

# Opposition Senators' Report

1.1 This inquiry into learning performance in schools has been far too ambitious an undertaking. It required more time and resources, and not least a span of attention by committee members which could not reasonably have been expected of senators. For this reason Opposition senators have formed the view that the inquiry has had only limited usefulness, and that the conclusions drawn in the committee majority report, and the recommendations made, need to be treated with caution. The sampling of stakeholder opinion was limited, as was the amount of empirical research available on some issues. This is not a reflection on the high quality of most submissions or the value of testimony given to the committee. It is only that inquiries like this tend to be coloured by 'snapshots' and hearsay more than they should be. The committee, being conscious of the achievement and hard work proceeding in schools, should have acknowledged the successful learning experienced in most schools, and the research demonstrating that improved standards are being achieved. Opposition senators are confident that this perspective is likely to be shared by education stakeholders regardless of the views they take on the issues covered in the report.

1.2 As this report will outline, far too much reliance has been placed on opinion expressed as 'evidence', and too much credence has been placed on 'evidence' which suggests a clear decline in standards. Qualitative research indicates that there are problems in some areas, but there was no substantial evidence to indicate declining standards overall or across the board. The committee certainly heard no evidence of any deterioration in teaching standards. What it heard about was increasing pressure on teachers resulting from the consequences of social inequity and funding shortages. It heard about the lack of incentives to attract talented people into the teaching profession.

1.3 The committee also heard of the failure of Commonwealth policies in two crucial areas: its failure to adequately fund programs addressing the needs of underachieving schools; and its failure to provide constructive policy leadership for improving school programs and raising standards. The need for a leadership role from the Commonwealth is not in question. What is most evident is the adversarial and ideologically driven agendas of the current minister and her predecessor, both of whom have attempted to wield power without responsibility over jurisdictions and systems whose task it is to run schools.

## **The conduct of the inquiry**

1.4 Opposition senators would support a constructive and thoughtful inquiry into raising quality and standards in school education. While believing that achievement levels are relatively high, on the basis of international comparisons and reported data which is now available from the states, Opposition senators agree that improvement is possible, and that there are areas of under-performance which need remedying.

1.5 There were some reservations, however, about the timing of the inquiry, especially in light of rhetoric from some Government party senators which suggested that school education is an ideological battleground. While the majority report refers to the ill-informed coterie of commentators who regularly criticise teachers for their failure to ensure high academic standards, Opposition senators make the point that too many members in both Houses give credence to such critics by quoting them approvingly, probably for political purposes.

1.6 Opposition senators recall the questioning of Professor Ken Wiltshire as an opportunity for some senators to reflect on the Leader of the Opposition. On other occasions some senators appeared ready to criticise some established teaching subjects on the basis of their content, failing to consider how inappropriate that might be in the context of a public hearing. Such incidents, not significant in themselves, created a sense of unease about a possible political agenda that might have been running in the ranks of Government party members.

1.7 Finally, in the conduct of the inquiry, Opposition senators note that its duration has been less than twelve months, but that the examination of evidence by the committee only began in March 2007. The broad terms of this inquiry have meant that much ground needed to be covered, and this has not occurred.

### **Past inquiries**

1.8 Opposition senators note that the terms of reference for this inquiry overlay a great deal of policy area which has been the subject of numerous previous reports commissioned by this government over the past decade (see Attachment A). None of these inquiries, or their recommendations, have borne fruit. It begs the question of how the Government will react to yet another set of recommendations.

1.9 This lack of response was referred to in a number of the submissions. For instance, the Independent Education Union of Australia suggesting that an audit of the reports and recommendations from parliamentary inquiries over the last decade be undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

1.10 Another submission, from Dr Glenn Finger et al from Griffith University in Queensland highlighted the issue:

We support, in principle, the recommendations of the *Top of the Class Report on the inquiry into teacher education and the Teaching and Leading for Quality Australian Schools: A Review and Synthesis of Research-Based Knowledge* report for Teaching Australia. However, we note that these are the most recent of many similar reports which have not been thoroughly and sufficiently resourced and acted upon.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Independent Education Union of Australia, *Submission 55*, p. 5.

2 Dr Glenn Finger et al, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

1.10 A similar picture emerges with reports commissioned by the Minister, through DEST. Professor Kevin Wheldall and his colleagues were instrumental in bringing about the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy but noted that:

Since the 'Nelson Report' was released there has been little done of appreciable significance to implement its findings. More seriously, what has been done has been paying little more than lip service to the Report's recommendations...We regard the decision...as evidence of either the unwillingness or the complete inability of federal and state governments to allow educational policy to be determined by the best available scientific evidence on how best to teach children to read.<sup>3</sup>

1.11 This sentiment was echoed in a number of other submissions, with Dr Kerry Hempenstall noting also that little productive change has as yet eventuated at the classroom level.<sup>4</sup> When asked to explain the lack of action taken following the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Professor Bill Loudon from the University of Western Australia added:

I think that the lack of action is a mystery which could only be explained by within-cabinet interactions, the capacity of ministers to get their programs up. It could not be explained by anything rational or scientific. We did an inquiry and the inquiry was quite clear.<sup>5</sup>

1.12 Professor Loudon pointed to teacher education as one example of an area in which a lack of funding had failed to provide a solution to a problem identified in numerous inquiries:

We have had 101 inquiries into teacher education in Australia since 1979. The House of Representatives report listed 100 in its appendix. It is not an un-inquired into problem. One teacher education program I know went from 210 academic staff in teacher education and 3,500 students to 70 staff and 4,500 students. Do you think they did that because they thought having fewer people around made the tearoom easier to manage? No. It was because their funding was halved in real terms in 15 years. In the universities everyone is always whining about this and no-one wants to hear a Dean of Education whining about funding for teacher education, but that is actually true.<sup>6</sup>

1.13 In particular, Opposition Senators note that one of the Government party senators' recommendations in the report is to call for an inquiry into the remuneration of teachers. Opposition senators not only disagree with the Government party senators of the committee on the issue of performance pay, but condemn the Government for initiating yet another inquiry with a history of failing to act on previous inquiries and

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3 Professor Kevin Wheldall et al, *Submission 27*, p. 5.

4 Dr Kerry Hempenstall, *Submission 5*, p. 2.

5 Professor Bill Loudon, *Submission 73*, p. 7.

6 Professor Bill Loudon, *Submission 73*, p. 14.

their recommendations. The Opposition Senators must question whether the Government is genuinely committed to long-term enduring solutions in school education.

### **The current inquiry**

1.14 Opposition senators believe that the inquiry has highlighted the need to focus on quality teaching and quality curriculum. They also note with some disbelief the failure of Government senators to fully acknowledge, or seek to address, the link between lower educational outcomes and socio-economic disadvantage.

#### ***Inequity as the enemy of quality***

1.15 A common theme throughout submissions was the strong socio-economic relationship between achieving and under achieving students, and the inability of the current education system to adequately address this inequity. Government senators acknowledged this relationship but did not appear to take it seriously. The committee majority report concluded that:

...the apparent problem of low socio-economic status has been resolved at the school level in some schools...The committee feels that the socio-economic status factor is surmountable, as it has been in past generations which have seen an 'aspirational' cohort rise from their working class origins. The difficulty for schools and teachers is to motivate students to develop an interest in their own educational growth.<sup>7</sup>

1.16 The Australian Council for Educational Research, the Australian Education Union, the Independent Education Union and the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia all noted the significant issue surrounding equity in the Australian education system.

1.17 Government senators cited evidence from the Australian Council for Educational Research that the correlation between socio-economic status and results was insignificant as justification for the Government's dismissal of the socio-economic issue, however the same submission notes:

The OECD has ranked Australia highly in terms of the current attainments of 15 year-olds...[however] students from low socio-economic and indigenous backgrounds tend to be over-represented in the tail of the achievement distribution. This means that increasing variability across the years of school sometimes is reflected in growing gaps between students from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds and between indigenous and non-indigenous students.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Committee majority report, Chapter 2, p. 9.

8 Australian Council for Educational Research, *Submission 38*, p. 1.

1.18 The trend is clear also in the submission from the Australian Education Union, which analysed Australia's performance in PISA. The Union concluded that while all states and territories performed at or above the international average:

The most notable and worrying element of the Australian results was that in the 2000 results in relation to reading literacy Australia was found to have 'high achievement, low equity'. The presence of a 'long tail' was caused by the comparatively wide spread of results across the achievement spectrum compared to several other countries with similar achievement levels.<sup>9</sup>

1.19 While student background may not be the only factor leading to under-performance in national and international testing, it is identified by many as a key factor, and one that Opposition senators feel should not be dismissed.

1.20 A number of submissions noted that unlike some OECD countries Australia maintains a substantial non-government school sector. This sector is growing for a number of reasons. One is the run-down condition of some of government schools. Opposition senators take the view that there is a justifiable argument for the provision of increased Commonwealth funding to all schools particularly needy government schools. Equal educational opportunities should exist for all students irrespective of SES, geographic location, or physical disability. As the Independent Education Union told the committee:

The responsibility for quality must be a collective one across governments, education systems, the teaching profession and the community. There should be an emphasis on collaboration not competition between schools or sectors.<sup>10</sup>

1.21 The long 'tail' of underachievement indicated by the PISA and TIMSS tests of comparative standards can in large measure be attributed to pockets of socio-economic disadvantage reflected in the performance of schools in some localities. These schools are in urgent need of remedial programs run by specialist trained teachers in literacy and numeracy, or more resources and intervention strategies.

1.22 Opposition senators are highly concerned with the correlation between low performance and social disadvantage. The need for early intervention for those students who are not able to meet literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and additional targeted funding for schools on the basis of need and fairness are noted. Australia's position on the international rating scale will not improve unless standards are raised across all schools.

### ***Performance Pay***

1.23 A key focus of the committee majority report is teacher quality, including issues of remuneration and the Government's flawed performance pay approach.

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9 Australian Education Union, *Submission 14*, p. 11.

10 Independent Education Union of Australia, *Submission 55*, p. 17.

Opposition senators' concerns about the effect of performance pay on the teaching profession need to be treated seriously. In some states and territories, such as the Northern Territory, there is already a discernible and negative effect. In relation to performance pay, the majority of the committee concluded that:

...some form of performance pay would be instrumental in enhancing the quantity and quality of the teaching profession...The committee believes that the teaching profession will need to take this at its own pace.<sup>11</sup>

1.24 Opposition Senators recognise the importance of rewarding quality teaching. The Government's so-called performance pay approach is fundamentally flawed. Opposition Senators believe teachers should be rewarded for what they teach and where they teach, and that this should be done in cooperation with the teaching profession.

1.25 Opposition senators believe there is an urgent need to address the declining status of teaching in Australia, including increased rewards for quality teachers, but rejects the need for the Government's performance pay approach, noting the failure of these schemes internationally.

### *Curriculum and assessment*

1.26 The importance of quality curriculum cannot be overstated. Opposition senators believe that rapidly developing a system of national assessment, including compulsory external examinations, is premature. On the issue of compulsory external assessment, Opposition senators cannot identify any substantial educational reason, or demonstrable case, for such arrangements automatically improving outcomes or curriculum rigour.

1.27 Opposition Senators believe the development of a high quality, rigorous national curriculum is central to ensuring high academic standards across all states and territories, and that it is curriculum which should be prioritised over assessment procedures.

### **Recommendation 1**

**Opposition senators recommend that the committee conduct an audit of inquiries into school education over the past decade, including an assessment of the government's response to recommendations.**

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11 Committee majority report, Chapter 6, p. 15.

**Recommendation 2**

**Opposition senators recommend that additional targeted funding for schools should be provided on the basis of need and fairness to address inequity in educational outcomes, social disadvantage, and rural and regional locations.**

**Recommendation 3**

**Opposition senators recommend urgent action to improve the status and quality of teaching, including a program to reward quality teachers for what they teach and where they teach.**

**Recommendation 4**

**Opposition senators recommend a National Curriculum Board led by an eminent educationalist with representatives from each state and territory as well as the Catholic and independent sectors be established to develop a national curriculum.**

**Senator Gavin Marshall**

**Deputy Chair**

## ATTACHMENT A

### School Education Reports Commissioned by the Howard Government

Year	Report
1998	National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education Project (Australia), <i>Preparing a Profession: Report of the National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education Project</i> , Australian Council of Deans of Education, Canberra, 1998.
2001	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, <i>PD 2000 Australia: A National Mapping of School Teacher Professional Development</i> , Canberra, 2001.
	Goodrum, D., Hackling, M. and Rennie, L., <i>The Status and Quality of Teaching and Learning of Science in Australian Schools: a research report</i> , Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, 2001.
2002	Ballantyne, R., Bain, J. D., and Preston, B., <i>Teacher Education Courses and Completions: Initial Teacher Education Courses and 1999, 2000 and 2001 Completions</i> , Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Higher Education Group, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2002.
	Department of Education, Science and Training, <i>An Ethic of Care: Effective Programmes for Beginning Teachers</i> , Canberra, 2002.
	Department of Education, Science and Training, <i>Raising the Standards: A Proposal for the Development of an ICT Competency Framework for Teachers</i> , Canberra, 2002.
2003	Ballantyne, R., McLean, S. V., and Macpherson, I., <i>Knowledge and Skills Required for Creating a Culture of Innovation: Supporting Innovative Teaching and Learning</i> , Paper prepared for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.
	Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, <i>Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future: Advancing Innovation, Science, Technology and Mathematics</i> (3 vols), Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.
	Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, <i>Discussion Paper: Young People, Schools and Innovation: Towards an Action Plan for the School Sector</i> , Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.
	Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, <i>Interim Report: Attracting and Retaining Teachers of Science, Technology and Mathematics</i> , Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.
	Lawrance, G. A. and Palmer, D. H., <i>Clever Teachers, Clever Sciences: Preparing Teachers for the Challenge of Teaching Science, Mathematics and Technology in 21st Century Australia</i> , Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Research Analysis and Evaluation Group, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.



	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs, Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce, <i>A National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching</i> , November 2003.
	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs, Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce, <i>Demand and Supply of Primary and Secondary School Teachers in Australia</i> , 2003.
	Skilbeck, M. and Connell, H., <i>Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers: Australian Country Background Report</i> , Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.
	Smith, D. L., <i>Learning, Teaching and Innovation: A Review Of Literature On Facilitating Innovation In Students, Schools and Teacher Education with Particular Emphasis on Mathematics, Science and Technology</i> , Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.
<b>2004</b>	Department of Education, Science and Training, <i>National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership Implementation Strategy Report: Report to the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training</i> , Allen Consulting Group, Melbourne, 2004.
	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs, Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce, <i>Nationally aligning graduate level teaching standards</i> , unpublished survey, 2004.
	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs, Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce, <i>Pre-Service Teacher Education in Australia</i> , unpublished, June 2004.
	Skilbeck, M & Connell, H, <i>Teachers for the Future: The changing nature of society and related issues for the teaching workforce</i> , A report for the Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce of the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, September 2004.
<b>2005</b>	Department of Education, Science and Training, <i>Teaching Reading, National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy</i> , Report, December 2005.
<b>2006</b>	Department of Education, Science and Training, <i>Attitudes to Teaching as a Career: A Synthesis of Attitudinal Research</i> , Canberra, May 2006.
<b>2007</b>	<i>Top of the Class: Report on the Inquiry into Teacher Education</i> , House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Vocational Training, February 2007