

# States of change

A Council of Australian Governments working group is about to report on how to reinstate quality education and training as critical to the nation's future, writes **Carolyn Rance**.

**H**ow the federal government's promised 'education revolution' will affect teachers in the classroom should be clearer after the Council of Australian Governments meeting in March.

When COAG met in December, less than a month after the federal election, new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said the organisation would be used to speed progress on national priorities such as health, climate change, infrastructure and productivity. Seven working groups were established, including a productivity group chaired by

Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard. It was given the task of developing a plan to strengthen Australia's economic and social foundations through education, training and skills development.

The plan is expected to focus on ways that greater collaboration between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, closer links between educators in the public and private sectors, and partnerships between schools, parents and employers, can deliver what COAG calls "significant improvements in human capital outcomes". Issues for consideration include teacher quality, raising the Year 12 retention rate, improving and expanding technical education, boosting digital technology in education, promoting the study of Asian languages and improving access to early childhood education.

Also on the agenda is progress towards a national curriculum—a government priority already evident in an announcement in January that a National Curriculum Board would be established.

## Your say



**Lois Neagle**  
Specialist Literacy Teacher,  
O'Connor Primary School,  
Kalgoorlie, Western Australia

COAG gives us an opportunity to get back to have input into the education agenda—and get away from politicians telling us how education should come about. We need to make sure we're engaged in this reform, take ownership of our curriculum and develop good numeracy and literacy through integrated curriculum.



**Rob Soward**  
AST, Kings Meadows High  
School, Launceston, Tasmania

The key issue facing schooling at the moment is funding. We need adequate government funding in line with OECD levels. Teachers have some fantastic ideas about curriculum and what schools should look like but those things won't come to fruition unless they're properly funded.

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It will be chaired by professor Barry McGaw, director of the University of Melbourne's new educational research institute and a former director of education for the OECD.

## Vital voices

At the AEU national conference in January, Queensland Teachers' Union president Steve Ryan said it was vital that teachers' voices be heard in all moves to reassess and update the national goals for schooling contained in the 1999 Adelaide Declaration. "It must not be a top-down approach. It must contain teacher input," he said.

Professor Peter Dawkins, secretary of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and a member of the new COAG working group on productivity, chaired a committee for the Council for the Australian Federation, made up of Premiers and Chief Ministers of all states and territories, that reviewed the declaration last year and produced the report *The Future of Schooling*.

He told the AEU conference that the review offered a framework for the new COAG group's deliberations on education, and evidence that collaborative federalism had already helped produce student results recognised as among the highest in the OECD.

The report noted that, in the eight years since the declaration, there had been rapid change and increasing awareness of schooling's importance in building economic



Professor Peter Dawkins (top) and QTU's president Steve Ryan (bottom) at the AEU national conference.

prosperity, fostering social cohesion, and meeting technical challenges. It acknowledged that the quality and performance of teachers and schools were central to the life prospects of all young Australians and national prosperity. An action plan suggested that, as part of any new Commonwealth-state declaration on national goals for schooling, governments should commit to working towards a

national curriculum and developing ways to measure the performance of students, schools and education systems in a more meaningful way.

The report, which also acknowledged the importance of attracting and retaining high-quality people in the teaching profession, called for a review of school leadership development programs. It said the states and territories should "explore innovative approaches to teaching and personalised learning with a view to using education budgets in the most strategic way to support high performance".

Noting "considerable progress" in the harmonisation of teacher registration, the report said all state-based, approved, pre-service teacher education courses aligned to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs' national framework should be recognised nationally.

At the AEU conference, professor Dawkins encouraged teachers to respond positively to the report's recommendations, and to initiatives devised by the COAG working group. He also acknowledged teachers' concerns about the need for increased schools and TAFE funding.

In answer to a question from the floor, he outlined the logic of the human capital reform agenda that Victoria had proposed to COAG. It states that reforms and investments to improve educational attainment would improve economic as well as social outcomes, increasing productivity and labour force participation, leading to increased incomes and tax revenues—especially for the Commonwealth government, thus helping to return the costs of their investments. This is a kind of "virtuous cycle" if the right reforms and investments are made. ●

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## Briefly

- A National Curriculum Board is being established.
- The quality and performance of teachers is central to the life prospects of all young students.
- Spending money on public education is in all governments' best interests.