

## **The Future of Schooling in Australia Report by the States and Territories. April 2007.**

### **Independent Education Union response**

The Independent Education Union (IEU) supports the underlying premises enunciated in the report that education for knowledge and skills is critical to understanding and addressing key social, political and environmental issues, and is crucial to future national economic prosperity.

The IEU believes that the report generally provides a sound framework in which to further build and enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for students and schools.

In this context the IEU makes the following observations on elements of the report.

#### **Chapter 3 - Dealing with New Challenges**

##### *Quality of Teaching and School Leadership*

The IEU agrees that quality of teaching is the largest in-school determinant of variation in student achievement and that high priority should be given to the development of strategies to recruit, retain and reward quality teachers.

However, the IEU is concerned about what is meant by 'performance-focused evaluation' of teachers and what such evaluation would be based on.

Further, the IEU is concerned about the emphasis on the role of the principal and the view that they are the "primary focus for high quality performance". Principals are very important components to the collective enterprise that is a successful school and their roles are significantly more complex than such a limited or primary focus would recognise.

##### *Early Childhood*

The IEU agrees with view that a young child's preparation for schooling is a key element in the learning cycle, especially for children from low socio economic backgrounds.

The IEU would like to see stronger commitment to universal early childhood education and notes that expressed commitment is not followed up by any strategy or inclusion in Chapter 5, An Action Plan.

The Independent Education Union believes that early childhood education and child care services play a crucial role in supplementing parental care, promoting children's social, cognitive and their personal development. This role is vital in enabling parents to participate in employment, education and training. Access to good quality care is a priority for families combining employment and family responsibilities.

The IEU knows that good quality early child care and education sets the right foundation for children's further development.

Early childhood education and child care services are also important in terms of an individual child's needs for companionship, play opportunities, social and emotional and intellectual development, either through regular care or occasional care.

Extensive research has demonstrated the value of early childhood education. Effective schooling cannot be developed in isolation and early childhood education is important for subsequent success and schooling should build on the influential pre-school years.

Well-trained early childhood educators have the knowledge and skills to identify children who are at risk and to make provision for early intervention, thereby lessening the necessity for later remediation.

The IEU strongly supports intervention in the pre-school years, when the need for developmental support becomes apparent. In this context, centres need more time, in the form of increased qualified staff, to work with individual children. Further, formal transition to school structures need to be established with time made available to the appropriate staff to meet and work together.

Therefore the IEU would have welcomed proposed action in the Report that called on governments to undertake a wide ranging review of early childhood services to (i) review policies with a view to reconciling the demands of employment, caring for children, quality educational experiences and gender equality, (ii) review the cost of childcare provision and the allocation of these costs, including the funding of services and the question of costs and benefits.(iii) undertake a comprehensive Australian longitudinal study into the broad effects of early childhood education.

#### *Towards a national curriculum.*

The IEU supports an agreed common core curriculum with flexibility to innovate and adapt at the local level. The IEU believes that a level of autonomy for individual schools and teachers provides for professional decision making to meet the best needs and interests of students.

#### *Assessment*

The IEU believes that the primary purpose of assessment is to provide information needed to improve students results in the broad understanding of this term, ie learning outcomes, as well as report to parents/carers.

Further the IEU supports the notion that monitoring trends and system performance should be conducted through sampling processes. Full cohort testing to establish such information is wasteful of resources.

#### *Public reporting*

The IEU believes making direct comparisons among schools is not straightforward, and in fact can be dangerous and misleading. Comparison of schools can be counter productive to schools, especially those in poor socio- economic areas, that may do well in broader educational and curriculum outcomes (eg by running VET or co-curricula sport and cultural activities) but not score well in literacy / numeracy tests.

Further, suggested approaches of comparing 'like schools' or using 'statistical adjustments' can also be problematic, depending on the choice and transparency of criteria.

The IEU has major concerns about the suggestion that data be used to compare teachers within schools in order to identify 'best practice'. Collegial practices in schools are best placed to provide such professional information and prevent simplistic judgements based on a single variable such as a test score.

The IEU supports especially the commitment to improving Indigenous student outcomes and welcomes the later statement in Chapter 4. It is noted however that the expressed commitment is not followed by including specific plans for furthering Indigenous student outcomes in Chapter 5, An Action Plan.

#### **Chapter 4 - Commitments**

Generally the IEU welcomes the commitment statements, but is disappointed there is no stand alone statement of commitment to properly fund and resource schools to achieve the goals established in the statements.

The IEU believes that a more coherent public policy on education funding is essential. It must acknowledge the realities of Australian schools and provide the way forward for a more equitable, less divisive framework of funding schooling.

Such a policy should include:

- A national resources standard for schools, to provide for the educational needs of every Australian student.
- Public resourcing of government schools to the actual benchmark needed to provide quality education for every student.
- Non-government schools to be publicly accountable on the same basis as government schools and be funded by government on the basis of genuine need, with reference to the national resources standard.
- Modification of the current SES funding model to include a proper measure of the actual resources of all non-government schools, and funding directed accordingly.
- Development of clear principles to bring the differential funding from state and federal sources into a consistent framework. This would enable public discussion of funding realities to take account of all sources of funding for government and non-government schools.
- The requirement that equity measures target extra funding across all schools where relevant student and/or school needs are identified.

#### **Chapter 5 : Action Plan**

##### *National Curriculum*

The IEU has long supported educational reform in curriculum that is based upon research, that ensures educational validity and integrity and very importantly that supports teacher professional judgement. Curriculum is not a values-free endeavour – it has always been an area of strong contestation and is so at the present time.

The curriculum should be intellectually rigorous and should also promote creativity and collaboration and provide a sense of learning progression as well as guidance of programs for students according to their potential and needs rather than by age. There

should be a clear focus on the student irrespective of their stage of learning. Curriculum should provide students with the knowledge and skills to enable them to manage their future needs.

The curriculum must provide teachers with the confidence to tackle critical social issues such as discrimination, whatever its form. International evidence shows that equal opportunity policies raise standards but cannot work as effectively as they might if the curriculum constrains rather than encourages acceptance of diversity of lifestyles, values and beliefs.

While maintaining the emphasis on literacy and numeracy, there are also new ways of learning with a greater focus on enquiry, collaborative and team approaches to learning, and problem-based learning. There must be sufficient time for teachers to respond to students' individual needs and interests.

Developing lifelong learners through local and globalised contexts that reflect the knowledge society, the information economy and realisation of individual potential is essential. Knowledge and how it is organised is not fixed and it is therefore important that curriculum development takes account of this and that students understand the interconnection of different bodies of knowledge.

The IEU notes both the time and expertise that teachers have committed over the years to developing curriculum and learning opportunities for students. Indeed, curriculum development that has occurred over recent years in the states and territories has involved all stakeholders including teachers, parents, employers and experts from the university sector.

The IEU rejects the tone of a 'back to basics' mantra in the current national debate which represents a serious failure in educational leadership and is political opportunism at its best. Such a simplistic notion fails to address the critical knowledge, understanding and competencies that employers themselves have been asking schools to address for the last decade such as problem solving, entrepreneurship and team-work.

There is at present constructive and innovative work being advanced by representatives of the key national professional education organisations under the convenorship of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association. These organisations include the education unions, Principals' Associations, Australian Council of Deans, Australian College of Educators, Australian Association for Research in Education, National Educational Forum and Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations.

The nature and purpose of the work advanced by these organisations (now formed into a Curriculum Standing Committee of National Education Professional Associations) is constructive and focused.

#### *Testing student achievement*

Currently the IEU is concerned about the over testing of students and subsequent narrowing of curriculum. Fundamentally testing must provide diagnostic information to be of any value.

In this context the IEU supports the proposed consideration in Action 3, but is concerned that it is proposed only in relation to areas not currently tested. IEU would support

exploration of such sampling to replace some of the national testing now in place, such as civics and citizenship, ICT, Year 7 and 9 literacy and numeracy.

The IEU believes that the development and implementation of assessment and reporting policies and practices must:

- Respect and involve the expertise and professional judgment of teachers and have their support and full confidence;
- Allocate appropriate timelines and resources for consultation and implementation of any changes in policy and practice, including consideration of workload implications.

The IEU believes that the following principles should guide the development and use of assessment instruments:

- Assessment methods should be planned as an integral part of course developments
  - Assessment processes must be reliable, fair and equitable
  - Assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn
  - Assessment should be aligned with the curriculum
  - Assessment should ensure that tasks are realistic, meaningful and worthwhile.
- Assessment practices should involve a range of measures and provide students

Mass standardised testing concentrates on narrow competency learning and has the potential to encourage practice testing as a method of improving test results. It does not provide useful or authentic information about student progress or learning needs and does not improve student learning outcomes.

It is not reliable as a measure of the total of students' understanding and abilities and it does a disservice to the diversity of a rich curriculum.

Assessment of student performance and the effective reporting of that performance to parents is an important aspect of teachers' work. The process is complex and the effective evaluation of student performance is multi faceted, involving a range of approaches requiring careful preparation, analysis and reporting.

The relationship between student and teacher is crucial – in essence, the effective reporting of student achievement relies upon the professional judgement and expertise of teachers. Teachers observe and teach their students over a long period of time and determine their growth in knowledge and skill development in a variety of ways. It is a matter of serious concern when the collection and mentoring of data from national testing is not embedded in professional practice and override teacher professional practice.

Mass standardised testing has been in place for close to a decade – it has not reduced the controversy about schools or standards, but perpetuates controversy through continuing debate about the causes of test scores and the reasons for uneven 'test performance between different schools and different regions. In such a debate, the real needs of schools and the need to improve curriculum and high quality learning opportunities connected to the lives of local communities become totally obscured.

The IEU remains opposed to the use of national testing to monitor and report on the performance of individual schools and teachers and which can be used as league tables on the release. In fact, the risk is that benchmarks focus attention too much on the minimum standards – rather than expressing the highest attainable standards for the majority of students.

### *Reporting*

The IEU has expressed its concern for some time about the emphasis on reporting and accountability, with economic imperatives such as “value-adding”, driving the decision making about education policy. Education is not an economic function even though it has economic implications.

Schools in the non-government sector have been through the wringer in recent times due to Federal Government’s A to E school reporting requirements, and any planned action or new reporting proposals must be negotiated very carefully with schools and teachers, with genuine consultation and negotiation about the need for further change.

Non government teachers do not support a two benchmark level for reporting on student performance at Years 3,5,7,and 9. Three levels would be the minimum acceptable.

The benchmark reporting builds an incremental picture of student achievement over time. The inclusion in the purposes of teacher professional development and a commitment to interventionist support for students at risk is important.

A snapshot of some of the 2005 results for years 3, 5 and 7 show that:

- It matters where you live – the proportion of students achieving the benchmarks in very remote locations are much lower than those in metropolitan, provincial and remote students. And in descending order, the proportions of students achieving the benchmarks in provincial locations and remote locations are smaller than those in metropolitan locations.
- Being Indigenous matters - the proportion of indigenous students achieving the benchmarks are well below the proportion of non Indigenous students.
- Gender matters in relation to reading and writing – the proportion of female students achieving at the benchmark or above is higher than for male students in years 3, 5 and 7.
- Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) did not matter – the proportion of LBOTE students achieving the benchmarks were consistent with non LBOTE students.
- For each of years 3, 5 and 7 there is a group of students who do not meet the benchmarks in each of reading, writing and numeracy and over time, the size of the group increases. For example, in 2005, between 6% and 7% of year 3 students did not meet the benchmarks. In year 5, between 6.5% and 12.5% of students did not meet the benchmarks; and in year 7, between 7.8% and 18.2% of students did not meet the benchmarks.

These are significant findings. Issues of equity and resourcing are particularly relevant to a number of the findings listed above. What is important is whether targeted action on these matters for the particular cohorts of students has taken place ie was there early

assessment and intervention for students at risk? And did that intervention make a noticeable difference the next time around?

The IEU believes that consideration of currently reported data needs to be examined in the above-mentioned context and certainly properly addressed before further consideration of reporting protocols.

#### *Supporting Workforce Reform*

School leaders are important components of the successful school. The IEU welcomes school leadership development programs but these must not be at the cost of professional development resources for other staff in the school partnership.

Para professional, or non-teaching staff, are likewise important cogs in the school partnership. It is vital to achieve effectiveness, that non-teaching staff are included in the professional development plan of the school, especially to learn and develop in partnership with the teachers they support.

The IEU welcomes the commitment to recognise and reward high performing teachers in a way that will match the differing government and non government schools and systems across Australia, and to discuss experience with relevant organisations which we expect would include Teacher Unions.

The IEU notes that we have been seeking to advance these very issues if school employing authorities and governments for over a decade. A genuine commitment to advancing this issue from governments, underpinned by a commitment of additional and substantial resources would be welcomed by the teaching profession.

#### *Harmonising Teacher Registration*

The IEU supports the MCEETYA National Framework and the cooperative approach undertaken by AFTRAA to achieve national consistency in registration of teachers and pre-service courses.

The IEU has long argued for a scheme for national teacher registration. Such a scheme would need to provide for the mutual recognition of teacher qualifications and experience, to take account of teacher mobility, to enhance teacher employment efficiencies and to strengthen planning and administrative requirements; to recognise and be sensitive to Commonwealth/State rights and responsibilities and to the different statutory and legal requirements which exist in different States and Territories and across the sectors; and to allow for the continuing integrity and autonomy of these arrangements provided they meet the agreed core principles.

These principles should be developed collaboratively and be agreed by all stakeholders but fundamental are issues of public interest, the support of teachers and the contribution to an enhanced status and public perception of teachers within the community and thereby the provision of a guarantee of high professional standards to students in their school education.

#### *Reducing Red Tape*

Teachers in non-government schools have consistently and loudly raised the issue of work intensification and the contribution to increased workload due to paperwork. As stated, teachers believe that much of the paperwork results from administrative

regulation and accountability requirements. Also as stated this diverts time and resources away from teaching and learning.

The IEU supports the inclusion of this item in the Action plan, and urges a genuine assessment of what is 'necessary' and 'unnecessary'. Further, we urge a review of the provision of clerical and teacher support staff in schools to complete the 'necessary' administrative work and free teachers to attend to their core business.

#### *Convening a National Forum*

The IEU supports the proposal and particularly notes that there has been a clear policy of progressive marginalisation of some key stakeholders in the education industry over the last decade, including the teacher unions.

The Independent Education Union represents teachers and support staff in non-government education institutions including early childhood centres, schools and post secondary training institutions, across all the states and territories of Australia.

The union currently has a membership of more than 63,000 nationally. In the school sector, the membership density is approximately 65% thus giving the union a legitimate and authoritative voice on professional and industrial issues on behalf of members in responding to the various educational inquiries and debates within the community.

The IEU has a deep knowledge and understanding of the professional role and work of its members in teaching Australia's students. This includes professional issues such as curriculum, assessment, reporting, the organisation of teaching and learning, and the standards underpinning professional knowledge and practice to name but a few.