

Australian Education Union

Policy on National Schooling Consistency

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Australian Education Union notes that education is a national industry. The AEU supports the development and recognition of public schooling as a key provider of social infrastructure for the Australian nation as whole. Schooling should be (and be seen as) a nationally focused activity. However, the AEU firmly believes that variations must and will continue within and between states and territories. Schooling must be locally responsive, flexible and democratic in both the content taught and the way schools operate. In general, coherence and consistency are preferable to commonality.
- 1.2 In general the AEU supports measures to facilitate the mobility of school children and teachers between states and territories. However, this should not be understood as an argument for standardisation of curriculum to a point that constrains the capacity of teachers, schools and systems to be locally responsive. It must be acknowledged that short of regimented uniformity any change of schools, even within the same state or territory must involve some adaptation.
- 1.3 There have been benefits from having different systems trial and implement changes, and in various jurisdictions being able to learn from each other. Uniformity can be rigidity and become a reactionary force. The sheer scale of making Australia-wide reforms may in some instances become an obstacle to change.
- 1.4 At a time when there is an emphasis on the need for schools to be innovative and “take risks”, as noted for instance in the report “Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future”, the implementation of national consistency must be done in a way that does not hinder desirable change.
- 1.5 In moving towards greater national consistency in the schooling system the AEU rejects a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach, or developments which are likely to lead to a net loss of high quality, equitable education for students. While greater national coherence and consistency should be strived for, that should not be at the expense of the quality of education for students or teachers’ conditions.

2. EDUCATION STRUCTURES

2.1 Age divisions and length of schooling

- 2.1.1 The AEU generally supports greater uniformity in educational structures amongst states and territories such as starting age of schooling, length-of schooling and nomenclature of the class/year levels and of groups and types of schools. The AEU therefore calls on school authorities to speedily develop consistency according to educationally acceptable criteria and to develop implementation strategies and supports calls to achieve this by 2010.

- 2.1.2 The AEU recognizes that differing educational histories have led to different organisational structures, such as the creation of Senior High Schools in the ACT and Tasmania. Where such differences are not a barrier to consistency in other matters, there should be no need for conformity.
- 2.1.3 Where greater consistency is generally desirable, AEU policies on curriculum, parent participation and related matters are key criteria for evaluating any specific proposals.

2.2 School Autonomy

- 2.2.1 Quality starts with system quality. Schools are not self standing, but interact with each other, and the framework and context for this interaction is set by the way the system is organised and framed. To achieve quality outcomes, it must encourage cooperation and take clear responsibility for equity and minorities.
- 2.2.2 The centralised systems which have historically characterised the administration of public schooling in Australia arose from Australia's unique geography and demography, and the extent to which they delivered quality teaching in an equitable manner regardless of location and school size should not be underestimated. Advocates of greater school autonomy have failed to articulate how they will continue to deliver this.
- 2.2.3 Advocating greater school self management has become a stock bureaucratic "remedy" to most problems over a period spanning two decades. Despite this, there is very little evidence to support the contention that it is the vital reform that its advocates claim.
- 2.2.4 Despite the length of time for which it has been in vogue, it is presented in a very simplistic way. There is a tendency to adopt the philosophy of "any devolution good, any centralisation bad", rather than any genuine analysis of what are the advantages and disadvantages of moving particular functions either towards or away from centralisation.
- 2.2.5 There are both historical and geographic differences in the extent to which states and territories have implemented school based appointments. Within a supportive framework of broad systemic policies and collaborative rather than competitive inter-school relationships AEU Branches and Associated Bodies will continue to negotiate appropriate changes to the administration of schooling.
- 2.2.6 Within schools, administration should be supportive of dispersed leadership, democratic styles, and the involvement of all teachers (and the wider school community) in decision making.

- 2.2.7 Models of management which focus on professional judgement and the right of teachers to be collegially involved in school decision making, to work together in teams to solve the problems that are real for them, and do not focus on the Principal as an all powerful line manager are those that will be most supported.
- 2.2.8 Models which place principals in positions of almost total authority and total responsibility and then seek to make it easy to remove them if the desired results are not obtained are untenable. They lead to lack of stability in schools, encourage system unresponsiveness and place unnecessary and undesirable stress on schools, their communities and teachers. It is wasteful and poor management. They also result in principals shouldering responsibility for what is essentially outside their control. They seek to absolve the system from responsibility for the equitable provision of education to all and the government from its responsibility to properly resource the system and fulfill its role and duties as an employer.

2.3 SAFER SCHOOLS

- 2.3.1 Schools have long recognized the importance of safe environments for all – students and teachers alike. Students have a right to learn and teachers to teach in an environment free from unreasonable disruption.
- 2.3.2 Many excellent programs are in use in schools all over Australia to deal with issues of bullying. These include peer mediation strategies, restorative justice models, and whole-of-school programs which provide consistency and fairness for students.
- 2.3.3 The AEU supports the establishment of common frameworks for these policies and practices, with appropriate resources to allow their successful implementation. The frameworks must allow for and promote the flexibility needed at the school level to design programs that meet local needs.
- 2.3.4 Such a framework must be more than merely a set of protocols or procedures for handling incidents of violence or bullying.
- 2.3.5 These procedures must include information to parents being made available rapidly and in a constructive manner.
- 2.3.6 Teacher professional development must be provided for both at pre-service and in-service levels.
- 2.3.7 Consideration must be given to additional staff resources, where necessary.

3. CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

3.1 General

- 3.1.1 The similarities between different state or territory curricula are greater than the differences. Various mapping exercises have shown that there is considerable overlap. This being the case, the AEU supports moves towards greater consistency, but with the proviso that where substantial change is indicated in any system such change is educationally sound and makes a clear net improvement, and that the desirable variations noted in 1 above are supported.
- 3.1.2 The AEU supports approaches to reporting, certification and assessment in the compulsory years that are supportive of high quality, democratic curriculum which is in line with relevant AEU policy.
- 3.1.3 Developing curriculum materials nationally, provided they are capable of accommodating differences, makes economic and intellectual sense and is supported. This includes the development of materials which are made available through ICT.

3.2 Senior years and final credentials

- 3.2.1 The AEU notes that the senior secondary curricula (and credentials) reflect fundamentally different educational philosophies in some states and territories. Therefore greater consistency is not possible without confronting those differences. The AEU believes that the higher quality, more democratic curricula (and credentials) existing or being developed in some states and territories should not be jeopardised by pressure for national commonality.
- 3.2.2 The AEU would support a national framework for more consistent senior secondary curricula and credentials if it were in accord with AEU policy. However, the AEU does not support 'work towards a national year 12 certificate' which is not integrated with appropriate reform of curricula as well as credentials.
- 3.2.3 The AEU supports administrative developments which facilitate mobility of students (and recent school graduates) and promote a more nationally coherent system, such as the ENTER score.
- 3.2.4 The AEU does not support the use of international assessment credentials (such as the International Baccalaureate) since it undermines the autonomy of Australian education decision making. Such credentials have the potential to lead to a situation where an external authority has undue control of Australian curriculum and where that curriculum may become inappropriate for Australian students or indeed for Australia as a whole.

3.3 Information and Reporting

- 3.3.1 Education requires the support of the entire community and, in particular, the parents of students enrolled in our schools. It is important that parents have access to timely, meaningful information about their children's progress.
- 3.3.2 Parents also need to know how their children are achieving at school, including on a comparative basis against state-wide benchmarks, in critical areas of their education.
- 3.3.3 Parents are entitled to comprehensive and accessible reports, within system-wide guidelines, on their children's achievements at school.
- 3.3.4 Where these can be made nationally consistent, it is clearly advantageous.
- 3.3.5 However, national benchmarks and national reporting must not become the focus of teaching. The dangers of becoming too test focused and of testing and reporting driving the curriculum have been noted elsewhere.
- 3.3.6 Many of the objectives of national testing can be achieved through sample testing.
- 3.3.7 The AEU will oppose the use of national testing as a means of monitoring and reporting the performance of individual schools and teachers and any forms of reporting which can lead to league tables.

3.4 Values

- 3.4.1 Values are inherent in all aspects of the curriculum. They inform decisions about what constitutes a curriculum – what is included and what is excluded, as well as how it is taught. Educational philosophies reflect values, as do social goals and civic priorities. It is absurd to suggest that schools – any schools - are value-free or “values neutral.”
- 3.4.2 Public schools are open to all regardless of wealth, status, race, disability or religion. This very fact places a consideration upon public schools as to how they deal with questions of tolerance and acceptance that is not as imperative on private and religious schools, where students can be excluded for a range of reasons – behavioural, financial or religious.
- 3.4.3 State and territory departments have worked together to develop an appropriate ‘Values in Education’ framework within which all schools operate. This framework has been agreed by all stakeholders and makes explicit much of what has been occurring in schools for many years.

4. INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

- 4.1 The educational disadvantage suffered by Indigenous students is well documented.
- 4.2 The AEU will be supportive of moves which are likely to lead to the necessary considerable improvements in educational outcomes for Indigenous students.
- 4.3 This requires a focus on both the education of those in remote, mainly Indigenous, communities and on the education of Indigenous students in urban settings.
- 4.4 The issue of racism is inherent to a discussion of Indigenous outcomes.
- 4.5 The AEU supports the mandating of courses on Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander studies in all teacher education courses nationally.
- 4.6 The AEU would support reasonable special measures to increase the number of Indigenous teachers nationally.
- 4.7 The AEU supports measures to ensure that funding for Indigenous students is additional to, not a substitute for, general funding.
- 4.8 The AEU supports the right of local Indigenous communities to have collaborative input into the design of programs to support local needs.

5. QUALITY OF TEACHING

In national debates there is currently an emphasis on the quality of the individual teacher to the exclusion of other important factors. The quality of the individual is a necessary but not sufficient condition for quality outcomes. The overall level of resourcing available to the school is of even greater importance. Other factors that affect the quality of teaching outcomes include teacher mobility, salaries, registration arrangements and supply, and these must also be considered.

5.1 Teacher Mobility

- 5.1.1 The AEU supports national portability of entry requirements to the profession, consistent with AEU policy on teacher registration and professional standards.
- 5.1.2 The AEU supports national portability of entitlements such as long service leave, superannuation, etc. which would allow teachers to move around Australia but remain as a teacher maintaining salary position and status.

- 5.1.3 The AEU supports the development of national benchmarks provided they are based on appropriate remuneration designed to make teaching a financially rewarding career and also supports greater consistency in access criteria and mechanisms for promotion positions.

5.2 Teacher education and registration

- 5.2.1 The AEU supports a more nationally consistent approach to initial teacher education based on a minimum of four years pre-service higher education study (or equivalent), and soundly based criteria for content, course structure and consultative mechanisms. Content should generally include a detailed understanding of the respective system (curricula, system structure, decision-making, role of teachers, etc) considered in the national (and international) context and contrasted with different states/territories. This will facilitate a better understanding of the respective system, ease mobility to other states/territories, and over time would strengthen the professional base of a high quality, more nationally consistent and coherent schooling system. This requires a national approach to curriculum development in teacher education, implemented by the profession and teacher educators, which provides a forum for debate and consideration of guidelines but protects appropriate institutional autonomy in the detail of course design. Teacher education should be in accord with AEU Teacher Education policy.
- 5.2.2 The AEU notes that nearly all states and territories now have a form of teacher registration, and this is supported. National consistency of registration standards and procedures and mutual recognition of this registration is desirable and best achieved through cooperation amongst the respective state and territory statutory bodies.
- 5.2.3 The AEU supports procedures and processes which involve cooperation between jurisdictions in regard to criminal records checks, provided that the procedures of the individual states and territories are themselves acceptable.
- 5.2.4 Teachers de-registered in one jurisdiction should similarly not be allowed to register in another jurisdiction.
- 5.2.5 Criteria for assessing overseas or interstate qualified potential teachers must not undermine the appropriate criteria for assessing locally qualified applicants. Genuine recognition of prior learning is desirable; watering down of entry qualifications is not. Subject knowledge and experience cannot be substituted for pedagogical knowledge.

5.3 Teacher Supply

- 5.3.1 It is imperative that a comprehensive, national approach be taken to the issue of teacher supply. Individual state or territory solutions which ignore the larger agendas will only pass on supply problems to other parts of the country, other parts of the curriculum or worst of all, other children and students.
- 5.3.2 It is therefore essential that state/territory and federal governments work together to overcome the difficulties in attracting new teachers to the profession and retaining those already teaching.
- 5.3.3 Whereas solutions such as offering teaching scholarships and payment of HECS debts may have a positive influence in the short term, unless the underlying reasons for teachers leaving the profession are addressed, there will be little long term benefit.
- 5.3.4 Initiatives could include adjustments to teaching loads; appropriate placement processes; system-wide mentoring programs; and relevant professional development. Initiatives to retain older, experienced teachers in the workforce could include opportunities for mentoring younger teachers; greater availability of part-time work; and changes to superannuation policies to enable flexible work arrangements without detriment to entitlements.

5.4 The National Institute for Quality Teaching and Educational Leadership

- 5.4.1 The NIQTSL has a potential to fulfill a valuable role within the education scene nationally.
- 5.4.2 The AEU is broadly supportive of the four guiding principles and five suggested functions of the NIQTSL outlined in the consultants report to the Minister. However, there must be an emphasis on “complementing not duplicating” existing structures and the functions must be primarily about the coordination and support of existing and desirable activities.
- 5.4.3 The AEU does not envisage the Institute as having regulatory powers.
- 5.4.4 Similarly, the AEU does not see the Institute having a direct relationship with individual teachers and school leaders, except perhaps for the circulation of appropriate materials. The principle interactions will be between the Institute and existing structures, importantly including those which represent teachers.

- 5.4.5 The elements of the Institute must be integrated from the beginning. It should not be perceived as two related but partially separate parts, one dealing with quality teaching and the other with educational leadership.
- 5.4.6 The NIQTSL should be managed by a Board of 15 to 20 representatives of teacher groups.
- 5.4.7 The AEU should be represented on the Board and involved in any advisory structures.

5.5 Professional Standards

- 5.5.1 The AEU strongly supports the development of appropriate professional standards for all involved in teaching in early childhood, school and TAFE. Their development provides an opportunity for professional recognition and public support and will enhance the status of the profession. It is also consistent with AEU support for teacher registration and the maintenance of high level qualifications. The development of professional standards should be in line with the “Professional Teaching Standards: AEU Position”.

6. SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

- 6.1 There are some schools which are experiencing problems evidenced by a range of indicators, such that they are operating under extremely difficult conditions.
- 6.2 There is an obligation on governments to ensure such schools receive the extra support they require in terms of resources and opportunity for professional personal and collective learning.
- 6.3 To brand such schools as “failing” or “poorly performing” adds further to the pressure. There is a real danger that schools catering to students who experience low achievement become “failing” schools. The assumption of “poorly performing schools” itself encourages a blame mentality in which there is rush towards punitive rather than supportive measures. The AEU will actively oppose such models.
- 6.4 The degree of “likeness” amongst schools should not be over estimated. The fact that some schools with apparently similar conditions seem to be doing better should be celebrated and built on, not used as a stick to beat those who are still struggling to find solutions.
- 6.5 The emphasis should shift from one of blame to one of sharing what works and success. The support to such schools should include the opportunity to see how other schools with similar conditions are tackling the problems and finding solutions.

7. CONSULTATIVE AND DECISION-MAKING MECHANISMS

- 7.1 The AEU believes it is essential that the best possible policies are developed and implemented in an open, democratic and efficient manner, involving all relevant parties including the teacher unions as representatives of the Australian school teaching profession.
- 7.2 National consistency is best progressed through MCEETYA taking a lead in a processes of consultation and consideration of the issues, or by holding open inquiries, rather than imposed by the Australian Government using its funding to coerce cooperation to its agenda.
- 7.3 The AEU supports the creation of a Schools Advisory Council to MCEETYA to facilitate the provision of advice which reflects genuine evidence based research and the views of stakeholders.
- 7.4 The AEU deplores the approach of the current Minister Nelson in using confrontational tactics and grabbing media headlines rather than seeking genuine and constructive dialogue with state and territory governments and unions and other teacher organisations. This is characterized by his “Taking Schools to the Next Level” statements.
- 7.5 Whilst the AEU is supportive of much that was in the “Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future” Report (Chaired by Professor Kwong Lee Dow), it is concerned at the model used for this report, which relied on a hand picked committee, with representative organisations playing only an advisory role.