

Keynote address

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Acknowledgments

- Traditional owners, the Ngunnawal people
- Clive Haggar, Acting Chair, Australian National Schools Network
- Distinguished guests and colleagues

Introduction

I am very pleased to be among people who are so passionate about the future of education in this country.

Any discussion about school reform and ensuring successful change should at the outset acknowledge the great work being done by the Australian National Schools Network over many years to innovate and share best practice among stakeholders so that all children benefit.

I would like to commend your contribution. I would also like to thank you for providing a very timely opportunity to discuss how we are travelling in implementing the education revolution—the brave undertaking this country embarked upon two years ago.

Albert Einstein said, “No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it. We need to see the world anew.”

The education revolution is Australia’s way of seeing the world of education anew.

It was borne out of the recognition that we face some ‘problems’—or we might say challenges—with education in Australia today.

One of these is equity.

Another is universal quality.

Some worrying indicators tell the story: our performance is not improving over time relative to other countries, and in particular, there has been a significant decline in our mean scores in reading literacy between PISA 2000 and 2006¹; Indigenous students are performing well below their non-Indigenous peers in literacy and numeracy; Year 12 completion rates are flat-lining and there are high levels of underperformance linked to disadvantage.

¹ COAG Reform Council: NEA: Baseline Performance Report for 2009

We know that as this century unfolds the pace of change and the challenges of competing in a global marketplace will only intensify.

Hence, our growing consciousness here in Australia that in education we'd reached a tipping point, that there was an imperative for change, not just in the pursuit of 21st century ready skills and nation building for economic survival, but as a moral response, to address the disadvantage that flows to a child from the lack of a good education.

Thus the stage was set for a new government to prosecute a progressive agenda, a mandate for change with education as its centrepiece.

In committing our efforts to transformative change, there are a couple of questions which I think should really focus our consciousness as we go forward with a bold program of reform.

And these are: *'What do we want from our schools for our children?'*; and *'What do our children want from their education?'*

I think essentially what parents want for their children is that they emerge from their schooling with the key skills for life and learning which enable them to step to their futures with confidence, equipped to face the twists and turns of a changing world, to realise their unique talents, and positively influence the lives of others.

And what should children of the 21st century want and expect from their education?

A Year 12 student, Sophie Palavestra, very eloquently expressed this a couple of years ago when speaking at the opening of the national forum, *Engaging Young Australians with Asia*.

This was her view of the future:

"Most of all, I want to be wise about what to believe about me and my world. I want to know what the wisest people on earth believe. I want to know how to be a success with my life...my school teachers are very important to me because they tell me how to deal with the future.

Sophie went on to ask:

"Do you know what to teach me? Do you know what I need to learn? Are you confident that you can design a curriculum which will equip me to live in my world? My name is Sophie and I am a student in one of your classrooms today."

So, therein lies the task—to impart wisdom, life skills, to set children up for success so they can deal with their futures—and we must bear that firmly in mind as we embark on our pursuit of education change.

International context

Across the world, there are of course billions of Sophie's generation with the same expectations.

Their countries recognise this, they recognise the role of education as the great equaliser, as the great enabler. Many are making massive investments in education and are rethinking, sometimes quite radically, their approaches.

In the UNESCO space, an agreement has just been signed between the organisation and the Commonwealth Secretariat to work together, share information and expertise to boost the education sector and progress towards major global targets. Particular focuses include teacher quality and the development of appropriate policies in striving to meet the goals of *Education for All*. This is against a context in which 27 million children in Commonwealth countries are out of school.

A quick international scan will show great commonality of reform priorities and challenges to address participation and achievement gaps: standards, assessment, teacher quality, overcoming barriers to access and learning; access to and use of technology; innovation in delivery.

As you know, the OECD has been comparing the effectiveness of educational policies and reforms for many years.

Speaking at an Education Ministerial Round Table at UNESCO in Paris last month, the OECD Secretary-General said that it is no longer enough for national education policy makers to gauge education improvement against their own past outcomes—in a globalised, competitive world we must be mindful of the improvements being made in other countries and how these are being effected.

And we have much to learn from each other in overcoming active resistance to change in educational policy. *“We need to empower the future generations with new tools to produce a better world; to adapt our educational policies to a new, more competitive and globalised reality; to identify our leads and lags, compare our know-how and prepare to learn from each other through enhanced multilateral cooperation.”*²

As we consider this new world order and what it means for us in an Australian context, we must also be mindful of holding on to those educational fundamentals that are valid and valued, those educational touchstones that speak to our country’s diversity and unique place on the global stage.

And we have to harness our collective strengths. There is no way we will achieve what we set out to do unless we work together. As the Secretary-General said, we have to learn from each other.

We must work together

At the Commonwealth level, we know that ‘top down’ approaches to reform cannot be the sole driver of change; we must work collegially and collaboratively, we want to consult and connect with the “experts”, and by that I mean our teachers, principals and parents who

² Education for the future – promoting changes, policies and practices – Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary General, delivered at the Education Ministerial Roundtable, UNESCO, 10/10/09

share the huge responsibility and the huge privilege of daily shaping the minds and lives of children in their care.

And people like yourselves in the ANSN—thought leaders, thought provokers, practitioners and professionals, who do such great work in advancing new ideas and best practice in a collaborative way—are absolutely vital to realising the education revolution's vision of delivering every child, every where, every year, a quality education.

New ways of working

As you know, the education revolution has many components. And while much of the commentary has been on historic investments and infrastructure—those things that are tangible, auditable and quantifiable, the education revolution is just as importantly about 'intangibles', things that are happening on the ground and among stakeholders.

What we are seeing as a result is the development of entirely new ways of working to address those more intractable issues where progress has stalled, where a 'blind eye' has been turned.

It is here especially that we must have the courage to recognise our shortcomings and strive to do things differently to better serve the children of the 21st century.

Witness to date the strides that have been made on things that have been in the too hard basket for decades—such as national curriculum, assessment and reporting, Indigenous achievement, and Commonwealth/state relations.

But before I begin to discuss these specifics, let me first place the 'heroes' of our revolution, and by that I mean the foot soldiers, represented by our teachers, at the forefront of our discussion.

Because only through teachers' best efforts and by best supporting them, will we achieve the positive change we are striving for.

Teachers as enablers

You have already heard from the Deputy Prime Minister on many of the steps being taken through the National Partnership on Teacher Quality to recognise, reward and support teachers and foster great leadership in our schools.

We all know the indisputable evidence which exists about the crucial role our teachers play in setting our children up for success in the future.

We are all aware of some great examples of the power of principals and teachers to effect dramatic results and inspire change.

The interesting and intangible thing is that although we've all had great experiences of great teachers it is still very hard to quantify what characteristics make up a good teacher, what the shared workforce 'DNA' might be.

If I could take my 'bureaucrat's' hat off for a moment, I'd like to reflect on my other life as a teacher, when I worked for many years in schools in New South Wales.

Programming represented my best judgment about what activities I thought the students in my care in schools in south western and western Sydney would benefit most from. With one eye on the syllabus and with due regard to what I knew about each student I crafted a thematic unit of work or set a focus question which enabled me to work with my class in learning.

In thinking about my own practice and experiences, there are some things I think you cherish and some things that are probably quite forgettable.

To this day, there are books and other materials I have held on to which have personal and professional importance for me alone.

A stranger viewing my bookcase would think it's an idiosyncratic, juxtaposed collection, but it speaks volumes to me and what I hold dear from my teaching career.

The thing is, teaching is personal, the classroom is your own domain, you want to make a difference, and the responsibility you have for those children in your care is inescapable.

Any good teacher, I'm sure, aspires to be "the one" their students look back on as having inspired them to go on to greater things; you want to have made a positive imprint on the characters and the future careers of all the children who have come into your classroom.

But while teachers strive for this aspirational goal, we have to acknowledge the reality of their day, which sees many of them trying to meet competing demands—as disciplinarian, caregiver, counsellor and so on—which take them away from their core business of teaching.

Again, this comes back to support for teachers and workforce planning—perhaps we should have more of a focus on staffing structures, which might include para professionals, teacher aides and psychologists, with a view to providing wrap around services that address children's broader needs.

These are the kinds of things the National Partnership will enable us to explore.

While we will do our best to research, identify and foster those qualities that will improve teacher quality, we will also work, through the teacher quality partnership, to re-establish that teaching is a great profession and a great calling for the best and brightest of our university graduates and back up these sentiments with appropriate remuneration structures, professional development standards and support for all our teachers.

Now let me turn to the broader education revolution landscape and how we are addressing our challenges of equity and universal quality.

Equity

First let's consider equity.

If we are to have every child on the agenda always there is no longer any room for a 'one size fits all' approach. We have to be more innovative and more targeted in what we do.

Core to this is the Government's establishment of and investment in three Smarter Schools National Partnerships. These mark a significant departure from traditional ways of doing business in the education space between the Commonwealth and jurisdictions.

Now if these partnerships are to live up to their name, they must seriously ask the question, '*What do we expect and want from our schools and teachers in the 21st century?*', and ensure they provide the means to deliver the answer.

If we look at the demands of modern day life, we have to acknowledge that schools now more than ever have an important role beyond ensuring the attainment of academic results.

We expect schools to address the holistic needs of the child, and with growing family dysfunction in some areas a sad reality of contemporary society, we have to acknowledge societal factors that impact on children's wellbeing and receptiveness to learning; we have to acknowledge the impact of the productivity and participation agenda, together with economic realities, which put pressure on parents and family structures.

So schools, and teachers, have to be very smart indeed in addressing these challenges.

As the implementation plans for the Smarter Schools partnerships unfold, what we are seeing is an undoing of the patterns of the past to effect real change in the future.

The traditional divide between Commonwealth/state/territory relations is being replaced by agreements to share best practice and to ensure that regardless of which state or territory a student lives in, they have access to the best possible support based on real evidence of what works.

The three national partnerships which have been entered into are structured with one or two lead states working with others to achieve specific outcomes. Binding bilateral agreements to effect change have been struck which comprise a mix of facilitation and reward funding, payable on delivery of agreed targets.

National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy

The National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy will focus on the foundational essentials—literacy and numeracy, and will foster stronger school leadership and the effective use of student performance information to identify where students need support.

Our aim is to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students, with a priority focus on primary aged students who are at risk of falling behind, especially Indigenous students.

Ultimately, we hope that this national partnership will contribute towards the ambitious COAG target to halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.

To me, one of the very important and very exciting outcomes we are beginning to see from some of the literacy and numeracy pilot projects which have been rolled out, is that from this new collaborative approach we have the potential to do things that are systemic and sustainable.

Instead of having isolated school by school projects that might have resulted in benefits for one particular school or region, we now have people working together on the design of the reforms so that everybody has ownership of them and can benefit from them—and it is from that that you get the systemic transformation; it is from that that we begin to build bridges—within schools, to parents as partners in their children's education, and to communities—somewhat like the ANSN model is doing in building bridges among collaborators.

This, I suggest, is the way of the future.

NP for low socio-economic status school communities

Another partnership being rolled out that I have high hopes for with regard to addressing inequity is the *National Partnership for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities*. This is designed to support education reform activities in up to 1500 low socio-economic status schools around the country.

While aiming to improve student engagement and educational attainment, this partnership will also focus on student wellbeing, entrenched disadvantage and dysfunction.

A key aspect is the development of extended service schools whereby schools will be encouraged to work in partnership with families, local communities and businesses to offer wrap around support for students and their families.

By gathering evidence of what works through this partnership in addressing families' social and economic difficulties, we hope to be able to identify better intervention strategies that we can use to help other schools who are not directly participating in the partnership.

Indigenous initiatives

Now let's look at the work going on to improve Indigenous outcomes.

As you know, all governments through COAG have made historic commitments to Close the Gap for Indigenous Australians.

Equity in education is central to the effort, with the reform agenda based on the central conviction that underachievement is not an essential by product of disadvantage.

All ministers have agreed to progress an Indigenous Education Action Plan based on six pillars for success that have already had proven results:

- readiness for school;
- engagement and connections;
- attendance;
- leadership, quality teaching and workforce development;
- literacy and numeracy; and
- pathways to real post school options.

The next step is to undertake broad consultation on the plan with stakeholders and the community.

Core to our approach to Indigenous children is translating what works more broadly to other schools. Transparency measures will be critical to establishing an evidence base and a clear line of sight between the targets that have been set and the strategies that have been put in place to achieve those targets. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will also be critical to the effort.

Quality

Now let's look at the quality side of the revolution.

In the often heated and ideologically driven debates about education, it is easy to lose sight of what matters most—which is what happens between students and teachers in real classrooms every day, for nearly 200 days every year.

So, what do we want for those students and teachers?

For a start, I would suggest modern, up to date classrooms, facilities and resources appropriate to schools of the 21st century and the digital age.

Witness the physical and virtual infrastructure being rolled out through the Building the Education Revolution, the largest capital infrastructure program in the country's history, Trade Training Centres and the Digital Education Revolution.

We'd also want students to be challenged and engaged by a curriculum which inspires a love of learning, motivates in them a desire to do their best always, and sets them up for success in whatever post-school pathway they choose.

We want teachers and school leaders to have the professional and pedagogical skills and support they need to focus on students' needs and make a positive difference to the lives of each and every child in their care every one of those 200 days of the school year.

How do we meet these criteria?

Firstly, let's look at national curriculum.

National curriculum

The development of Australia's national curriculum signifies our intent to set out the best possible educational roadmap for our country which responds to the complexities of internationalisation, the speed of knowledge production and the challenges of diversity.

It must provide the blueprint for us to ensure that Sophie's generation, and those that come after her, are set up to succeed.

To ensure rigour and quality, we must look beyond our horizons in order to develop a curriculum that is world class and is referenced against international best practice.

In response to Sophie's questions, *do we know what we need to teach; do we know what she needs to learn*; we need to clearly articulate what students need to know and be able to do as they progress through the schooling sector; we need to define what teachers teach; and from that, we need to assess how well the students learn what they are supposed to have learnt.

Given the billions of dollars that are invested in education we must have access to tangible evidence of our success or otherwise in getting desired outcomes.

One important point I'd like to make is that while we are striving for rigour in the curriculum that does not equate to rigidity, to 'one size fits all'. Importantly, we want teachers to be able to be innovative, to look at the program of work required and design teaching and learning activities that will best engage their students and meet their needs.

As well as having a curriculum grounded in the core fundamentals, we must consider the surrounding and emerging context, the expectations of parents as to what their children should be learning about, the imperatives of what students must know in a dynamic, constantly changing world, a world in which you have to run just to stay on the same spot.

To ensure this, we need to build flexibility within a given curriculum framework.

Teachers need to be able to discuss, share and evaluate their own ideas and experiences and reflect on their own practice.

They also need flexibility in the classroom to cater for individual differences, to employ a repertoire of teaching strategies, to account for the individual needs of the school community, and engage with and include the use of information and communication technologies.

Which brings me to a discussion of:

The digital education revolution.

The implementation of the Digital Education Revolution is a recognition that if a revolution in education is indeed to be achieved, then there must be a revolution in the way education is delivered.

In a very potent way, IT opens the door to fundamentally rethinking our current approach to education.

Aside from the obvious benefits that flow from switching schools into the digital age, another benefit of the DER is that it helps to level the playing field between outcomes in richly resourced schools and those less advantaged.

As you know, the use of ICT in the classroom has tremendous potential for us to reinvent the traditional model of education, that is, one teacher standing in front of a class delivering a lesson or supervising one activity for a class of 25 children.

This has survived over decades not because it's a superior pedagogical model but because it is expedient.

Through the creative use of technology in the classroom, teachers no longer need to be straitjacketed into and frustrated by having to 'teach to the middle'—there is capacity to cater for all levels of the skills spectrum simultaneously through individual learning plans.

For teachers, the emergence of collaborative technologies and online communities mean that they no longer need to work in isolation—classroom practice can be opened up to the world and teachers and students can get direct global access to the best support, educational tools and resources available.

For now, let's have a look at some concrete ways of how teacher practice might be supported and assisted, within the context of the new national curriculum.

For example:

- Teachers will be able to publish lesson plans and other resources they have created by combining resources such as Learning Federation content and their own insights into how to teach a particular concept so that all their colleagues can benefit.
- A teacher seeking advice from colleagues about how to implement a particular element of the National Asian Languages strategy will be able to search a database of lesson plans illustrating all elements of the strategy and be able to participate in on-line mentoring programs operated by national professional bodies. Across the spectrum, they will also have on-line access to world class experts in key curriculum areas in Australian Universities.
- A teacher seeking guidance on the precise meaning of any element of the national curriculum will be able to find resources illustrating that element and only that element immediately and to integrate those resources directly into on-line lesson plans.

- A teacher seeking to diagnose student competencies in any element of the national curriculum will be able to quickly find assessment resources directed to that particular element of the curriculum and to seamlessly provide those resources to students in his or her class.
- A teacher seeking to compare a particular students' NAPLAN performance with his or her assessment of that student's literacy and numeracy skills as demonstrated in small scale in-class assessments will be able to do so online and in real time.

Assessment and reporting

Once we have a national curriculum in place we will of course need to ensure alignment between curriculum, assessment and reporting. Access to good, transparent data is crucial to the quality agenda.

Why? Because only by investing in high quality diagnostic data will we have the means we need to:

- inform teaching and learning
- inform programming and planning
- assist in defining teacher professional learning
- report, communicate and celebrate achievement
- ensure continuity of learning
- assess the effectiveness of intervention strategies, and
- harness evidence to leverage investment.

I think it's fair to say that over the past two years we have made great strides through our efforts with NAPLAN in providing a picture of children's performance across the country.

NAPLAN draws on the very best curriculum expertise in designing and reviewing the test, the very best research knowledge and technical expertise in developing the achievement scale and world class psychometric methods in analysing and reporting the results in a meaningful way for teachers and parents.

As you know, following Ministers' agreement on a framework for publication of comparable information about school performance and context, including comparison of statistically similar schools, there has been intense and passionate community debate.

As someone who has been involved in performance reporting and assessment for many years it won't surprise you when I pose the questions.

If we don't have transparency in reporting how do we know that we are hitting the mark with what we teach and how we teach it? How are we going to know what difference we are making, what outcomes are being achieved?

From the government's perspective, NAPLAN reporting will enable a comprehensive, reliable picture of how different schools in different communities perform that will foster accountability, inform school evaluation, collaborative policy development and resource allocation. It will also help the community to understand and support the public investment in education.

Community debate about the fairness and adequacy of government funding of public and non-government schools will for the first time be supported by genuinely comparable data on schools whichever state or territory they are in and whoever they are owned and operated by.

In my view, while there might be risks associated with using published information to assess schools, this is not to deny the usefulness of school-level educational performance indicators involving student achievement data, provided that relevant contextual factors have been taken into account and that the statistical uncertainty associated with the estimates obtained are displayed prominently to aid meaningful interpretation of the data.

This is a challenge that can't and won't be put in the too hard basket. We have expert minds on the job who I am confident will find robust and defensible ways of distinguishing the misleading information so that it does not contaminate that which is good and valuable, so that it is complementary to all the other factors that inform decision-making by parents, teachers and policy makers.

The way forward as collaborators

I would like to conclude with a few brief words about the new operating context we are all working in as a result of changes to the Commonwealth/state architecture.

The outcome is a very different operating environment from what we are used to, with new financial arrangements focused on output/outcome measurements, with payments related to specific commitments, reform actions and the results that are achieved.

The Government has underlined this fundamental relational change by saying it is determined to use the architecture of Federation to bring about reform through "intense and demanding collaboration".³

Perhaps we need to look no further for evidence of this than the two-day conversation with principals convened by the government last week to have an open and yes, at times, "intense", discussion about the reform agenda and how we can work together to deliver better outcomes for our children.

Of course, we didn't agree on everything, but the energy, the 'buzz' and the sense of working together that this created just goes to show that we need more laboratories of thought and discussion like this, we need great collaborators, for example, through the

³ Gillard – Fraser Lecture: *A new progressive reform agenda for Australian Schools*, May 2008

auspices of agencies like the ANSN, to enable sharing, connecting, researching, reporting and learning among diverse stakeholders to achieve common goals.

We are all passionate about education, and I feel privileged to work among people who are 'change ready'. I look forward to more of this kind of collaboration between governments, practitioners, professional networks and those at the coal face as the education revolution unfolds.

Conclusion

To wrap up, having begun with a quote from an eminent physicist, I would like to leave you with a quote from an eminent professor. It is by Hank Levin, Professor of Education at Columbia University.

“Those children that parents send to us, are the only ones they have,” he said. “They don’t have another reserve set at home, to send us if we make a mistake with the first set.”

I think this is a very salient reminder to all of us with a role in education—professionals, policymakers, practitioners and critical friends—that we don’t get second chances with children’s lives. If we fail in our task we fail our children. It is on our watch that important choices are being made, and actions being taken, that will undoubtedly impact on their futures.

So the education revolution is high stakes for everyone.

Two years in, I think you will agree that there is a great deal of new and imaginative work being undertaken and I thank ANSN for your significant contribution thus far.

As we go forward we must continue to innovate and evaluate, to work together in looking at the ‘why and how’ of what we do with fresh eyes, to identify what works and renew and redouble our efforts to best benefit all children.

Never have we had such a great opportunity to truly effect change. I know you share with me the objective of leaving this and future generations the best educational legacy we possibly can.

I am confident that by working together that is exactly what we will do.

Thank you.