

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Fuelling the crisis

“ Brendan Nelson’s portrayal of himself as the saviour of education standards should be of concern to those committed to strong, quality, public education systems.

His appropriation of the role of keeper of improved standards is part of the federal government’s long-term strategy of achieving a user-pays education system. It is well served by the new accountability requirements that have been attached to federal funding.

Under the guise of ‘choice’, the first part of that strategy has seen the shameless redirection of public funds from government schools to non-government schools, without regard for accumulated wealth or the level of fees charged and, in the process, redefining ‘need’ as ‘entitlement’.

The second phase of the strategy is to create and sustain a view that government school education is in crisis.

Nelson continually downplays success stories such as Australia’s performance in international assessment programs. He actively fosters the view that our teachers and schools are failing.

He has generated a raft of inquiries, investigations and reviews aimed at creating and reinforcing an image of a profession in disarray. In doing so, he has placed much of the blame on state governments in a bid to generate community concern and further increase the number of students enrolling in private schools.

As the American educator Alfie Kohn puts it: “Those proponents of a narrowly defined top down standard and coercive pressure type

of accountability have no interest in improving the schools which struggle to meet these requirements. For them, public education is not something which should be made better; it is something from which to be freed.”

Nelson repeatedly implies that parents who send their children to public schools somehow care less about them than those who ‘make sacrifices’ to get a private school education.

The implicit message of the government’s voucher system for parents of students who fail literacy and numeracy benchmarks is that

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their schools are not to be trusted. Instead of improving funding to schools that need it most, the government would rather put public money into the pockets of private individuals and companies without any accountability requirements.

The moves towards micro-management in education, as seen in the specific requirements now attached to federal government funding, largely ignore factors such as student background and the accumulation of disadvantage in some schools. They cut across innovation, diversity and quality relationships and are the antithesis of what is required for successful

participation in the modern world.

They are the first steps towards the introduction of a ‘failing schools’ policy, such as we see in the UK and the US, which declares schools to be ‘failing’ based on student test performances.

As educators, we know that an early casualty of this policy is quality teaching and learning, as more and more schools focus on passing the tests to the detriment of a broad and varied curriculum. The consequence of this is a two-tiered education system, with some schools preoccupied with basic skills, and those serving more affluent communities free to enjoy art, music and literature studies.

Having created and encouraged a view of education in crisis, Nelson must, of course, be seen to have the solution. What this has meant in the UK and US has been the mandating of simplistic solutions, such as requiring a particular reading method to be employed by all teachers, irrespective of the needs of the students they teach. In the lead up to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Nelson has already flagged his preference for a ‘phonics for all’ approach. This could become a requirement attached to next year’s funding...and who knows what else?

It is safe to assume that Nelson’s funding requirements will undermine teacher professionalism, punish teachers and students, and reduce the quality of what is currently happening in schools. ■

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