

8th February 2013

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
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Canberra ACT 2600

Thankyou for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee's/House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee's Inquiry into the Australia Education Bill 2012.*

Summary of key points:

- Australian teaching staff and principals need education and cultural change within schools, before "evidence-based methods" are likely to be adopted
- Needs of gifted and talented students within Australia, are widely under-recognised and these high-potential students are very poorly served by the existing educational system which has not been responsive to their needs
- Work-place bullying is a serious problem within Australian educational workplace culture, which unfortunately currently extends to principals bullying parents who try to intervene to improve their children's educational experience
- Creationism, pseudo-science and religious dogma should not be taught or pushed as messages within government schools
- Mental Health is a major problem in our community, and staff with mental health training should provide support to students, not "Chaplains" with religious affiliations
- Teachers and parents need access to support and departmental intervention when there are ongoing bullying problems or issues such as fraud or dishonesty by principals. It is not adequate to give increased power to principals if this is not tied to increased accountability
- Indigenous students would benefit from the educational system making active efforts to engage with local Indigenous communities
- -focussing all efforts on the lowest academic achievers is not the way to raise Australian educational standards, don't ignore the students with high learning potential

It is excellent that the Australian Government intends to clearly establish that **all** students in **all** Australian schools are entitled, as a right of Australian citizenship, to an excellent education that will enable all students to reach full potential. This is a laudable aspiration, as clearly there will need to be massive improvements made to the quality of Australian education before this Utopian aspiration shall be achieved.

In order to achieve the stated goal that schools shall adopt "evidence-based methods of teaching and learning", I believe that there needs to be a massive cultural change in attitudes for many of Australia's current teaching staff. I suspect that many teachers would not have a deep understanding of what the term "evidence-based methods" actually means, let alone how to apply such teaching methods within their own classroom. Professional development of teachers, plus undergraduate training of future teachers, needs to address what can best be described as profound ignorance by many teachers regarding what is mere anecdote, what is a subjective and unproven belief, and what

are evidence-based methods that have arisen from objective studies and research into proven methodologies.

Over the past ten years, my involvement with the Australian education system from the consumer's perspective (as a parent of several gifted students) has been a saga of disappointment, frustration and broken promises. There have been moments of brilliance, and a number of dedicated and inspiring teachers to whom we shall be forever grateful. Unfortunately, far more of our family's experience with the Australian education system has been a resoundingly negative constellation of not merely broken promises but in fact blatant lies and hostility; a principal who demonstrates ongoing bullying and manipulative behaviour towards both staff and parents; teachers who believe it is "elitist" for intelligent children to receive adequate education for their needs; and an appalling number of teachers who announce that they "don't believe in" gifted education, or teachers and principals who make 'lip-service' comments that are supposedly supportive, yet actually reveal their complete lack of understanding and appalling ignorance regarding appropriate provision of gifted and talented education. As a family we have been forced to develop our resilience in our efforts to survive what has been a very stressful and damaging experience within the NSW public education system. "The system" has let us down. We have recently made the decision to move children to a school that is more distant from our home, which appears to be making more of a genuine effort to improve children's educational experience.

Australian education desperately needs to move towards "evidence-based methods of teaching and learning". At present, a school can have the majority of teaching staff expounding their opinion that gifted and talented education is something that they "don't believe in", as though it is some kind of religious belief system that is being discussed, rather than an area of educational and psychological research, dating back to work by Sir Francis Galton from 1888. (That is correct, 1888, not 1998!) There is an extensive evidence-base of work that considers the educational needs of gifted and talented students (also variously called "students of high-learning potential", "bright", "high-performance capability", and many other terms that reflect essentially the same cohort of students, plus a variety of definitions that will include varying percentages of Australia's students), and various strategies that may succeed in actually meeting these students' educational needs. Gifted and talented education is a real and serious issue to a large number of students within the Australian education system, to a large number of Australian families, and yet off-handedly dismissed by far too many ignorant principals and teaching staff as something that they do not "believe in" - insultingly akin to discussions of perhaps the tooth fairy or the Easter bunny.

Addressing the concerns and very genuine needs of Australia's many gifted students, has to occur if the Australian government is serious about the Australian Education Bill 2012 and the stated objectives. If Australia is ever (not just by 2025) to rank as a highly performing country based on student performances, then Australia needs to stop neglecting the students with highest ability, those who are cognitively gifted and with the potential to translate their gifted ability high levels of performance, when (and if) their giftedness is realised as talent. It has been clearly demonstrated that it is not enough for a child to start off gifted; students need support from their family, their schools and the community if they are to evolve to their full potential. Students need to be challenged, extended, stretched and inspired. The existing Australian Education system appears to be almost completely focussed on who can achieve minimum Naplan standards – and it is most definitely counter-productive with regards to the educational, social and emotional well-being of gifted students. Depending on definitions, gifted students can be considered to include at least 10%, even up to 30%, of the total student cohort – so that means a considerable proportion of Australia's total student population are currently having their educational needs neglected, ignored, and even having blatantly destructive educational styles and approaches used within individual schools.

Although I have discussed my own children's educational needs as gifted students, I am also mindful of the educational needs of students who are struggling to attain the minimum standards for Naplan. In addition to being a concerned and involved parent, I happen to also be a doctor, currently working in the area of Indigenous Health and previously having worked many years in the Emergency Department of a public hospital. My experiences working as a medical professional give me a perspective and insight into the lives of many poor and economically- underprivileged members of our community, whose needs are not well understood by many people, including those working in politics or education, whose own upbringing was sheltered from the harsh realities of other people's lives.

In my opinion, many noble aspirations for Australian Education are not likely to be achieved without simultaneously reviewing what can be done in terms of public health, relieving the effects of poverty, and dealing with the epigenetics of stress that are affecting generations of Australians, including the inter-generational effects of issues such as racism and the Stolen Generations, poverty and alcohol and substance abuse.

Unless the Australian Government also tries to take action such as (for example) compulsory iodine supplementation of bread to reduce rates of clinical and subclinical cretinism from hypothyroidism related to dietary iodine-deficiency, or substantially raising community awareness of the hazards of alcohol consumption antenatally, which leads to foetal alcohol syndrome (of varying severity), or funding more wide-spread and easily accessible parenting support programmes, then let us pity the classroom teacher who takes on a mixed-ability class of sleep-deprived students with poor nutritional status and acquired brain injuries from iodine deficiency or antenatal exposure to alcohol and other drugs. Students who are struggling to achieve the minimum standards on Naplan testing, most certainly need the Australian Education 2012 Bill to raise overall educational standards, however this alone will not be enough for them if other issues are not addressed.

I propose that the Inquiry into the Australian Education 2012 Bill, should extend its inquiries to seek submissions from, for example, the Paediatrics and Child Health division of the Royal Australian College of Physicians.

The current national obsession with Naplan minimum standards is, in my opinion, NOT helpful to the experience of the typical student. Teachers have been heard to announce in January that "we will not do anything fun until after Naplan" – that is half the year gone before students are even expected to enjoy their school day. Principals have been heard to tell teachers "I want to come in here and get them FRIGHTENED about Naplan" – and this in early February, to a class of 7 and 8 year olds. Which parents want to send their child to school so that adult authority-figures can intentionally frighten them? Is this how the Australian Government genuinely intends to have Naplan (which is merely a data-collection instrument) mis-used?

With regard to "Developing benchmarks and supporting improvement", it would be desirable if there was consultation with state and national gifted and talented associations, who could have a valuable role as partners who could share evidence regarding effective methods of educating this substantial and yet neglected minority within the Australian educational system.

Accountability and transparency within the educational system currently remain inadequate. There is a system requiring NSW schools to prepare an Annual School Report, for example, which should be made available and distributed by 30th June in the following year. However, it appears that there is no requirement that these reports are independently prepared or audited, and there is no apparent enforcement of the requirement that the reports are actually made available within the expected

time frame, nor that there are actually parents or community members involved in the reporting process. In particular, I have not seen evidence of any consequences if a school principal blatantly lies about what activities have actually occurred at the school, or lies about what the performance indicators actually might reveal about the school (if these were honestly reported). There needs to be an independent review process and transparent reporting, with consequences for blatant dishonesty by a principal.

I have read a submission by Mr David Nicholls (which I downloaded after his submission was made publicly available by the Inquiry) which raises valid points regarding classroom teaching of the misleading named “Intelligent Design” approach to denying scientific facts and theories. I endorse Mr Nicholls’ opposition to “pseudoscience”. It would be of great benefit to future generations of Australians if they were educated in a system which promoted critical thinking and metacognitive skills, to protect students from naively assuming that slick marketing of a belief system can have equivalence to scientific rigour. I also object to having principals and teachers in a government/public school, mis-using their status as an authority figure to children by imparting their own particular religious dogma as though it is not their personal opinion and belief system but is presented as though it is actually fact and part of the school’s educational message to the students.

After ten years of recent involvement with the Australian education system, I am unaware of any genuine systematic attempt to assess or analyse well-being of school students at any of the three government/public/state schools which my children have attended. After over 25 years as a medical practitioner, I have deep awareness of the massive issues regarding Mental Health (and mental illness) which the Australian community as a whole faces. Although there have been some recent advances in funding short-term help for acute crises, with funding for psychological services under both Medicare and ATAPS funding models, this is woefully inadequate to meet the needs of those with significant needs for long-term assistance such as (for example) those with Borderline Personality Disorder or Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (from rape or domestic violence, for example), and overly-bureaucratic systems are not an ideal model for engaging youth in need of mental health services. This is INCREDIBLY relevant to the scope of a review of Australian Education, as Mental Health problems within a family will impact significantly on an individual student’s capacity to engage meaningful with their educational process, while stresses that impact on an individual who feels isolated, mis-understood and unsupported within their school environment, will have significant effects on that student’s Mental Health and social well-being, in addition to their educational and academic success. I also feel that schools need to have a well-funded program to have fully-trained mental health professionals available, with absolutely no religious affiliation, who have the skills to assess and non-judgementally provide help to students whose mental health is suffering. If you want a Chaplain, go to church, not to a government/tax-payer funded school!

It is excellent that the school funding proposals include additional recurrent funding for students who identify as belonging to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families, however it is simplistic to assume this will be adequate in itself. Schools should seek advice and input from members of local indigenous communities, including having roles for community elders to give input as to culturally-relevant ways that would appropriately engage indigenous students and increase their rates of school attendance and increase their school achievement.

I am particularly concerned about the proposal to have “empowered school leadership”, if this is not associated and directly linked to increased accountability with real and serious consequences when a school is saddled with toxic, dishonest and corrupt leadership. In the majority of cases, principals may act in the best interests of their staff and students. However, the education system appears to have serious unaddressed issues of institutionalised work-place bullying. Many hard-working teachers have been subject to significant amounts of stress, with resultant mental-health and

physical health problems, as a consequence of what can be profound and unrelenting bullying over long periods by malicious principals and unfortunately also from other teaching colleagues. It will be difficult for the Australian education system to overcome problems with students suffering bullying at school, when there remains clear evidence of teachers suffering ongoing long-term workplace bullying. The Australian Education system needs to introduce clear processes by which parents or students or teachers can raise concerns about bullying or unprofessional or inappropriate behaviour by principals or other teaching staff, without the current situation in which parents are concerned that their child will be victimised as a result of their complaint, and in which teachers have clearly suffered further work-place bullying and harassment as a result of raising complaints.

Australian education is indeed in need of a major overhaul, which needs to commence with reviewing current training for teachers both as undergraduates and as part of their life-long learning, with particular attention to the hidden curriculum that shapes attitudes and corporate culture. Honesty, integrity, cultural sensitivity, awareness of the complexity of the needs of the student community – there is so much more that is important in our education system than how many students reach a particular band in Naplan.