

Cost of Progress

There has been much discourse and discussion in both the media and various levels of government in recent months about Australia's Education Agenda. The ideas and thinking about the way in which we can improve our educational achievement, especially compared to other countries in international tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), vary significantly in their emphasis.

For some, the key to improving educational outcomes is as follows:

1. **Demand a higher level of pre-requisite study by pre-service teachers prior to stepping into the classroom.** *This assumes, of course, that post-graduate study is central to the development of teaching skills, the efficacy of the teacher-student relationship and, therefore, linked to improved educational outcomes for students;*
2. **Lift the standards required to enter the teaching profession and, thereby, restrict access to the profession by those deemed to have lower than acceptable academic standards.** *What educational standards are indeed required? Why do people with higher academic profiles choose other professions – Is this based upon the financial benefits, the perception of the teaching profession in society, their perception of teachers, or some other reason? Perception or reality of workload required? Their own experiences of teachers in their own schooling history? Society demands? The way society refers to and values teachers? What are the essential qualities, skills and attributes that are found in leading teachers?*
3. **Require pre-service teachers to have studied another degree or discipline prior to studying education.** *This should certainly improve pedagogical content knowledge and application of knowledge within a field of interest, but will it improve teaching techniques or the passion/motivation to teach? Will it result in improved educational outcomes for students?*
4. **Ensure that students intending to undertake education courses sit initial entrance tests in both literacy and numeracy.** *What standards will be applied? Are these different if you intend to study primary education versus secondary? Are they different if you intend to specialise in Mathematics or English education? What happens to students who do not pass these standards?*
5. **Improve the standard of teacher preparation courses at universities.** *What aspect of teacher preparation is lacking? How is this assessed and compared between universities? Is there more to being a teacher than knowing your content knowledge and being able to stand in front of a class? What are the necessary intangibles that define a true and genuine teacher? How do we select for these intangibles? Can these be taught or developed, or is it simply that some have these qualities and others do not?*
6. **Increase compliance and expectations related to staff training and development once employed within a school.** *If staff are required to undertake increased training, or further administration for the purposes of compliance, how is the time for these activities provided?*

Are staff removed from classes to undertake these processes? Do they have significantly reduced classes in their first year, thereby presenting a significant expense to employers and the community? How do they improve their practice if they are fully engaged in the practice? How can this be done?

7. **Improve society's image of teachers.** *How often have we heard people say, "I would never be a teacher" – why is this? What sits behind this statement that speaks of the image of teachers held by society, or that of the job they are asked to do? How many times have we heard people we know say, "If I could do anything, I would be a teacher"? Food for thought? How do we as a Nation address this and make teaching the most desirable job one could aspire to do? Is this even possible in Australia?*

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership has done much work in researching and defining the Professional Standards for Teachers in the Knowledge, Practice and Engagement domains that ultimately embrace the role of the teacher. While there has been broad agreement with the many elements of the standards, there remain many aspects that have a significant minority of teachers in doubt or in non-agreement. An excerpt from an AITSL Report, for example, includes the following statements:

- *70% of educators nationally indicated they have a 'fair' to 'expert' knowledge of the Standards;*
- *Pre-Service teachers are the most positive towards the Standards and are more likely to implement them in the next six months compared with other educators;*
- *80% Principals and 63% teachers agree that the Standards will lead to increased student outcomes, broadly defined as student learning, engagement in learning and well-being¹.*

This is not to suggest that good teachers have to agree with all that is contained in the Standards but, then again, such Standards have come from credible research and consultation. It does beg, however, the following questions:

1. *As our knowledge of the teaching and learning principles and practices associated with improved student learning, engagement and well-being further develop and are refined, how do we implement such knowledge and skills in our schools?*
2. *How do we encourage teachers to re-define and consider that which they have long held true and developed within their practice? (even for small incremental developments);*
3. *How do we ensure that staff are committed to ongoing professional development and continual self-improvement?*
4. *How do we change the mindset of established educators who remain largely unaware of these research developments (and perhaps resist change to these Standards)?*

In an already highly demanding and emotionally draining role, there is little doubt that, for some, the thought of such new developments, requirements or externally imposed Standards and compliance can be too much to bear.

There is no doubt that parents and students expect and demand the best educational opportunities, service, attention to detail and commitment to exceptional teaching and learning dynamics – and so they should. The teaching and learning paradigm of the previous decade is no longer appropriate and,

for many schools and educators, this is still yet to be accepted. How can a school possibly improve student outcomes, if even a significant minority of educators cannot appreciate the need for a new teaching and learning paradigm?

A.B. Paterson College is fortunate for the visionary introduction and adaptation of a research-based pedagogy that is as relevant now as it was then. The development of the *Teaching for Understanding* framework has led to the development of many skills, design thinking, and learning attributes that are quite distinctive to our students. In the last two years, the addition of 21st Century Learning Skills and Higher Order Thinking Skills have further extended and refined our approach.

This deliberate re-focusing and specific targeting on teaching and learning dynamics, and the skills and attributes associated with leading teaching practice, resulted in a significant improvement of our academic results, with 2012, 2013 and 2014 being the College's finest years of academic achievement; a commitment to professional learning and development; and the need to incorporate new strategies and practices to increase student achievement.

Such improvement has been achieved without selective entry procedures for enrolment, and is a genuine product of these re-focused efforts on student learning. Such progress does come at a cost, however, and this is found in the increased efforts of our committed staff and, in some situations, the departure of some staff that do not share the vision of seeking such improvements, or see the need for a new skillset. Without the insistence on improved performance, the development of new skills, and the greater engagement and commitment to understanding each student, how can schools meet the needs of their students?

The College will continue to seek improvements in our classroom practice; the further development of our pastoral care programme (which will see a greater relationship with research-based evidence in the coming years); and the development of analytic tools that will assist in the tracking and analysis of long-term student development. These exciting developments will provide an even greater commitment to student well-being, positive education and personal growth, and the opportunity to better understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of students, thereby providing opportunity for improved and more targeted intervention strategies.

Progress cannot be achieved by doing the same thing that we did yesterday, but rather by examining our practice in great detail, looking to evidence from credible research, engagement with professional Standards, and committing ourselves to change. The needs of our students are different now than they were five years ago, and so we too must adapt to provide relevant approaches, new thinking, and develop the new capacities and skills needed in tomorrow's teachers in order to develop tomorrow's students. If we continue to do what we did yesterday, we will not be catering for the future; if we do not embrace the necessary change associated with improving teaching and learning practices and the new skills required of tomorrow's teachers, we can never provide the development or the ongoing continuous improvement that is expected.

The world has changed; the needs and nature of society has changed; education has changed; and so too has the skill set required of exceptional teachers and, as such, so too must we now look to change the training models used to develop exceptional teachers, and potentially examine the attributes of

those called to join the profession (and for them to see this as a vocation – not merely a job). Great teachers are born – they are not made. They possess a soul that is driven to do all they can to help and protect the child, a willingness to accept constructive criticism in the hope of improving their practice, a mentality of not counting the hours but rather one of giving, a commitment to ongoing continuous improvement, an understanding that their best is needed for the future of others and society, and a deep appreciation of the concepts of duty and service.

The changing nature of education is both a welcome and, potentially, a weary journey, but one that genuine and heartfelt educators will continue to embrace, will gain deep satisfaction in, and will be nourished by. The cost of not making such progress for our students and for our society is one that is too great to bear. In the words of George Bernard Shaw – “Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” Educators enable change – they bring hope to the hearts and minds of those entrusted to them, they bring exciting new possibilities, develop new ways of thinking, and openly share their views without indoctrination. Those, who cannot accept change, will never change anything and lose all hope of progress.

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¹ Insights: Evaluation of the Australian Professional Standards April 2015