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Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
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Australia

Teaching and Learning (maximising our investment in Australian Schools)

October 29th 2012

Sir/Madam,

It is with great pleasure and honour that I submit my responses to the Terms of Reference outlined in your committee's invitation.

I bring to the committee a wealth of teaching experience from fourteen schools, across four states in only a matter of twelve years; an experience which has allowed me to see some defining trends in education across Australia. I believe as a teacher I have earned the respect of my peers and colleagues and have generated an excellent rapport with students and their families across a wide range of social backgrounds.

While I am passionate about my profession, I see its many flaws – most of which were avoidable were it not for the postmodern cultural revolution which infected our education system from since the late 1970s. Too many metaphorical babies were dispatched with the bathwater amid a wealth of ideological notions and pop-culture ideas that often seemed to be promulgated for promulgation's sake. And as I view the history of our species over the past century, it is with sadness that I see those traditional methods of schooling which brought us such wonders as the lunar landing, penicillin, the technological revolution and the green revolution have been replaced with methods that remove a child's structure in the classroom and so rob that child and all his/her peers from high quality learning for our even more challenging future.

The appalling behaviour of students to which I have been exposed could fill a book; and the nonsense philosophy which brought us such deep social dysfunction in some pockets of Australia is accounted for elsewhere. I present here a coalface account of how the many ivory-towered ideals of people no longer fronting a classroom have impacted the education of our nation's children and in so doing, changed our nation substantially.

But hopefully not irreversibly.

(a) The effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools;

Australian schooling suffers from too many trends. Holistically, any curricula of any subject should – in the natural course of time – increase in content and diversify in methods of teaching (pedagogy). Such a growth in material would naturally mean that teachers' time is well used without the need for unnecessary learning of new and irrelevant material. Two of the greatest errors in Australian teaching of the past two decades have been Objectives Based Education (OBEs) and Essential Learning Standards (ELS) adopted as their famous acronyms TELS (Tasmania) VELS (Victoria) etc.

At the coal face, these two practices were wasteful for teachers on the following grounds:

OBEs are ostensibly a nothing education – the equality of opportunity being famously mistaken for equality of outcome; and so ensuring all students achieve at the same level by watering down curricula and not challenging higher achievers, in order to accommodate those who do not wish to learn. OBEs represent the 'dumbing down' of our schools. Administratively, OBEs wasted teachers' time with mindless reporting which consisted of a page full of statements describing what a student *could* do, as opposed to how well they did it. This allowed for an egalitarian approach to levelling the playing field rather than the egalitarian availability of good schooling. OBEs were categorically rejected by Western Australian teachers last decade. Yet as recently as 2008, I witnessed an uninformed Assistant Principal at a independent school introduce the concept to the school as a 'dynamic' and 'new' way of teaching, which the school needed to adopt. I felt it my professional responsibility to direct attention to the WA debacle. The school then dropped the idea.

ELS were similarly an administrative burden for teachers. A unit of work in, for example, mathematics, needed to be initiated by giving students a test on the work yet to be covered. The philosophy behind this was to see which students were already leaders in the area; and to somehow demonstrate to students what they were about to learn. Administratively, they allowed a teacher to measure empirically how much a student learnt from the beginning to the end of a unit. Sadly, what was overlooked in the formation of ELS is the heartbreak effect that a failed test has on the psyche of a developing adolescent's mind as almost all students failed with scores less than 20%. Teachers lost not only one whole lesson per unit area to systematic failing but also had the added burden of marking and then providing feedback to a by now despondent class. At a Catholic school I repeatedly wasted much time and enthusiasm of a mathematics class by following this procedure as was required by ELS. The notion that a comparison of achievement can then be made by comparing final scores to initial scores is the ideological tweaking of data to magnify obvious improvement; an overall wasteful and nonsense practice: why not allow kinder children to sit VCE exams to calculate empirically how much they will learn in 12 years? Surely such data will make someone look good. This flawed approach to schooling is matched only by the reporting procedure which was required under ELS. A comparison can be made for this student whose learning was inextricably linked to his willingness to be an unsociable, passively aggressive boy with minimal respect for education, for his peers and for his own learning:

“Jeremy's behaviour is affecting his learning. He is always disorganised; is rude to me, does no homework and is disruptive in class. Until these basics of respect of maturity are put in place, I can offer very little to address his academic needs and so I encourage Jeremy to have a change of heart if he is to make the most of his time at_____.”

This report was vetoed under ELS and I was forced to re-write it in the didactic politically correct style which hid all accountability and responsibility of the student:

“Jeremy can improve his marks in mathematics by coming to school on time and completing his homework in a timely manner. He needs to put more time into studying algebra and completing all tasks effectively in class.”

Whilst I grant that both reports send a similar message, as a parent of five children, I would want to know in writing a more direct approach to the welfare of my child's learning as outlined in the first sample so I could deal with a behavioural issue which is clearly getting in the way of my child's learning. ELS reporting did not allow for behaviour to be accounted for so directly.

In searching for practices to allow children to realise their full potential for a career goal, we have inadvertently allowed many students slip through the gaps of learning. By presenting 'easy' options for children who could achieve much higher in school, we have produced a genie that is now too difficult to place back in the bottle. One such example are VET courses (Vocational Education and Training) which are often eyed by lazy students as an easy opt out to escape academically more rigorous subjects. At an independent boys' school in with a well-established VET programme, I was witness to far too many boys opting for VET subjects as a way of 'playing up' and getting out of work. Consequently I have witnessed too many competencies be signed off for certificate courses; have felt pressure from other staff to rush through a certain certificate level by year's end; as a means of delivering some sense of qualification to students who were escaping academic accountability; so they could feel good about having achieved *something* at school. I witnessed on one occasion a student vying for a Certificate II in horticulture write his name on a school lawn in herbicide during his final months; and another student at a similar stage of his course herbicide a vineyard instead of treat it with a biological control agent.

(b) The structure and governance of school administration – local and central – and its impact on teaching and learning;

School administration in some isolated cases has caused schooling to become affected. Although I have found a small proportion of leaders in schools (from Head of Faculty through to Principal) to deliver unbelievable and at times inconceivable levels of incompetence, for the school suffering such poor leadership, the issue is relatively omnipresent, often filtering into all levels of a school:

- A colleague at an independent boys' school was asked by the Principal in 1998 to use an entire term to tour the country to derive research from successful Agricultural schools in Australia to establish this school's own Ag-based teaching facility. That principal later that year 'slated' the same teacher for her 'hair brained' scheme of money wasting and junkets for a facility he claimed suddenly to have no knowledge of his sanctioning.
- I was appointed the head of a major school sport by my Principal: in a minuted meeting in 2002 we agreed on an appointment for the coach of that sport's first team. Over the midyear holidays an impatient deputy of the school managed to change the Principal's mind and have himself appointed head coach. The minutes from our meeting were ignored and I was exposed to blame for appointing \$20,000 in coaching salary for an unsanctioned appointment by the school's governing body. At one point in time, the school actually had *two* teachers in charge of the same sport and two concurrently independently working head coaches until I saw fit to tender my resignation.
- A Principal at an elite boys' school often overlooked key staff for succession in major appointments, and instead 'parachuted' in favourites of his among the staff to posts in which they had little experience. In one case an entire boarding house's parent body was in uproar at such an appointment and the Principal went into damage control to stem the reaction from the resignation of the obvious and overlooked candidate.

- That same Principal proudly appointed a leader in Public Relations to a key role at the school via telephone. For some unknown reason that candidate then received a letter from the same Principal to the opposite effect.
- In another similar case, a Head of SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) at a school was known famously for asking at a curriculum meeting one month after her appointment: 'What does B.C. mean again?' She was a favourite of a Deputy Principal's.
- The head of science at a Catholic high school in _____ told me on my first day that I was teaching 'the chemistry'. When I inquired exactly what, it was explained to me simply: '*the* chemistry'. There was no work programme from which to structure a curriculum. That head of science was a primary school trained teacher responsible primarily for catering within the school. Students were not allowed to take textbooks home in science at that school.
- A Principal at that same school summoned me to his office to deal with a case of appalling student behaviour. I had been defamed by a student in her implicit statements to my junior class that I had 'called us all a _____'. When I took the student to task for this and other matters of blatant truancy, she refused emphatically to attend a school-sanctioned detention and was supported by an Assistant Principal and then by the Principal himself. The school suddenly changed its own after-school detention policy. That Principal saw it fit in our meeting to produce all of my school reports, a third of which onto he had placed post-it notes with criticisms of how I wrote comments. This was a deflection away from his responsibility to support a _____ professional of his in the face of blatant slander by a _____. Somehow he not only managed to rise to the post of Principal but insisted on telling me that my impression that his inability to support me was contrary to the approach taken by any other Principal I had served under, was a gross error on my part: 'I think you'll find all Principals would support the student in this case'. I resigned my position there with 20 minutes' notice and was penalised six weeks' pay by that school.
- A department school in one of the nation's most troubled suburbs had in place a sufficient system for dealing with chronic disruptive behaviour. It involved strategic use of a withdrawal room for students to 'cool down' from at times almost violent conflict. If the student could not be calmed, then they were suspended for up to five weeks. The morale among staff was excellent and the mission felt communal. When the Principal was physically attacked in the school yard, he and his acting replacement were removed from the school and a new Principal installed who abolished the current system of dealing with disruptive students: the withdrawal room was closed. Violent students needed to be managed in class. The result of this was nothing short of bedlam. Staff left, several suffered significant emotional breakdowns after violent confrontations with threatening students. One teacher was king hit from behind in an unprovoked attack. Several suffer severe psychological harm from these events and the morale at the school has plummeted. I could not conjure even one of those former colleagues of mine to submit to this inquiry as they felt it would be too much of an emotional exposure. The department has covered up these incidents. Staff who have made formal complaints have seen their efforts wasted. That new Principal has since been appointed to a position _____.

I see it fit to find complaint against only three of fourteen Principals with whom I have worked. Largely, there are sufficient checks and processes of transparency in place across education to ensure good leadership at most schools. In addition, there are numerous heads of faculties, subjects, houses, sub-schools and departments with whom I marvel at their ability to exhibit great leadership. I find particular need to mention the following excellent leaders of ours in education:

- These individuals, to my thinking, are leaders made of the 'right stuff'.

The success of these leaders rests largely on the autonomy with which they work. The most flourishing faculties I have ever seen are those in which a head of science gives me and other staff absolute free reign to impart the national curriculum as we see fit. The most stymied ones are those in which a head always looks over my shoulder and comments on not only how I do things, but on what I do. In a similar vein, I find the most up-beat schools are those in which a Principal recognises the professionalism of his/her staff and trusts that the job gets done well; and is not consumed with relatively administrative issues such as follow up of meeting attendance (allows freedom to deal with impromptu student issues); absence for personal reasons which do not impact on lesson time ('popping down' to the shops); encourages attendance at staff's own child's school events (eg a daughter's sports day etc) and does not feel the need to over-meet with staff (compare a weekly meeting at two of the nation's most successful schools to *seven* meetings per week at a struggling state-school). Indeed the relative vibe among staff between all fifteen schools I have taught at is measured tangibly in how often staff are required to meet. Over-meeting is an easy trap into which a school can fall; and encourages incompetence in senior staff (we were told *daily* by one Assistant Principal that all spare lessons were 'on notice' because she was not sure she had done the sickness covers correctly) and other teaching staff (ridiculous scenes of random staff taking valuable time to tell a collective body of fifty professionals that they were reminding us of an email which they sent the night before to draw our attention to a flyer they'd put in our pigeon hole - what exactly then is the need of either a memo or email if such things need to be spelled out to us daily?).

The need is to deprive teachers of autonomy in their profession. With autonomy, education flourishes. Without it, staff and schools can stagnate.

Which can be seen from the research of Zbar *et al.* (2009); and which is best demonstrated by independent schools which over the past thirty years have resisted trends in education which are untested; and allowed their staff to exhibit trusted professionalism; and have allowed trivial nuances of starting and finishing time to fall understandably by the wayside. It is somewhat sad that Zbar *et al.* (2009) are re-discovering at the end of a failed education revolution that autonomy plays such a crucial role in education success.

Reporting in a Government School in is nonsensical. The time-honoured recognition of what constitutes a year level has been redefined to occupy two separate levels, numbered from some arbitrary system which to date no one has been able to explain to me. Students are measured against a state-wide expectation that identifies an 'expected level' for the student against which a small box is filled in with a grey shade. A student's entire school year for that subject is then represented as a solitary tick in a separate box as a comparison as to where that student stands among his or her peers. Ultimately is my child's tick ahead or behind the grey box?

How this compares to the independent sector, which has expanded every subject into up to ten different criteria all with widely recognised bands of achievement ranging from A to E is immense.

(c) The influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive a quality education;

Family members can prove to be the most disastrous input into a student's education. Numerous anecdotes can be drawn from my 12 years' experience, but I highlight the main themes here:

- Numerous students find skill in provoking teachers into conflict. Since I bring a sense of dynamic theatre to most classes I teach, this provocation usually has come from those who previously could harness the class's attention through immature theatre: I have stolen their audience. Through whatever means, such students can initiate and then fuel conflict in order to 'catch out' a teacher for swearing, showing disrespect or sarcasm in return or for physical contact. In some cases these students have the full backing of their parents - usually single

parents – who back their child unconditionally and seek for punitive measures to be taken against me. It has occurred three times of significance in my career for three of the most disruptive students which their respective schools had seen for some time. In one case a student with Tourette's syndrome, a victim of sexual assault and a sexual predator himself, falsely claimed to his mother I had mockingly imitated him, complete with his own fabricated outbursts at home. I was backed entirely by a solid school leadership yet had to deal with an incensed mother who could not be swayed. Because an angered single parent cannot see this cross school/cross border/ cross year level trend that I see from my experience, they feel genuinely victimised; as if teachers are seemingly trained in how to target and bully their most precious angel.

- Catholic schools tend to make rods for their own back in taking a gospel approach to disciplining students. In some schools it would seem even the most destructive students are afforded forgiveness '70 times 700 times' in clear violation to how that child's continuity at a school affects staff morale and the education of other children. In 2012, a Catholic secondary school continually allowed a well-recognised school bully to remain at the school where he maintained his antisocial habits. One of his victims reached a point of reacting violently toward the bully and the result was the school bully's father storming into the class the next day screaming 'where's that little _____ who hit ____?!' Many members of that class are still receiving counselling for such a traumatic ordeal. The responsibility for such trauma lays at the feet of the _____ who encourage a Munchausen Syndrome approach to dealing with bullies, at the expense of everyone else's well-being.
- 'Demography is not destiny' is a noble concept repeated by our Prime Minister, particularly as Education Minister as 'disadvantage is not destiny'. By this phrase, we infer that we should have an education system which can allow any individual to achieve at any level they seek. To a large extent this is already in place: anecdotal evidence of success stories abound. However, it takes courageous leadership to overcome this by raising expectations across a whole school body in those schools which struggle – and eight examples have been analysed in the literature (Zbar *et al.*, 2009). Student Family Occupation (SFO) is a large determinant of a child's destiny and is a monumental hurdle to overcome at the coal face. How do we teachers deal with:
 - Children who laugh about their infant sibling's referral to their mother's marijuana use as 'bubble-bubble' as a consequence of that infant having witnessed the use of a bong?
 - Loggers' sons who disrupt lessons on global warming by yelling 'who gives a _____?' when the biology behind trees processing CO₂ is addressed in lesson?
 - A daughter who finds no time to do her homework because she needs to medicate one mother, avoid her second mother's wrath, prepare a meal for several siblings and then help them with their own homework?
 - The numerous students who brag that the thinking behind their total lack of engagement is the safety net of the 'dole' to which they aspire as their life's only goal?
 - Students who *en masse* reserve the right to have Monday as either a day to recover from a hangover; or else the day to settle fights with peers which were perpetrated over the weekend?
 - Those students whose descriptions of wasting their student allowance on cigarettes, alcohol and drugs?
 - Those students whose descriptions of conflict with their family members sound dreadful?

In several cases, I have encounter circumstances in which direct intervention by removal of a child from its parents would seem the only course of action to avoid a poverty generational trap cycling into the future. Easy access to funds in the form of the nation's baby bonus and generous child allowances makes early parenthood seem attractive for some teenage girls who have had such a life choice modelled by their own mothers who in some cases were only repeating what *they* experienced as children. Education appears helpless to avert this cycle.

(d) The adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment;

The onset of the digital age in schooling was a painstakingly slow undertaking which was frustrating to watch. Having come into teaching from an IT heavy vocation, I found the rate at which technology was embraced in schools quite slow. In many instances, a key student was appointed as *de facto* professional and utilised to install Audio Visual (AV) equipment for *ad hoc* events. This had two effects: to rob the student of an adequate education by limiting time in class; and to allow an obligation to employ that student straight from school to maintain the status quo – thus giving the school a now under-qualified AV or IT expert. Although I have seen this occur in three schools, it is now quite rare but I feel was responsible in those schools for a lagging behind effect in their adoption of technology.

There is a significant delineation in availability of the IT infrastructure and training for our children which exists, at writing, between two schools in the same state, both of which I have taught at. The delineation highlights the need to expose the simple gesture of ‘a laptop on every desk’ as an antidote to today’s education crisis. It is much more involved:

School 1 is well resourced to channel fast resources from the ARNet to provide fast internet and unique opportunities to attend online lectures transmitted to numerous schools at once by renowned scientists and artists. A wireless network has been installed in the school powerful enough to accommodate the need for each child to have three Personal Electronic Devices (PEDs) online at any one time. Laptops are a mandatory part of a Year 9’s booklist.

In any class I could log on to almost any computer and direct all work to a fast projector installed above a whiteboard which allowed for smooth transition of ideas. The school has a *Clickview* library of documentaries and educational resources which were accessible at any time. I could access any of my files from anywhere in the school. In the event of any physical complication, a staff of three qualified technicians could fix almost all problems immediately.

School 1 matched this physical expertise by confronting the distraction factor of PEDs early on by adopting a pedagogy which required students to become ‘responsible digital citizens’ through their online activities. This involved lessons on emailing protocol, cyberbullying, leaving responsible ‘digital footprints’ and utilising the resources as a learning tool rather than an entertainment feature. Part of this plan was to *not* ban PEDs, nor to restrict students from sites such as Youtube, Facebook, Twitter etc. in order to develop responsible patterns of habit for the real world. Introducing students to *Turnitin* anti-plagiarism software allowed them to see their own work protected on the world scene.

The result of this was felt at two year levels under my tutelage:

- My Year 9 science class were drilled in a nine week course to research two science projects, skilled in rewording ‘cut and pasted’ information as their own, how to write correct in-text references in a scientific setting, complete a Harvard System bibliography, submit all work to *Turnitin* and submit all work online via the school’s intranet provider. They produced work of tertiary quality in some cases.
- My year 12 Biology class was able to take these skills further and establish a Biology Journal complete with external referees and a quality publication. Biology classes became a hive of technology-based activity whereby students were continually immersed in the internet to make the most of the learning resources available to them. A Facebook page was established for them to exchange ideas and all work was submitted online. I received in some instances work of postgraduate quality.

School 2 is not as well-resourced as School 1. The internet is restricted through a single departmental portal and so downloading of teaching resources is slow. Students have had no training in digital citizenship and so the rate of distraction in class is very high; and their interactions between others via PEDs do not exhibit as much responsibility as at School 1 and in the working world. Youtube has been blocked along with Facebook and other social media sites. This has been a necessary measure to allow for teaching to occur. Mobile phones are banned outright in the school for a similar purpose. The time spent for me to construct a data projector, wire it into my laptop, and then find a teaching video which I have been forced to download from the net at a painstakingly slow rate in the lesson beforehand, allows for the class to start the lesson as a disruptive entity. As a result, I am reluctant to use the technology in lessons unless it is completely 'idiot proof' and planned well ahead, whereas at School 1 a more *ad hoc* and serendipitous use of the technology made lessons a great deal more engaging for students.

Whilst I welcome the necessary controls needed for students in School 2, and although I can still deliver the national curriculum via more traditional and still engaging methods; I feel the delineation between well-resourced and comparatively poorly resource schools is going to widen with every passing year.

It all comes down to how well IT is taught from a young age. This places a great deal of responsibility onto parents and how they manage their child's online use before they get to school; and responsibility onto an education system which embraces the technology rather than play an economically constrained catch up.

(e) Factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system;

Teachers are not paid enough. Early learning teachers and those who teach during a child's transition through puberty (years 6–8) should be – along with nursing staff – some of the most rewarded professionals in this country.

This would raise the bar for aspirants who would seek a career in the profession, make courses more competitive and academically rigorous. Australia should look to Finland, to the admissions rate of applicants (at some university only 1%) and for the thorough and ongoing training which is closely supervised during the formative years and then allowed autonomy in later years.

I have witnessed some dreadful practices of teachers which should have been weeded out at University.

A selection process whereby a prospective undergraduate applicant fronts a class of students should be mandatory, as with the admissions process of performance-based art degrees at all Australian Universities (eg Drama, Music etc.).

As a nation, Australia needs to embrace the profession of teacher as something of note – an empowered and respected vocation as is the regard given to it in Finland, South Korea and China. Of note, China gives greater respect to those who choose to teach in poorer regions. In Australia, by contrast, the mention of working in a country school is often met with 'hopefully you'll get a transfer to the city soon!' as if Australia's struggling schools deserve abandonment.

(f) Other related matters.

What is missing from your Terms of Reference for this inquiry is an input into education that underlies practically all problems faced in schooling in Australia today.

Student behaviour is the greatest interference in providing a high quality education for a system from which, in all honesty, I believe not one child should be left behind. In Australia we have no adequate way to deal with extremely poorly behaved students: they rob a class of significant learning time, disrupt a teacher's credibility, cause terrific psychological harm to other students and bring tremendous destruction on society when they leave school. They leave in their wake a destructive theme in the classroom where today in many struggling schools, students feel quite entitled to extract some form of credibility from a teacher before dispensing with any respect. One current student of mine who aspires to be a veterinarian, for example, truly believes it is her right to 'hate' me, hate all teachers and give her school minimal respect – showing no comprehension that my undergraduate major may be of some assistance to her planning her future (mocking instead my correct pronunciation of the word ' '). This is typical of an uphill battle that many teachers face. Students from lower socioeconomic spheres who have been exposed to dreadful behaviour both at home and at school, rarely present the quaint and emotion-evoking urchin of a Smith Family or Salvation Army campaign advertisement; but are generally quite conceited and angry at the world, aiming their discontent with life at the only individuals in their lives who can truly make a difference.

I believe we have a crisis in education because of this single fact and we have this destructive element in schools because there are no ultimate deterrents for repeat offenders and violent/aggressive students. The most extreme consequence today is a suspension which is either often welcomed or leads to further complications within often dysfunctional families. Independent schools are afforded the luxury of expelling students to protect the schooling of others; Catholic schools choose to not do so unless circumstances are extreme; Government schools have no further place to deposit disruptive students and so have a greater tolerance of such individuals. Unfortunately the slow slide in student behaviour over the past three decades has embedded into our nation's schooling a destructive element which needs to be dealt with if we are to harness a true education revolution.

I believe the nation's teaching body could well furnish an independent inquiry into student behaviour alone, with enough material with which to seek out a synergistic solution.

Whilst I admire the protection of poorly behaved students by those within our vocation (myself included) is a far cry from past days of institutionalised violence and demeaning treatment, I truly feel from my wealth of experience that the pendulum has swung too far – the direct result of the loss of structure in a child's life which has its origin in a postmodern ideology that is filled with flaws.

Reference:

Zbar, V., Kimber, K., Marshall, G. (2009) *Schools that achieve extraordinary success: How some Victorian schools punch above their weight*. Centre for Strategic Education. Occasional Paper February 2009 # 109