

Advocates for quality

“Quality Schools—What is the Essential Role of Educators and their Unions?” This was the topic of an international symposium I attended recently with participants from unions in the US, UK, Australia, Canada and Europe.

All these unions believe they have a significant role in improving the quality of education. All have a strong focus on professional development, as well as union training because they are committed to maintaining quality public education systems.

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As educators, we know the characteristics of effective schools, we have been involved in the relevant research, and are committed to achieving appropriate practice.

The US National Education Association has developed a ‘KEYS to Excellence’ program which encourages schools, with support from union organisers, to self-evaluate and select two or three areas for improvement. Teachers believe the union’s role is significant and speak highly of the benefits of community involvement, professional consultation and democratic decision-making. The NEA also finds it a useful recruitment opportunity.

The AEU also has a role in debates around school quality. In conjunction with state and territory organisations, it:

- encourages teachers, through branches and associated bodies, to be active in professional consultation
- assists teachers in ongoing professional learning

- listens to the needs of teachers
- builds campaign networks of parents, community and interest groups
- takes on political parties, responding to attacks on public education.

Education policy is being discussed by bodies including the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the OECD. Unsurprisingly, these bodies are mostly concerned with economics, not quality, public provision. It is essential our views are also heard.

The AEU has established a national reference group to look at ways of improving enrolment in public schools. Obviously, this leads to questions of quality and it is vital that education unions play a lead role in providing answers. The group is considering ways to work with governments, including:

- seeking commitments to public education in ways such as certified agreements and strategic plans
- promoting the establishment of K–12 schools, which remove the stress of transition between levels of schooling when students are often lost to the private system
- developing appropriate education facilities for special-needs students
- building local communities of secondary and primary school clusters
- improving facilities in public schools
- government schools working together to maximise enrolments
- encouraging teachers to advocate for public education
- promoting best-practice PD programs, and
- supporting well-researched pedagogical change with sound implementation.

Educators can judge education policy and practice in a sound educational

context while politicians have entirely different goals and usually short timelines.

In the UK and US, politicians are currently prevailing. Quality is narrowly defined by testing regimes which are having a devastating effect on teachers, students and the quality of curriculum being offered (see ‘Stress test’, page 20).

In Australia we are more fortunate, due to the credible arguments of major stakeholders and the lessons learnt from overseas. For educational arguments to hold their ground against political and economic agendas, it is essential that teachers and unions are involved in research which informs classroom practice.

Those responsible for our public education systems have a lot to learn. Politicians of both major parties are distancing themselves (some faster than others) from aspects of public provision. The recent collusion of state and territory treasurers to cap public sector wages, at a rate barely equivalent to cost of living increases, is an example of short-term economic agendas overriding long-term community concerns about education and health.

A raise between three and three and a half per cent would be an effective pay cut for teachers and fails to address the imminent teacher shortage. It does nothing to attract or retain new entrants into the profession.

Quality cannot be divorced from resourcing issues. Every time governments make knee-jerk responses rather than strategically addressing resources, quality public education is undermined and the future success of our students is threatened. ■

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