag' of trade-offs, including (for secondary principals) the 'loss' of about four weeks 'holidays'.

The proposed Award attempted to radically redefine the nature of teachers' work and the structure of schooling. There was nothing radical in the ensuing drama, which followed a well-worn script, including the usual posturing, threats and strikes. While principals welcomed aspects of flexibility provided by the proposed Award, they also agreed that the price was too high and the quantum certainly not high enough.

The New HSC

The new HSC will get under way this year, despite the rush, pressure and lack of additional funds to resource the new courses. The Office of the Board of Studies met most of its frenetic deadlines; largely by courtesy of the many teachers who donated a wealth of time in writing and implementing syllabuses. Principals struggled on in schools depleted by the large numbers of teachers across NSW who were involved in the new HSC, and in day-marking for the current HSC. The next hurdle will be the new assessment program for the HSC: this will require a quantum leap in thinking of Olympian proportions!

Testing Times Continue

Meanwhile the 1999 HSC results appeared on time and online. The Board of Studies (BOS) website creaked and groaned under the weight of tens of thousands of 'hits' during the last school day in 1999. The more patient



principals were able to use their access IDs to download school results. The University Admissions Centre (UAC) website crashed early the next day, unable to cope with the deluge of eager students seeking their Universities Admission Index. The media ran the usual news stories, accompanied by whatever league tables they could construct out of the results made publicly available. Those of you who read my article, 'Testing Times' (in *Principal Matters*, September 1999), will want to know that my school's mentions in the 'merit lists' increased sixfold (6x1=6). Clearly, the proposals I have espoused are starting to work and I look forward to my school being cited as a model for others to follow. Just don't mention that it was a larger Year 12 in 1999!

The media struggled to come up with a new angle on the HSC results. I'm sure they tried harder after I offered to write the HSC headlines and stories for the next five years . . . in advance! The angle this year was the disadvantage faced by students in many rural schools. This is a real issue and the debate certainly was a welcome change from the usual annual stories about boys *vs* girls' HSC results or government *vs* non-government schools.

Education Minister Does It, Again!

The new year saw Minister John Aquilina forget what he had promised in the previous one: despite giving assurances to the contrary, he once again attacked principals for retaining too much money in their schools. The media again published school bank balances without mentioning that the real 'surplus' is at least one-fifth and, in some cases, ten per cent of the amounts quoted. Both primary and secondary principals have responded by threatening to break off all contacts with the Minister, and especially with his appalling advisers. (Incidentally: my spelling checker, when perusing the word 'Aquilina' provides the option to 'Replace, Find Next'. Sounds like good advice for the Premier.

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State of the Nation



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

New South Wales NSWSPC

The Award and All That

WHEN FACED with the choice between conspiracy and 'stuff-up' to explain a situation, I usually go for the latter. The teachers' union and the Government in NSW seem to lurch from crisis to crisis in education, with neither side displaying any capacity to manage recurring problems with any degree of flexibility or vision. Certainly the Machiavellian moguls are alive and well in the corridors of Bridge Street but I think even Machiavelli would have re-written his text if he had known in advance about the unique art of dealing with both the NSW Teachers' Federation and the NSW Government.

In the middle of the protracted dispute over the proposed award for school and TAFE teachers, both sides stumbled into yet another dispute over the ELLA (lit-

eracy) tests for junior secondary students. The tests were the subject of a long term ban by the Federation and, as the date loomed, the bans were reinforced. The resulting chaos saw principals under siege from the Director-General and his superintendents who, in some cases, insisted on principals going to absurd lengths to administer the tests. The Government lost no time in grabbing the moral high ground and the *Daily Telegraph* spent weeks giving the Federation a thorough and orchestrated mauling. In an ironic twist, secondary principals were praised by the triumvirate of government, union and department for their handling of the dispute. Now we ARE worried!

Meanwhile, the main game shows no sign of ending, with yet another strike in early May. The only certain outcome is that the drift to the non-government sector continues.

A Manly Affair

The re-designation of Manly High School as a selective school a decade ago should be written up as a textbook case in how not to achieve school or system change. The name changed but most else remained the same, with the addition of a legacy of resentment amongst staff over the change. Despite the efforts of successive principals, the school has scored fewer 'hits' on the HSC 'merit lists' than have many schools of the more common garden variety. A crisis emerged when the school's P&C was ambushed and voted out by a group anxious to promote both the school's plight and the group's own profile as knights in shining armour. The end result was a solid and respected review of the school by the DET, which produced a raft of recommendations with big implications for all schools. One of these was that schools should be able to compare their performance with schools 'of similar composition', something the DET has been resisting for some time. Another is the issue of performance management contracts for the new principal and DP. For Manly High School, the review pointed to a need for a cultural shift to create an environment in which a selective school can be successful.

The Slow Bleed Continues

The drift to the non-government sector continues, with alarming enrolment figures for Year 7, pointing to at least two dozen government high schools in Sydney having enrolments of less than 300 in a few years' time. Governments are reluctant to close schools at the best of times and the current response has been to create collegiate groups of schools in areas of falling enrolments, with several junior high schools feeding into a senior campus.



This has not been achieved without considerable pain and success will prove illusionary unless the restructure is accompanied by consultation, adequate planning and resourcing. It is time that we understand in NSW that the drift to the non-government sector can only be reversed when government schools are allowed to play by at least some of the rules of the 'private' sector (for example, the discretionary control over inputs) and when the 'private' sector is forced to practice and be accountable in ways which more fairly reflect their massive taxpayer funding.

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Peace is Declared!

INDUSTRIAL PEACE has broken out in NSW schools and we are all learning how to cope. The salaries dispute has been settled and even the skirmish between the Principals' Council and the Minister is no more, aided by a little shuffle in the Minister's office. All is not lost though: a recent article in the Union's journal reminded us that it's only three years until the next salaries war. Can't wait!

Taking Action

There is considerable evidence in NSW of a renewed interest by the Government and DET in tackling the issue of declining enrolments. The drift to the non-government sector, while in some ways a 'catch up' with other States, has certainly caused disquiet within the DET and the Union. The Principals' Council has recently discovered that some people are genuinely listening to proposals it has been pushing for some time. Recent positive moves include the establishment of a task force chaired by the Director-General and serious discussions on the Council's proposal for executive restructuring. Meanwhile, the Minister has launched his own guerrilla warfare against the Commonwealth's EBA - we wish him well but need to be convinced that there is more than posturing involved.

Executive Restructuring

This proposal seeks to abandon the dated '81 period' rule, with the more flexible establishment and classification of head teacher positions based on staffing numbers. Each school with over 700 students would have two deputies, with a slight decline in the number of head teachers statewide. The proposal has gained widespread support and the union is well aware that the number of head teachers under the old formula is set to considerably decline. The success of this proposal rests on the Union accepting the DET's cost neutral formula and on everyone else plucking up a little courage. Wish us luck!

Collegiates

Meanwhile, the Government and the DET are pushing ahead with their solution to the problem of declining

enrolments in NSW government schools, namely the combination of some schools into collegiate groups. The most common model is the arrangement of junior high schools around a senior college. While this is hardly original, there is the potential (being realised in some areas) for new links between the schools and with other providers, such as TAFE. Some collegiate proposals have genuinely evolved out of local school community discussions but there is also concern from many sources that the model is unproven and seemingly unresearched.

For all that, we have much to be proud of in NSW. The new HSC courses are being implemented and we welcome a review of curriculum in the middle years. Vocational courses are not only expanding but are being mainstreamed into the system and into quite a variety of schools. And we do have the Olympics. What was second prize?

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