

## **The Politicisation of Education Standards**

More than ever, education in Australia - and in particular curriculum and student performance – has been politicised. Over the decade of its incumbency, the Federal Government has given a tone to its statements of an educational crisis in the country because, it alleges, schools and teachers are failing in their task of educating students.

For instance, the Prime Minister recently made the following statement:

*“For too long, the education debate has focused exclusively on inputs and quality, on money spent on student-teacher ratios and the like. And this was the territory staked out and defended fiercely by education producer groups, by the state education bureaucracies, curriculum designers and the teacher unions. Our great challenge as a nation is to improve the quality of Australia's education system.”* (in the PM's speech to launch the book *“Dumbing Down”* by Kevin Donnelly)

It is hard to fathom why anyone, nonetheless the Prime Minister, would think that a focus on inputs and quality should be the subject of derision. Certainly it is entirely appropriate that education bureaucracies, curriculum designers and teacher unions give attention to these issues and argue strenuously for their continued improvement. To say that it has been the exclusive focus of such groups is plainly wrong.

A similar statement in tone and content came from Minister Bishop's address to the National Press Club in February 2007 (her speech, *Preparing Children to Succeed – Standards in our Schools*) when she said:

*“Education is a national priority and it is too important to be left at the mercy of state parochialism and union self-interest ...Raising academic standards and improving educational outcomes for Australian students involves making some hard choices. It means making decisions that State Labor governments, education unions and other vested interests will not like.”*

While the stated targets of their disdain might have been the State governments and the unions, it is the nation's teachers who feel the full force of such criticism. They are the professionals in the classroom charged with, and committed to, delivering high quality teaching and learning and improving the educational outcomes for Australian students.

## **The Funding Whiphand**

There is further evidence of this increasing politicisation of education in the Commonwealth's use of the funding lever to force education authorities to agree to its policy detail and implementation, regardless of its efficacy. This is despite the fact that the federal government employs no teacher in the country.

Prior to the recent MCEETYA meeting, the Federal Minister Bishop waxed lyrical about excellent teachers being 'national treasures' and the need for a performance pay model to reward such excellence so as to lift teaching and learning standards. However, she nimbly side-stepped the fundamental question of the necessary additional funds to either support a fair professional appraisal process or to pay those teachers who are performing at highly accomplished levels of teaching.

In fact, the Minister's approach was anything but cooperative. She threatened to withhold \$9 billion dollars in federal funding unless the States introduced her model of performance-based pay. It is worth noting that \$9 billion is close to one year of Commonwealth funding in a four year round.

Such an approach is divisive and undermines the capacity for cooperative work with State and Territory governments and key stakeholders, including the education unions, which are major representative bodies of the teaching profession. This is counter-productive to strengthening Australia's education systems. For the profession and the education community (and more broadly) it is seen as the government expressing a lack of confidence in our schools.

### **What Standards Should We Be Talking About?**

At some point in the national debate about education standards, it is hoped that the Minister might begin to traverse the important issue of resource standards.

For without a genuine commitment to additional funds to support both existing and new policy initiatives such as professional pay for teachers, the Minister is simply re-allocating existing funding provided to schools. So what is she planning to jettison? Current programs? Agreed and settled collective salary agreements in favour of AWAs? Or is it simply to be another under-funded approach to professional salaries for teachers?

In relation to "standards" – including teaching, learning and resourcing standards - it is important to identify the base from which we are operating in the Australian school context.

### **Do We Have A Standard For the Cost of Education?**

In 2002, the MCEETYA Resourcing Taskforce was established to determine whether the reported expenditure reflected in the Average Government School Resources Costs (AGSRC) accurately represented the underlying costs of schooling. MCEETYA's intention was to establish the concept of a National Resourcing Standard for government schools.

In 2004, the Taskforce reported on its work in relation to the question "***what does a school need in terms of costed human and physical resources to function effectively?***" The results were telling. At 2003 prices, the Taskforce established the national standard for primary education at \$8265 per student and \$11,186 for each secondary student. These figures did not include capital costs, students with disabilities, servicing of capital or payroll tax.

According to the MCEETYA Taskforce, these figures represent the level of recurrent funding needed to meet the costs of primary and secondary government schooling.

However, the actual recurrent funding paid in 2003 was \$6056 per primary student and \$8021 per secondary student - an underfunding of \$2209 per primary student and \$3165 per secondary student.

What is the scenario for 2007? Taking into account annual % supplementation (2004-2006), the primary standard would be \$9837 and the secondary standard would be \$12974. The amounts actually being received in 2007 are \$7216 for primary and \$9319 for secondary - an underfunding of \$2621 and \$3655 respectively.

### **International Tests – What Do They Tell Us About Our Standards?**

The 2003 PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) that compared results in 27 OECD countries, showed that 15 year old Australian students, on average, ranked second in literacy, sixth in mathematics, and fourth in problem-solving.

Against that performance, Australia ranked 18th out of 30 OECD countries for per capita government education expenditure as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product.

In this context, the performance of Australian students from low socio-economic backgrounds should be a matter of critical concern. The PISA reports reveal that these students lagged well behind the performance of the average Australian student - and the achievement gap was bigger than in many comparable countries such as Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Austria, Norway, Korea, and Finland.

What is clear - and scandalous - is that many Australian schools generally don't have sufficient resources to meet either the educational needs of all students or the nationally agreed Goals for Schooling. And many federal government policies do little to redress the problems.

### **New Education Resource Standard Called For**

This means that Australian students are achieving at very high levels on international surveys despite the fact that there is significant under-funding of education by governments. Students struggling to meet national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy might have a better chance to do this if schools had more resources which they could target to their educational needs.

What is needed is a new education resourcing standard which ensures that all students have access to optimum teaching and learning conditions, no matter which school they go to or which SES district they live in. And also to ensure that there are sufficient resources to fund a professional salaries model for teachers which is fair and has integrity.