

NEEDED:

21st century
educational leaders for
21st century challenges

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LEADERSHIP, REDUCED TO its barest essentials, is about the exercise of influence to bring about change, and preferably improvement, in people's lives.

The need for concerted educational leadership in Australia is greater in 2007 than it has been for several decades. But so is the opportunity. I say this for two reasons.

First, there exists across the Australian educational landscape a growing mindset that the quality of school outcomes is shaped significantly by factors other than socio-economic-cultural considerations, and can be heightened if particular school-based variables are supported and encouraged⁽¹⁾. It is essential that we consolidate and affirm this mindset since it can be lost far more easily than it has been gained⁽²⁾.

Second, with a watershed federal election looming, the major political parties have developed and articulated highly focused educational proposals. Such a definitive national focus on education is quite rare — I can think of no comparable situation since the Whitlam-initiated constitutional adjustments and associated compensatory educational reforms of the 1970s.

Herein lies what I regard as a truly unique and compelling challenge for those Australian educators who would call themselves leaders and who aspire to exercise influence for the betterment of their communities and nation: *to accept that there is merit in each of the major education proposals that is being asserted by the major*

political parties and to develop educational responses to them, both singly and through aggregation.

To do so will require intellectual depth, because of the complexity of the underlying polarisation; moral courage, because of the need to set aside personal convictions and assume an apolitical stance; and professional trust, because of the need for new forms of relatedness. To the extent that we are successful in this highly challenging pursuit, we can claim to be exercising the distinctive form of leadership that the 21st century will almost certainly require of all of its institutions .

21ST CENTURY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP – A THUMBNAIL SKETCH.

Since the dawn of leadership research in US universities in the early 1950s, scholarly inquiry has been dominated by analysis of the behaviours of authority-based individuals from within four groups — military officers, political figures, corporate giants and school principals. The numerous leadership models that resulted until as recently as the mid-1990s — managerial/strategic, transformational/inspirational, moral/ethical and educative/advocacy, for example — all tended to emphasise the importance of individual capability in relation to contextual factors.

With the advent over the past decade of the dual concepts of learning organisations and knowledge-based economies, however, it has been accepted that successful leadership cannot be restricted to either individuals or offices. Rather, leadership for 21st century economies and workplaces must be able to utilise the diversity of work-groups to create new forms of meaningful knowledge and to institutionalise processes that ensure organisational quality of life⁽³⁾.

With this emerging construct of leadership in mind, I pose the question of how the Australian education community might capitalise on the education platforms of the major political parties as a watershed federal election looms.

THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE.

Both major parties assert that education is both a social and an economic issue. Both acknowledge that high quality teaching is a shared responsibility of governments and the teaching profession. But that is the limit of their apparent similarities.

The Government's core education proposals can be viewed as twofold⁽⁴⁾. First is a commitment to national consistency in curricula, particularly in such basics as literacy, numeracy and mainstream history. Education Minister Julie Bishop has indicated that the implementation of national curricula will be accompanied by an increased emphasis on systematic student assessment, and the possible creation of school league tables. Second is the extension of WorkChoices into the nation's education systems through the introduction of a performance pay scheme for highly accomplished teachers, presumably in conjunction with a form of AWAs managed by school principals.

Of immediate relevance to the Government's policy platform is that there is no education system in the world where performance pay has been successfully implemented on a sustained basis. Moreover, research shows conclusively that overall (ie, schoolwide) student achievement is closely linked to shared professional learning and

collegial trust⁽⁵⁾. It can therefore be argued that it is difficult to see how contractual arrangements and pay schemes that are based predominantly in a concern for individual teacher accomplishment would enhance the quality of the nation's schools. It is important also to keep in mind, however, that the concepts of *profit sharing* and *group incentives* have been shown to raise productivity levels and to increase teamwork and knowledge sharing in instances where active employee participation is valued, practised and rewarded⁽⁶⁾.

Second, in response to questions about the well-known effects of individual rewards systems on teacher trust and collegiality, it might be asserted that such problems can be largely overcome if one simple question is addressed in whatever reward system is devised:

How has your professional leadership, management, teaching and conviction helped to make our school a more effective centre of learning for all?

Also of utmost importance is that the salaries of Australia's most experienced teachers, no matter how dedicated, expert or professional they may be, are currently relatively low when compared with the top end of salary scales for other professional groups. Relatedly, retention rates for experienced teachers are distressingly low and particular difficulties are being encountered in attracting teachers to maths and sciences, disadvantaged areas, and to working with children with learning and behavioural difficulties.

Thus, it could well be argued that we owe it to those professional teachers whose pedagogical excellence and leadership are sustaining quality in the nation's schools to find ways to significantly increase their workplace rewards generally and their remuneration levels more specifically. On this criterion, if no other, it could be considered self-defeating to reject out of hand the Government's performance pay policies. Thus, two questions emerge:

What forms of compensation systems would enable highly accomplished teachers to receive extrinsic rewards at the same time as sustaining and nurturing productive working relationships in our schools? What sort of leadership would be needed to support the successful implementation of such schemes?

The Federal Opposition's education proposals are framed in the context of espoused priority concerns for global competitiveness and minimisation of disadvantage⁽⁷⁾. Accordingly, the Opposition has indicated that two initiatives in particular will drive the educational agenda of an elected Labor government — increased school and student assessment to facilitate early intervention and provide a basis for sustained high achievement; and needs-based funding as a derivative of substantial increases in the national education budget.

Given the relative decline of education funding in Australia over the past decade by international standards, Labor's education finance platform can be regarded as defensible. However, it should be kept clearly in mind that authoritative research over the

past two decades has established that the provision of additional educational finance to schools will not in and of itself result in higher levels of school outcomes⁽⁸⁾. It is only when those inputs are used to enhance professional learning and school-wide pedagogical processes that heightened student achievement is likely to occur on a systematic basis⁽⁹⁾.

Given the OECD-PISA research-based insights regarding the relatively low achievement levels of the lowest performing 20-25 per cent of Australian students⁽¹⁰⁾, Labor's proposal for high quality assessment — both diagnostic and normative — can also be regarded as responsible and forward-thinking. However, it should be remembered that high quality assessment does not necessarily guarantee high quality teaching and learning, nor does it necessarily provide an explanation of why Australian schools have historically been less successful with low achievers than with high and average achieving students.

The complexity of the issue of needs-based funding should also be kept in mind in assessing the Opposition's educational platform. Mechanisms for determining genuine need and, in particular, for ensuring that funds distributed on a needs basis are deployed productively can be said to have defied, to some extent, the best efforts of not only our education systems but other Australian social and welfare agencies as well. The continuing sad plight of Australian Indigenous communities stands as stark testimony to that regrettable fact.

Thus, the key questions that emerge from the Opposition's Education platform might be summed up as follows:

How might we employ equity principles and increased educational funding to facilitate needs-based school development schemes while also ensuring that the overall educational standards of Australia's schools are world class? What sort of leadership would be needed to support the successful implementation of such schemes?

It is my position that we should not expect Minister Bishop or Shadow Minister Smith to take responsibility for what are essentially strategic, moral and intellectual issues for professional educational leaders. The responsibility for teasing out the proposals that they have developed, and for testing their pragmatic potential, goes with the territory of educational rather than political leadership.

While each set of propositions poses particular opportunities as well as difficulties, the critical challenge is to postulate what might ensue from their amalgamation and to devise leadership processes that would be up to the task of implementing those amalgamated solutions. Specifically:

What educational blueprints would meet the challenges of a scenario in which schools are provided with significant additional resources, to be distributed with a priority concern for equity as well as generic educational achievement, and where those professional staff who lead successful improvement processes will be eligible for extrinsic rewards? How might those blueprints be effectively implemented in Australia's schools?

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

At the risk of gross oversimplification, solutions to this compelling challenge may indeed be within our grasp.

Thirty years of Australian experience with compensatory education, reinforced by huge projects in North America and Europe, have taught us a great deal about the dynamics of successful needs-based funding. Highly credible international student assessment mechanisms are now available for both diagnostic and norming purposes. Numerous approaches to school-based development have been trialled and evaluated in Australia and elsewhere and used to develop generic models of quality-assured school improvement.

Relatedly, the specific functions of school principals in successful school revitalisation — visioning, building school identity, creating organisational cohesion and effectiveness, developing distributed leadership systems — are relatively well understood. Additionally, the concept of teacher leadership has been explored in all Australian education systems over the past two decades and has been found to have widespread appeal, particularly when treated with sufficient flexibility to acknowledge the full complexity of teachers' professional and personal lives⁽¹¹⁾.

Finally, the delicate concept of teacher success can (and should) be extended beyond outmoded definitions of individualism to include schoolwide and team-based professional action.

The AEU, as an organisation and through its membership, has a critically important leadership role to play in the Australia that is emerging. The AEU itself has the capacity to influence public, political and professional opinion on educational issues that are fundamental to Australia's well-being in the 21st century. AEU members have the opportunity in their schools and collegial groups to assess the major educational platforms that are being proposed and to ascertain how one plus one might be synergised to make three. In so doing they will be demonstrating what "new knowledge" can mean, as well as how it can be created. They will also be helping to create shared understanding and agreement where polarised arguments currently dominate. And they will be demonstrating that vital forms of 21st century Australian innovation require the engagement of the educator professions if they are to materialise.

The 2007 federal election campaign has therefore brought into focus unique educational challenges. It requires leadership that is grounded in new forms of intellectualism, moral courage and professional relationships. It is difficult but it is possible.

NOTES

1. The landmark research of Newmann and Wehlage, featuring the dual concepts of *authentic pedagogy* and *professional learning community*, is fundamental to this point. See Newmann, F and Wehlage, G (1995) *Successful School Restructuring: A report to the public and educators* Madison, WI: Center on Organisation and Restructuring of Schools.
2. The US *Coleman Report* (1966) led to a widespread belief that "schools basically don't make a difference to children's life chances". It took 30 years (until Newmann and Wehlage's research in 1995) for this

mindset to be seriously challenged. In the meantime, immeasurable harm was done to the image and status of the teaching profession internationally, including Australia.

3. Renowned international change theorist Peter Drucker has stated that, in successful knowledge societies of the 21st century, schools will be the key institution and professions such as teaching will constitute a "leading class". See Drucker, P (1994) "The Age of Social Transformation", *Atlantic Monthly* 27, 53-80.
4. My syntheses of Federal Minister Julie Bishop's policy proposals are based primarily on: (1) Bishop, J, (7 February, 2007) *Preparing children to succeed – standards in our schools*. Canberra: National Press Club; (2) Bishop, J, (1 February, 2007) *Education and Economic Growth*. Address to the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia, Brisbane.
5. See, for example, Newmann and Wehlage (above) and Newmann, F, King, B, and Youngs, P (2000) *Professional Development to Build Organisational Capacity in Low Achieving Schools: promising strategies and future challenges*. Madison, WI: Center on Organisation and Restructuring of Schools.
6. See Silva, G (1998) *An Introduction to Performance and Skill-based Pay Systems*, International Labor Organisation. www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/actemp/papers. See also Ingvarson, L, Kleinhenz, E and Wilkinson, J (2007) *Research on Performance Pay for Teachers*, Melbourne: ACER.
7. My syntheses of Shadow Minister Stephen Smith's policy proposals are based on (1) his presentation, *The Future of Australian Education*, Yeronga State High School Auditorium, Brisbane (7 March, 2007); (2) Smith, S (February, 2007), *Matter of Public Importance: Education*. Canberra: Parliament House.
8. See, for example, Hanushek, EA (1995) "Moving beyond spending fetishes", *Educational Leadership*, 53, (3), 60-64. See also Crowther, F and Lewis, M (1999) *Managing Resources in Postcorporate Educational Organisations: A preliminary framework*. Toowoomba: Leadership Research Institute, University of Southern Queensland.
9. See Newmann and Wehlage, above. For relevant Australian research see Crowther, F, Hann, L and McMaster, J, (2001) "Leadership", in Cuttance, P, *School Innovation: Pathway to the knowledge society*. Canberra: DETYA, 123-142.
10. OECD (2004). *Learning for Tomorrow's World. First Results from PISA, 2003*. Paris. See especially Chapter 5, "The Learning Environment and the Organisation of Schooling", 208ff.
11. For a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of successful teacher leadership see Murphy, J, (2005) *Connecting Teacher Leadership and School Improvement*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.