

OVERVIEW

The Committee's Inquiry into the Status of Teachers is very timely because significant changes in education policy, particularly at the Commonwealth level, and cuts in government funding to public schools undermine the quality of education provided to our students. The Inquiry has been remarkable both for the extent of the interest it has generated and for the unanimity of the views expressed by participants. Parents, students, school and community organisations, unions, universities, teachers and professional organisations have contributed their perspectives in more than 300 submissions and in public hearings in every state and territory. The message from these groups is consistent and clear.

Teaching in the 1990s is a highly complex and demanding activity. Despite shrinking budgets, alarmist media reports, unsupportive ministers, a crowded curriculum, and the disappearance of support services, teachers have continued to dedicate themselves to their students. The Committee has been encouraged by the evidence of the deep commitment of teachers, by their passionate concern for young people, and by the many examples of innovative and cooperative teaching practice brought to its attention.

But all is not well in the teaching profession, and it is generally agreed that there is a widespread crisis of morale amongst teachers. The status of the profession is disturbingly low. Perceptions in the community about the low tertiary entrance requirements for teacher training, and the low status accorded in this country to children, contribute to this state of affairs. As well, the feminisation of the profession - that is the high percentage of women teachers - means that prejudiced views about the value of women's work are also a factor. Few teachers recommend a teaching career to their children or their brightest students. Some are even ashamed to admit to being teachers. While teachers themselves value their work they believe it is not understood, appreciated or supported in the general community.

The Committee considers this is an unduly pessimistic assessment of the situation. The evidence received shows that community perceptions of teachers and teaching are more varied and more positive than many teachers realise, particularly among people and families most familiar with teachers' work. This is a clear indication of the need for teachers and others, especially governments, to publicise more effectively the excellent work taking place in our schools.

The Committee believes that a tolerant, vigorous, successful society requires a quality education system, and at the heart of quality education are quality teachers. Low morale amongst teachers works against quality teaching. As this Report shows, steps to improve morale and to address the difficulties described will go a long way to achieving quality outcomes in education. **Teaching needs to be accepted as a profession.** To reinforce that view, the recommendations in this Report aim to give teachers responsibility for professional standards in teaching and governments responsibility for staffing, facilities and back up support.

The Committee accepts that teachers are central to the quality of students' learning and that therefore it is necessary to support our teachers more effectively. The Labour Party in Britain and the Democratic Party in the United States both won recent elections with campaigns in which education was a central issue and in which teachers were acknowledged as critical to its quality. Evidence to the Committee indicates that community support for education is equally strong in Australia.

Now is the time to act. The teaching force is ageing. Its average age is 46. Many teachers will retire within the next ten years and new teachers will be needed to replace them. To attract and retain high quality applicants it is important to enhance the status of the profession. Our students deserve no less.

The causes of teachers' declining status are well known. They are documented in this Report. So are the means by which they might be addressed. The Report's recommendations will be a significant step in this direction.

What remains to be seen is whether governments in Australia will acknowledge the central importance of teachers to ensuring a successful education system, and whether they will make a commitment to practical measures to support teachers. It is clear from the evidence presented to this Committee that governments ignore community commitment to education at their peril.

Senator the Hon Rosemary Crowley

Chairperson

