Safe schools
New schools network supports LGBTIQ students

TAFE
How the private education model failed

Talkback
What I wish I’d learned at uni: teachers

Autism
What’s working in the classroom?

Why we need to stand together for students with disabilities
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6 Most schools need to raise funds for basics
Gonski money is delivering benefits - but only one-third of schools are getting it, AEU survey finds.

13 TAFE: How the private education model failed
Research by the AEU into for-profit VET courses shows that shareholders, not students, are the big winners.

16 A missed opportunity
Australia’s approach to teacher education falls short of high-achieving countries but a government review has wasted a chance to make good.

18 What I wish I’d learned
As the debate continues over how best to train teachers, Australian Educator asked two young teachers and a principal for their thoughts.

20 How pay and status make all the difference
Teacher training has a different look where student achievement is among the world’s best.

28 Putting fairness back into funding
Public schools do the heavy lifting, but are vastly under-resourced for the challenges they face, new research has found.

30 Enabling inclusion
Almost all children with autism spectrum disorder experience difficulties at school but there’s work underway on many fronts to find better ways of teaching them.

35 My best app
Extending learning beyond the classroom with apps for mobiles, tablets and desktop computers.

36 Aiding to learn
Clever computer devices and applications are enhancing the education, and lives, of students with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Regulars
04 FYI
07 From the president
38 Recess – Tales from school
Global unions along with feminist and women’s organisations have demanded to be heard, claiming they’re being sidelined by the UN’s main women’s forum – the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

Following the recent 59th session of the CSW, nearly 1,000 unions, women’s rights and community-based organisations signed a statement expressing their “outrage that we have been excluded from negotiations”.

“In a context of increasing attacks on the human rights of women and girls… we had held up the CSW as a place where we could express our views and influence the development of critical policies that affect our lives and futures,” the statement said.

“Instead, it seems that governments are intent on closing even that door by trying to limit the robust participation of non-governmental organisations [and] restrict recognition of the human rights of women and girls… It seems they are intent on discussing everything about us, without us,” the statement said.

Concerned that they were being restricted to “side events”, the organisations reminded CSW that their delegates attended “to hold our governments to account to the commitments they have made to guarantee gender equality, eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against us and achieve the full realisation of all of our human rights.”

“We come to the CSW to advance progressive policies that, if implemented, will make a meaningful difference in our lives. If the CSW no longer provides us with a forum for policy change and accountability that fully involves us, we will stay at home.”

They are urging member states to make a stronger commitment to women’s economic rights

Education International, the organisation that represents more than 30 million education workers around the world, was one of the signatories to the protest statement.

A school district superintendent has bravely spoken out against a plan by a state governor in the United States to evaluate teachers based on student performance.

New York governor Andrew Cuomo announced in his State of the State address earlier this year that state test scores would count for 50 per cent of a teacher’s evaluation in what Dr Bill Cala, superintendent of the Fairport Central School District, called an “all-out assault on teachers, children and families”.

Cala questioned the validity of the existing state testing regime and said the governor’s new plan would usher in “a whole new wave of unreliable ratings designed to crush teachers, close schools and open the door to his other ‘reforms’ such as lifting the cap on charter schools, creating a tax credit for private schools and [charter schools], and increasing the amount the state gives charters per pupil”.

“Let’s be clear that the governor’s agenda has nothing to do with what is good for kids. Far from it. It is what is good for his financial supporters: the corporations who are making billions of dollars on the tests, the texts, the technology, the corporate professional development and the data collection, retrieval and distribution,” wrote Cala. “As this country gets poorer and poorer and the few get richer and richer the pride of our nation, its public schools, are being disassembled…”
We’re testing the wrong things

Scores on standardised school tests do not correlate with students’ ability to think, according to author Anya Kamenetz.

In her new book, *The test: why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing – but you don’t have to be*, Kamenetz explores 10 arguments against high-stakes standardised tests.

One of those arguments covers the limited nature of the testing in the United States - where students are examined on maths and language alone.

Kamenetz writes that a 2013 study by MIT neuroscientists of nearly 1,400 eighth graders found that standardised tests mostly assess crystallised intelligence or the application of memorised routines to familiar problems. The tests fail to assess students’ fluid intelligence, or their ability to apply reasoning in novel situations, comprising skills such as working memory capacity, speed of information processing, and the ability to solve abstract problems.

“The researchers found that even the schools that did a good job raising students’ math scores on standardised tests showed almost no influence over the same students’ fluid intelligence,” writes Kamenetz.

She quotes an expert in educational testing Daniel Koretz, the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who supports the view that the tests are limited.

In his book *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*, Koretz writes the tests measure only “a subset of the goals of education”.

“Some goals, such as the motivation to learn, the inclination to apply school learning to real situations, the ability to work in groups, and some kinds of complex problem solving, are not very amenable to large-scale standardised testing. Others can be tested, but are not considered a high enough priority to invest the time and resources required. Even in assessing the goals that we decide to measure and that can be measured well, tests are generally very small samples of behaviour that we use to make estimates of students’ mastery of very large domains of knowledge and skill,” writes Koretz.

Learning through doing

Coming up with new ideas and testing them out can sometimes be a bit ‘hit and miss’. But a new approach, known as ‘design thinking’, may help guarantee success. Design thinking involves developing new ideas and practices that are based on evidence and other successful ideas. It can be used by teachers and school leaders to solve complex problems that schools face.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) introduces the notion of design thinking in its new *Learning Through Doing* guides. AITSL says the guides provide a way to help educators “plan and carry out disciplined innovation – from stimulating ideas to incubating solutions and scaling promising practices”.

For more information go to tinyurl.com/nferxep

Redecorate for better results

Classroom design can boost learning progress by up to 16 per cent in a single year, a study has found.

A three-year research project in the United Kingdom carried out detailed surveys of more than 150 classrooms and analysed the performance of more than 3,700 pupils aged between five and 11, according to a report on *The Conversation* (www.theclassroomconversation.com).

While specific elements such as air quality have been analysed before, it was the first time researchers had used real schools to assess the effects of every aspect of a classroom on children’s learning, wrote Peter Barrett, professor of management in property and construction at the University of Salford.

“We have provided teachers with a series of illustrated options they can consider in their own classrooms to make real and cost-effective changes. Just changing the layout of the room or the choices of display on the walls in line with our suggestions can have a tangible effect and need not be expensive,” he said.

To read more go to tinyurl.com/o846mmw
Most schools need to raise funds for basics

Gonski money delivering benefits - but only one-third are schools getting it, AEU survey finds.

School fundraising and voluntary contributions are now vital to the smooth running of schools, according to the State of our Schools survey, commissioned by the AEU.

An overwhelming majority (84%) of principals report that their schools have organised fundraising events in the past year, the survey has found.

The funds raised were mostly used to buy classroom equipment (63%), computer hardware and software (56%), sporting equipment (45%) and library resources (44%). Other funds went towards basic maintenance and new buildings, special programs and study trips.

Only one-third of schools surveyed had received Gonski funding but those who have report that it’s making a big difference. About a third of those schools had received between $11,000 and $50,000 in Gonski funding while $18 per cent received up to $10,000, $17 per cent received $51,000 to $100,000 and 14 per cent got $101,000 to $200,000.

Most schools chose to spend the Gonski funding on extra classroom teachers or coaches (28%) and one-on-one support for students with learning difficulties (21%). Additional student support staff and professional development for teachers was also supplied by the Gonski funding.

Almost all principals (87%) believe that the Gonski funds will make a “significant difference” to the quality of education delivered at their schools.

The other side of the coin was the 17 per cent of schools that reported budget cuts. They said the main effect of the cuts was in increased workloads for teachers and senior staff (80%) and less support for students in danger of falling behind in areas such as literacy and numeracy (70%). The cuts also meant fewer support staff/education assistants (55%), less support for students with disabilities or those with learning difficulties (51%), fewer teaching staff (49%) and increased class sizes (39%).

Overall, almost two-thirds (62%) of those surveyed believe their schools are under-resourced, with 16 per cent believing the problem is “significant”. They believe student outcomes would be improved by smaller class sizes (74%), followed by extra support for students with disabilities or behavioural issues (46%), upgraded classroom facilities (46%), and extra specialised literacy and numeracy programs (45%).

Teachers under pressure

According to principals, staff vacancies are becoming more difficult to fill, with 28 per cent reporting teacher shortages during the year and 26 per cent finding it more difficult to suitably fill vacancies across all areas of the curriculum.

Teachers say that comes down to workload. Forty per cent believed that reduced workloads would help retain teachers in the profession while 23 per cent thought that fewer student management issues would help.

Two-thirds (66%) of teachers planning to leave the profession before retirement blamed the workload.

In a typical week, most teachers (more than 80%) said they work outside of their paid hours on weekdays, evenings and weekends. More than two-thirds (73%) said their hours had increased.

A total of 23 per cent worked more than 55 hours a week, 19 per cent worked 51-55 hours and 23% worked 46-50 hours.

Almost two-thirds (62%) of those surveyed believe their schools are under-resourced.

“
It is no exaggeration to say that school funding for students with disability is in a state of crisis.

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<th>Enabling basic justice</th>
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<td>I still remember how I felt as a new teacher with my first young student with a serious disability. I desperately wanted to help, but had a sense of powerlessness and a lack of understanding of what I needed to do. It was at a low-SES primary school with limited money for specialised support. Like many teachers, I worked out my own solutions. A few years later, I had a child with severe autism who often reacted badly to the stimulus of the classroom. Working with his family, we developed a system where he could present me with a special card that allowed him to leave class to go to a safe, supervised area – no questions asked - and return when he felt ready. With creative thinking, special attention and a lot of help from his parents, we were able to turn school from a difficult and sometimes frightening experience into something positive where he actively participated in his learning. But I know I could have done more if I'd had the resources in terms of better in-class support and my own professional development. Teaching students with disability is not an optional extra; it's the reality of the modern classroom. We are seeing an increase in the diagnosis of conditions such as autism and behavioural disorders, and our funding systems haven't caught up.</td>
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“...behind the statistics are children who are missing out on their one chance to get an education.”

Correna Haythorpe
AEU FEDERAL PRESIDENT
Needs must:
Govt puts squeeze on disability funding

As another federal budget looms, the Abbott government has the chance to honour its pre-election commitment to introduce the full needs-based funding for children with disabilities that Gonski recommended.
Parents of children with disabilities and educators agree that funding is woefully inadequate and is failing to support schools to properly educate children with disability.

"Parents are made to feel guilty, as if we’re menaces for asking for support for our children that should be there anyway. It’s a very frustrating and upsetting situation,” says Alex Baltins.

Baltins is mother to five-year-old Sebastian, who’s in kindergarten at his local public school in Sutherland, New South Wales. Diagnosed with autism, severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), Sebastian is “quite a complex little boy but very intelligent”, says Baltins.

He qualifies for around one to two hours per week assistance, although the education department suggested it might be able to find the funding for one hour per day.

But Sebastian, still coming to terms with his new environment, needs more full-time support.

Baltins says the school’s principal dipped into the general budget to pay for the support during Sebastian’s transition period but that’s now being phased out as the transition period comes to an end.

Baltins was grateful for the extra support but worried that other children at the school might be missing out. “It’s not fair, but my priority is Sebastian and knowing he’s supported at school.”

“You want your child to get the best education they can, to be happy and lead a successful life. You have all these hopes and dreams for your child and then you realise it’s completely out of your control,” says Baltins.

“I have no money, I can’t afford to send aides and support people into the school. So it’s incredibly frustrating to know the government isn’t honouring its promises to support children with disabilities,” she says.

Baltins was one of a number of parents who travelled to Canberra with their children in March to tell members of parliament of the struggle they face in finding schools that are properly funded to educate their children.

“Teachers want to be able to support all the children in their classrooms, but it’s a bit difficult if they have children with ADHD or ODD. If the children are acting up, what are the teachers going to do? Either they focus on one child and the rest of the class is ignored or they ignore the child,” she says.

“It’s not the teacher’s fault or the school’s fault – it just comes down to the funding. It’s also about training provided by the government for educators in schools.”

Schools struggling to cope
Most schools don’t have the resources for students whose disabilities need extra support, according to a recent survey of public school principals and teachers.

Almost 80 per cent of principals responding to the AEU’s State of Our Schools survey said they did not have enough funding for students with disabilities, and 84 per cent said they had taken funding from other areas of their school budgets to provide additional support for students.

The resources most needed by principals were pretty basic; 82 per cent wanted additional assistance for teachers in the classroom; 56 per cent specialist support; and 56 per cent more professional development for teachers.

Research from several sources shows that, while just over 190,000 students with additional needs are receiving funded support in schools, at least another 100,000 are missing out altogether and many more are getting less than they need.

The Abbott government has introduced an interim measure to fund disability in schools, but it’s a stopgap that doesn’t recognise the extent of the problem.

A delegation of parents and children with disabilities visited Canberra earlier this year to meet with MPs.
support required, as measured by the National Data Collection on disability in schools, says AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe.

“The Gonski Review recommended a full loading, covering the real need of all students with disability, to be based on this measure,” she says.

“We have a system that is failing to deliver any support to schools to educate significant numbers of students with disability,” says Haythorpe.

“Minister Pyne has never been able to explain why the Coalition has walked away from its pre-election commitment to introduce a full disability loading, as recommended by Gonski.

“We are seeing fantastic work being done by thousands of educators across Australia to give children with disability an education, but the support they need is just not there,” she says.

“The system is broken”

Theresa Duncombe wrote to federal education minister Christopher Pyne just after he was elected, asking for an opportunity to meet him to explain what it’s like to have a child with a disability.

“He wrote a wonderful letter back saying my son Ben should be entitled to sit in a classroom of my choosing – wherever, whatever that might be and that he was entitled to full support,” she says.

“I went back to the school and said, ‘Well, what does that look like for you?’ The principal said he didn’t even understand what it meant.”

While the minister talks about the funds the government has injected into disability support in schools, Duncombe says the money doesn’t filter down to the schools.

“It doesn’t mean a lot for Ben, he doesn’t get that. It’s just numbers games,” she says.

“And by the way, Mr Pyne declined to meet me back then and again during the delegation of parents to Canberra earlier this year.

“He didn’t come and speak to us at all. Perhaps he’s not game enough to look at the kids and the reality of what it’s like. It’s sad, because he’s the minister who’s meant to be sticking up for our kids,” says Duncombe.

Duncombe’s son Ben, 16, has a “moderate” intellectual disability.

“He’s got high needs. He walks and he talks and he learns; he can read, but he’s never going to be a maths genius.”

Duncombe and her husband, Kevin, have moved three times, seeking out the best public school for Ben’s needs. Their latest move, to the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, in time for the start of this school year is so far looking promising.

“A lot of our experience has been very negative but there are some fantastic, innovative teachers out there who are trying really hard,” she says.

“But the system is broken. It’s not about the teachers, it’s about the lack of funding.”

“What we’re asking for is an education for our son. My goal has always been to treat Ben like any other child. We want him to grow up in our local community in a mainstream
At first Kate Walsh thought her son, Cameron, was just “a naughty child”. He’d just moved to a public school from an independent school that was like “trying to fit a square peg in a round hole”.

Walsh’s husband died when Cameron was just two and Walsh has raised her son as a single parent since. The change in schools was “the best thing I ever did”, says Walsh. “He had the most angelic teachers.” She acted on their recommendation to have Cameron assessed and he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism, severe ADHD and, “probably the most difficult to deal with”, ODD.

But, after two years at the school, the large classes were proving too much for Cameron, and so Walsh found a place for him at Cook School at Loftus in the Sutherland Shire, NSW, which specialises in teaching children with emotional and behavioural issues. “That school was absolutely brilliant and, if I’d had my wish, he would have stayed there. But because of funding, it’s only a 12-18 month program, so they had to boot him out and put him back in a mainstream class,” she says. Cameron’s now at a school that’s “basically a school for kids that don’t fit in anywhere else”, says Walsh. “He’s not happy there and I’m not happy but we have no other solution.”

For Cameron to return to a mainstream classroom, he needs a full-time aide. But there’s no funding. “The thing that really frustrates me is that the mainstream public school he first went to, which is a K-12 school, has the rooms and the teachers to run two special ed classes in primary but the department refuses to fund it. But it just doesn’t make sense because the high school section already runs two support classes,” says Walsh.

“My issue is that kids like Cameron, who are highly intelligent, are quite unique. If they’re helped when they’re younger they can go on to be running the country, running companies or inventing things. My biggest fear is that Cameron will end up in the juvenile justice system if he doesn’t get the help now,” she says. 

Kate Walsh

My issue is that kids like Cameron, who are highly intelligent, are quite unique.
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school. Our dream for him is that he’ll be out there with all the other kids. We want him to be employed, independent.

“The reason we ended up moving to the Sunshine Coast is that the school he’s at has employment programs – they’re taught social enterprise because they recognise that these kids could end up in their own small businesses.

Teachers need more support
Eight-year-old Alex is in his first year of mainstream primary school and, despite limited additional support, the difference it’s made to his language and social skills in just a few months has been astonishing, says his mother, Trish Reeve.

Alex has a wide range of disabilities including autism. He can read at grade 4 level, but his comprehension is closer to a two-and-a half to three-year-old.

Gowrie Primary School in the ACT is a “lovely little public school”, says Reeve where Alex receives help from an “amazing” aide in the mornings. “They say it’s three hours but it’s barely two-and-a-half and she’s dealing with many other children.”

By the afternoon, when the medication starts to wear off for most children, one teacher is left dealing with 20 children who need “a wide range of assistance”, says Reeve.

Nonetheless, Alex has thrived in the mainstream environment. “It’s not the curriculum, he’s now got role models in front of him every single day.”

“So we’ve told the school that we don’t care about his grades this year, if he doesn’t meet the educational standards he’s learning more important things,” says Reeve.

But teachers need more support, she says.

“In this day and age, teachers need both themselves and an aide in a classroom at all times because there are 20 children in that room and at least 40 issues to deal with – some diagnosed, some undiagnosed,” Reeve says.

The search for funds continues
The principal of a Victorian school has been forced to raid the school’s budget for the cash to support her students with additional needs.

In a school population of 807, 15 students receive extra funding under Victoria’s Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD), but the principal estimates there are a further 40 to 50 children – four to five from every year level – who “don’t quite qualify for funding or have some sort of learning disability that doesn’t attract funding”.

In response, the school runs a ‘student room’ and pays two integration aides to run it. Children leave their regular classrooms for subjects like English and maths, and receive one-to-three or one-to-five assistance.

“It’s a bandaid measure that provides as much help as the school can afford, but the principal says that even the funding for those who meet the PSD criteria isn’t sufficient.

“For instance, I have a number of students who have either level 2 or level 3 category funding. And if you work it on a per-hour basis, level 2 funding equates roughly (give or take) to 10 or 11 hours of aide time a week. But some of these students require full-time assistance to actually manage in a classroom – intellectually, socially and emotionally,” the principal says.

“So you’ve constantly got this deficit of somewhere between 11 and 19 hours of time and money for these students. In order to provide those students with full-time assistants, the money has to come from somewhere,” she says.

The school budget is suffering as a result. “It means I don’t have the funding to push the level of literacy support and intervention across the college for those students who don’t meet the stringent PSD criteria, but still have quite compelling learning needs that can’t be met in a mainstream classroom where there’s another 24 students and one teacher,” she says.

“It’s sad. Sad for everybody.”

Correna Haythorpe says that, rather than denying there is a problem, the minister should listen to teachers and parents who are at the frontline of the system every day.
Competition isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It can bring consumers more choice and lower prices. But it doesn’t work for education, which is a right, a public good and an important service.

Keen observers of the TAFE sector’s 25-year journey towards marketisation are concerned that changes are being wrought due to a form of ideological fundamentalism, which is leading to a grim outlook.

AEU deputy federal secretary and federal TAFE secretary Pat Forward has witnessed the market model in action and, in her view, the private VET sector in Australia is in crisis. “The market model has not worked, the regulatory system has failed, millions of dollars are being wasted, and students are becoming indebted for their lives for qualifications that are worthless,” says Forward. “Due to this crisis of trust, the VET system is being eroded, TAFE is being decimated, and students are being ripped off.”

Forward’s real concern is not with imperfect market models, but rather a more serious question for our society: should public funding for education be given to the private sector to allow them to make profit?

Spelling it out
Forward’s views are based on experience, and backed by a new report that reveals the damage being done in the public vocational education and training sector.

The Capture of Public Wealth by the For-Profit VET Sector report was prepared for the AEU by Serena Yu and Damian Oliver from the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney Business School. It focuses on the changes in Victoria, which became the first state to roll out a demand-driven entitlement model of education that entitles students to a tax-payer subsidised training place at a provider of their choice.

The rationale behind the expansion of contestable funding in the sector is that it offers greater competition amongst providers, improves student accessibility and affordability, increases the quality and transparency of training delivery, and boosts confidence in the system of qualifications.

“The assumption is that poor-quality training will be ‘competed away’ by better providers and well informed students,” says Serena Yu, “but this has emphatically not been the case.”

Instead, there’s been a fall in overall funding for VET, which has declined by about 25 per cent since 1999. A large chunk of those cuts have come from state TAFE budgets, resulting in staff retrenchments, campus closures and a reduction in course offerings.

“This large-scale decline in funding raises the questions of what an appropriate price for high-quality vocational education should be, and at what point such quality is forfeited,” says Yu.

In addition, data from the Productivity Commission shows funding per student hour by state falling nationally from $16 to $13, or about 22 per cent, in the last 10 years.

The price of expansion
As TAFE struggled with funding cuts, for-profit training providers proliferated. There are now more than 3,000 across Australia.

In Victoria, numbers have more than doubled, from 200 to over 420, since the rollout of the entitlement-based funding model. In Victoria, numbers have more than doubled, from 200 to over 420, since the rollout of the entitlement-based funding model. State funding to for-profit providers has also ballooned, increasing from $477m in 2008 to more than $1.4 billion in 2012. This growth is driven “almost entirely by the Victorian experience,” says Yu.

There’s also been growth in student enrolments in the state over the past six years, increasing by 39 per cent annually in the private sector TAFE, on the other hand, has seen its share fall from 90 per cent to 60 per cent.

In Victoria, numbers have more than doubled, from 200 to over 420, since the rollout of the entitlement-based funding model.
Students hoping to access vocational training under this new regime face a decline in the number of courses available from TAFE, and a selection of courses from private providers that are questionable at best. So questionable, Forward says, that almost 10,000 qualifications issued by the private sector have been recalled or cancelled in Victoria. Like clockwork, shonky for-profit providers are coming under scrutiny again. Earlier this year *The Age* exposed their tactics to lure prospective students, often among the most disadvantaged, with free iPads as incentives for abbreviated courses “delivered by unregistered subcontractors”.

That’s not all that’s overblown – student debt via the VET FEE HELP scheme is skyrocketing. In the Grattan Institute’s submission to the Senate Inquiry into private VET providers, it reports a $16 million overpayment in VET FEE HELP in 2013, and $60 million in the past five years. “They estimated that this “doubtful debt” - which is not expected to be repaid - could be 40 per cent of the money lent,” says Forward. “That’s nearly double the rate of higher education.”

Taxpayers will pick up the cost. In 2014/15 it was around $1.5 billion, and the Grattan Institute estimates it will grow to $2.5 billion by 2017/18. Meanwhile, the AEU report indicates that some private colleges are making 30 cents from every taxpayer dollar.

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.

### Time for reform

The campaign to Stop TAFE Cuts has raised the profile of funding as an election issue in three states, and established that TAFE institutes around the country are being destroyed, says Forward. “The report we commissioned shows that opening up vocational training to the private sector simply turns public funds into private profits, while doing nothing to increase transparency or the quality of vocational education,” says Forward. “It also gives the AEU a very strong foundation for working with the ALP across the country to develop an alternative policy.”

The three foundations of an alternative policy – capping the amount of funding open to competition at 30 per cent; regulation to ensure students get the course hours they’ve paid; and outlawing the practice of sub-contracting delivery to non-registered training organisations – won’t fix the problem. “But they offer the basis of a strategy to call a halt to the destruction of TAFE, and a foundation upon which to rebuild it,” says Forward.

The recommendations in *The Capture of Public Wealth by the For-Profit VET Sector* and the alarming analysis behind them, are essential for rebuilding confidence in vocational education and the system of qualifications, says Yu. “It is frightening to think that the unscrupulous practices of some providers, at the expense of taxpayers, could erode such a key pillar in our education system.”

### Strong profit margins

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<th>Provider</th>
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Private providers are recording strong profit margins on their public subsidies. In Victoria alone, an estimated $277.1 million worth of profits were generated in 2013 based on $799.2 million in public subsidy revenue.

Source: ASX prospectus documents
Entry standards to teaching courses are falling, the number of courses is growing without enough emphasis on maintaining standards, and we are producing an overall surplus of teaching graduates, but too few in key areas like maths, science and languages.

The federal government’s solution was to call for a review of initial teacher training by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), headed by Australian Catholic University vice chancellor Greg Craven. But after months of considering submissions, the review’s recommendations and the government’s response have failed to go far enough to lift standards in the profession, says AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe.

It’s a “missed opportunity”, she says. “The review’s priorities should have been to increase entry standards for teaching courses, turn teaching into a two-year post-graduate degree and address the oversupply of teaching graduates.”

“If we want the best teachers in the classroom, we need to get the best people and give them the best training possible to ensure they are properly equipped for the job,” says Haythorpe.

Quality leads to high performance

High-performing countries recognise that quality teachers are the key to quality teaching, notes a study by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), led by principal research fellow Lawrence Ingvarson.

“Many [high-performing countries] now draw their teaching workforces from the top 30 per cent (or even 10 per cent) of secondary school leavers, in contrast to Australia, where teachers are drawn largely from the middle third of the graduating secondary school cohort.

“The proportion of Year 12 entrants to undergraduate programs with ATAR scores less than 50 nearly doubled over the past three years. Only 21.5 per cent of Year 12 offers went to students with Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores above 80, compared with an average of well over 50 per cent across all other university programs (e.g. nearly 70 per cent for science and engineering),” according to the ACER study.

Prospective students who have not been successful at the school level are unlikely to be successful at university level, says Ingvarson in an interview with Australian Educator.

The ACER study found that academic ability is an important measure for entrants to teaching courses, with research showing a link between aptitude and eventual teaching effectiveness. The study found no evidence to support the selection of students on the basis of personality characteristics and psychometric tests.

But Ingvarson isn’t convinced that ATAR scores are the best prerequisite for teaching students, noting that around half the number of entrants do not come directly from Year 12.

“We need more valid predictors of how well someone will cope with the demands of a rigorous teacher education program,” says Ingvarson.

New South Wales is going further in selection procedures than any other state. From next year, school leavers entering teaching degrees will need to have a mark of 80 or higher in three of their Higher School Certificate subjects, including English.

“Academically, we want our teachers to be performing at the highest level. Everyone talks about taking students from the top 30 per cent of the cohort, but we’re the only jurisdiction doing anything about it,” says NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli.

“I’ve got a son in Year 1 and the other one will start next year. So as a parent, not even as the minister for education, I want the teachers standing in front of my children for the next 13 years to be academically clever, to have achieved significantly in academic terms. But academic achievement is not enough on its own. They also need to be very good at the art of teaching,” Piccoli says.

“No one should expect a new graduate to be fully classroom ready.”

Lawrence Ingvarson,
ACER principal research fellow
Getting ready to teach
Giving beginning teachers the knowledge to teach is one aspect of their training, but teaching practice is a separate issue, says Ingvarson.

“No one should expect a new graduate to be fully classroom ready. What we really need – and report after report has said this – is to think of it in two stages,” he says.

Teaching needs to adopt the methods of other professions, such as law, medicine or engineering, where a degree is followed by several years of residency or internship, says Ingvarson.

“There are a lot of things you can’t learn, that are very important, until you are a resident and you’re recognised as someone who is working towards meeting the standards of registration. Correna Haythorpe says one way of addressing this second stage is through a two-year postgraduate degree. She says the TEMAG report correctly identifies that too many graduates are not ready for teaching, but it fails to consider an increased course length or postgraduate study to address the problem.

Lifting course standards
The TEMAG report also recommended stronger regulation of university teaching programs to ensure they all meet an agreed standard, and Ingvarson agrees there’s a “definite need” to strengthen accreditation procedures. “They’ve been weak and there’s a lot of variation across the country,” he says.

With almost 50 teacher education providers and more than 400 accredited programs, Ingvarson says we have “far too many” providers for a relatively small population.

“We need to consolidate and strengthen the providers who are really showing that they’re effective,” he says.

The ACER study notes that the number of small providers and programs has increased in recent years, introducing a potential threat to quality. “Twenty out of 60 programs in Victoria had entry cohorts of fewer than 50 students in 2014,” according to the study.

Matching supply to demand
Teaching course providers also need to better match the supply of graduates to demand, says Haythorpe.

“There is nothing in the report to address the lack of workforce planning that has delivered an oversupply of teaching graduates in some areas at the same time as shortages in key subjects like maths and science.”

Piccoli would like to see an improvement in advice to new students about their employment prospects. Each year around 5,000 teachers graduate in NSW, but only 1,000 new teachers are employed.

“We have a shortage of science and maths teachers and an oversupply of primary teachers, but there are universities that don’t appear to steer them anywhere – people go into what they want to do.”

The large numbers of students in teaching courses are placing big demands on schools that provide practicums, says Ingvarson.

“It’s very difficult to find good placements. If we simply ensured that supply matched demand, it would be easier to accommodate students for practicums.”

Ingvarson adds that there are “major deficiencies” when it comes to practicums that aren’t addressed in the TEMAG report. “We really must find good supervising teachers and there should be a strong partnership between the university program and the schools that are taking the students.”

But, he says, there’s no extra funding associated with the TEMAG recommendations “and the practicum is one of the areas that’s always needed extra funding”.

Haythorpe agrees, saying the AEU supports the recommendations for better support for early career teachers, but they must be accompanied by appropriate resources.

In other words: “The path to great teaching and good schools lies in recruiting top talent, preparing teachers extremely well, ensuring they meet high standards for entry, and then providing them with resources, learning opportunities and ongoing feedback to enable them to continuously improve,” as US education policy expert and academic Linda Darling-Hammond wrote last year in an article in SFGate.
As the debate continues over how best to train teachers, *Australian Educator* asked two early career teachers and a principal for their thoughts.

**What I wish I’d learned**

**Melanie Schultz**  
Ngukurr School, SE Arnhem Land  
Northern Territory

I graduated with a bachelor of education (primary) from Melbourne University in 2011. I’d had some experience in a remote Aboriginal school, after a 12-week placement in the APY lands in South Australia in my third year of study. That helped me to know what to expect in terms of the environment, community and culture.

But, if I was designing a course for training teachers, I’d include more practical information.

For example, what I found really hard at the beginning was that I was plonked in a room and I didn’t know where to start. I did get a lot of support, but everyone had a lot on. I found the first six months very difficult and I thought I wasted a lot of time because I didn’t know where to start.

After my first year, I created a resource for other teachers, which included all the great online resources to help others save time.

I also wish that someone had told me about the value of using other people for guidance and the need to reach out for help from a team.

You’re taught at university about ‘best practice’, but when I first started it was difficult to apply what I knew about teaching and learning in a new and challenging context. Students from different backgrounds are engaged in different ways. I found I needed to use some strategies and classroom structures that I previously thought were very traditional. Preparing teachers for setting up different types of classrooms with different levels of support would be helpful, not just classrooms for inner-city, mainstream learning.

“**If I was designing a course for training teachers, I’d include more practical information.”**

Melanie Schultz

**Steven Kolber**  
Brunswick Secondary College  
Victoria

I graduated five years ago but have since finished a postgraduate qualification in ESL [Teaching English as a Second Language]. I wanted to add ESL to my repertoire because we have a language centre at the school, so ESL is something that’s always going to be a factor where we are. It’s just a totally different teaching methodology.

I also teach English, humanities and VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning].

I wish I’d been taught more about preparing lessons, behaviour management and managing students with disabilities during my training.

University is probably overly theoretical – I think there’s probably too much theory, or at least too much new theory. I’ve had to learn by failing. It’s just a matter of trying over and over again until you find something that works.

If I were talking to a beginning teacher I’d suggest they work out what their ideal classroom would look like and what their limits are: what they’ll accept and what they won’t accept. It’s best to have it worked out in advance, rather than trying to do it as you go, otherwise you’ll be seen as inconsistent. And that’s not the persona you need to be the one at the front.

There’s definitely a role for better professional development and mentoring once you’ve graduated as well. Apart from minimal in-school mentoring, there’s still not a lot of PD available, unless you go out of your way and pay a fair bit of money. And the success of that can depend on where you’re at, who you get and how committed they are.
Marcus Krill
Principal Northfield Primary School
South Australia

The prerequisite for teachers, of course, is a passion for young people and their learning. And, in terms of my primary school (we’re in a relatively low-SES area) a reasonably strong sense of social justice is also important.

When it comes to university training, it’s vital that both teaching practice and curriculum are a focus.

We don’t need people coming out of university who are experts on curriculum but lack expertise in pedagogy. There needs to be an awareness of both.

The practical component of teacher training at university is absolutely crucial, and there should be more practicums in schools and pre-schools, because that’s where the authentic learning occurs. The learning is contextualised and they are supported and, hopefully, challenged by accomplished teachers.

You need to examine what actually makes a good teacher. And what you need is to be able to have a high level of people skills to deal with not only the children and young people but also their parents and your colleagues.

Ongoing learning for teachers is also absolutely essential. That professional learning can come in a multitude of ways. I support the notion of post-graduate qualifications, although the big issue is the time and dedication it takes to embark on study at that level while teaching full-time.

Being in such a complex profession means that there is a tension between doing that job well and also being able to successfully embark on the post-graduate study.

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“I think there’s probably too much theory, or at least too much new theory.”

Steven Kolber

“It’s vital that both teaching practice and curriculum are a focus.”

Marcus Krill
Countries from around the world, aiming to improve the performance of their students, look to high-performing nations for the secrets to their success.

One of the best-known examples is Singapore, which ranks in the top five in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for reading, maths and science. The PISA tables, released every three years by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students.

“Education is the main enabler for a nation with no natural resources and whose competitive edge lies in arming its people with skills and competencies needed for the 21st century,” notes Singapore’s National Institute of Education (NIE) in a report outlining its plan for the years ahead.

But it’s not just about the economic issues, as “…the need to preserve national culture, identity and values rooted in family and community is just as important…”, the report says.

One of the distinctive features of Singapore’s education system is the close relationship between the NIE (which selects and trains all teachers), the Ministry of Education, and schools. This “tight and strong partnership” is the envy of other nations, writes US education policy expert and academic Linda Darling-Hammond in a forward to the report.

“It allows research to inform policy and policy, in turn, to be translated seamlessly into schools,” she writes.

The cooperation between government, educators and employers is much closer than in Finland, for example, another much-admired country for its success in student achievement, says Finnish educator,
“Although the respect a society has for the teaching profession is important, the status of teaching is influenced by the extent to which teachers are treated as ‘professionals’, and are empowered within the school system.

‘Teachers need to have ownership of their professional standards and have a say in their own professional development. They need to have autonomy and flexibility in decision making, the rights to exercise influence on school capacity to improve student performance, and professional judgment about ‘what’ and ‘how’ to teach,” she says.

In Finland, teachers have traditionally had “a very strong and central place, particularly in the smaller communities”, says Sahlberg. “There’s the priest, the judge and the teacher who are the most important people”.

This prestige has been maintained because of Finland’s insistence that teachers be trained at the same level as professions such as law and medicine, he says.

“This is not the case in other countries, where these other professions receive much higher education than teachers do.

‘All of these countries that allow different pathways to teaching - like the US or England where you don’t need to have a university degree or similar qualifications – you have this visible problem of the declining prestige of teaching and the teaching profession as well,” Sahlberg says.

### Anarchy in the UK

Putting schools in charge of teacher training in England and Wales is having disastrous consequences for the profession.

The UK government has introduced many policies with great appeal among members of Australia’s ruling conservative party. That’s a troubling development for the education sector.

John Hattie, chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, has been monitoring teacher training outcomes in the UK and fears Australia will follow the UK model that uses schools to train teachers.

The Cameron government’s teacher training programs reduce the role of universities in favour of schools-centred training, which Hattie has branded a failure.

“Schools aren’t turning out many teachers, there’s a high attrition rate, and that’s leading to shortages of staff in the UK,” he says.

Rosamund McNeil, head of education and equality for the National Union of Teachers (NUT), says Hattie is right to be concerned. She says the on-the-job model doesn’t provide teachers with the resilience they need to cope in the classroom and to stay and thrive, in the job.

Meanwhile the future of university teaching courses is at risk because of the competition from the school-centred training programs. Some universities have already closed or reduced their teacher training.

It’s not a national strategy for managing teacher numbers and qualifications, says McNeil. “We’re beginning to see an undersupply of teachers in some subjects and in some areas of the country. They’re really just a punt on whether enough teachers will be turned out. Their model doesn’t work.”

The UK government’s move to provide schools with more control has also affected professional development.

“It’s a lottery for teachers. You’re at the whim of your head teacher as to whether they want to invest in you or not,” says McNeil.

“If we want the teaching profession to be high status, high performing and attractive, and to recruit graduates up against law and medicine, then having an entitlement to really high-quality continuing professional development – as lawyers get – is a missing element of teaching in this country at the moment.

In the lead up to the UK election, the NUT was blunt in its condemnation of the Conservative Party’s manifesto on education. NUT national secretary Christine Blower said that in the space of five years the government had “de-skilled the profession by dropping the requirement that teachers should be qualified”.

On Labour’s proposal, the NUT noted some “positive elements”. For example, Labour recognises the importance of teachers gaining qualified teacher status and have pledged to stop non-qualified teachers teaching in schools.

Whether the union achieves its aim to ensure future proposals benefit both educational effectiveness and beginning teachers will depend on which party wins on May 7.
Schools around the country are joining a coalition that recognises and respects the needs of same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse people.

Network of school support for LGBTIQ

“I feel very embarrassed and depressed having to wear girl pants to school,” says 16-year-old Bailey. “Teachers at school still call me a girl and say things like ‘good girl’. [I want] to shout out that I am not a girl.”

He no longer participates in school sport, “my favourite subject”, because he was forced to use the female change rooms. “I would really love to get involved in many activities... like inter-school sports competitions, but I am too embarrassed [because] I’ll be forced to play in the girl team.”

Bailey was one of almost 200 young people surveyed by researchers from La Trobe University and the University of New England in a study funded by beyondblue. The study, ‘From Blues to Rainbows’, gathered evidence about the mental health and wellbeing of gender diverse and transgender young people and recommended action on a number of fronts.

Suggestions for schools included improved training for teachers and school leadership, sexuality education programs, appropriate uniform policies and private and safe toilet facilities. Schools were called on to provide support and policies for gender diverse and transgender students and to create an environment where students feel safe to advocate for their own needs and rights.

One groundbreaking program is answering the call, although its supporters have been persistently working at it for several years.

For many teachers, some with decades of experience, it’s their first open discussion about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex issues.

Safe Schools Coalition Australia aims to make all schools safe and supportive for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, teachers and families. Schools can join the coalition in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, and all states and territories will be participating by the end of this year.

The program began almost five years ago in Victoria in partnership with the departments of health and education. It was founded as part of Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria within the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society at La Trobe University.
More than 250 schools have joined the coalition, and that’s been increasing since the national rollout began 12 months ago. The schools agree to create an environment that’s free from homophobic and transphobic bullying, one that’s safe and inclusive for the whole school community.

Schools are encouraged to make a public statement that they support gender diversity, sexual diversity and students who are inter-sex, says Roz Ward, the program manager in Victoria.

One of the coalition’s major tasks is to train school staff and teachers. “It’s been a real privilege to do that work,” says Ward. “In Victoria we’ve now trained almost 6,000 staff in the last four years.”

For many teachers, some with decades of experience, it’s their first open discussion about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex issues.

“The sessions give teachers the confidence to know what they’re doing is good, that they’re allowed to do it, and that there should be no doubt they should be supporting gender and sexual diversity.

“We also support students to take and lead action themselves. That includes running events at schools and having groups that lead activities, particularly on days like International Day of Homophobia and Transphobia (17 May),” Ward says.

The number of student groups is growing rapidly, with around 50 in Victoria alone, and they’re helping to challenge homophobia and transphobia by changing the culture in schools.

“We get to the point when a student says to another student: ‘Hey, don’t say “That’s so gay”. That’s homophobic. You can’t call homework gay – it’s boring but it’s not homosexual’,” says Ward. And, there are stories from teachers describing cases of homophobia where they didn’t need to intervene because other students were stepping in.

Providing support for transgender students has also been an "amazing journey", says Ward. "We’ve learned a lot and we’re spreading the knowledge across the country with the program."

“We’ve had stories like the Grade 3 student who knew she had a girl’s heart and brain, but she had a boy’s body. She told us that when the teacher and students in her class first used ‘she’ instead of ‘he’, it was the best day of her life.

“That’s the difference this kind of work makes to individual students."

Exploring gender identity

More and more young people are talking about their gender identity, and exploring it in different ways, says Ward.

The latest research shows that about 10 per cent of people are same-sex attracted, meaning as many as 350,000 Australians of high school age. Transgender and gender diverse people may be between 2 and 5 per cent of the population, she says.
Up to 1.7 per cent of people are intersex, a term that relates to physical, hormonal or genetic features that are neither wholly male or wholly female.

**Case studies**

**Mars**

17 years old trans*

“I hope that one day I, and those like me, will no longer feel shame about our identities. That the world can somehow wake up and recognise the beauty in diversity and learn to value the full spectrum of it.

I want to reach a place where I will no longer feel that because I’m trans* doors are automatically closed to me, that I shouldn’t even try.”

Trans* is used to denote the umbrella nature of this term.

**Willow**

17 years old gender questioning

“I hope that I’ll find someone who’ll stop making me care about who I identify as and come to an acceptance of the limitations of my body and the freedom of my mind.

I want to do something big in the world and I promise you that I’ll make it happen. I want a change in the way we view sexuality and gender not only in the Western world but in countries where discrimination is still a pervasive part of everyday life. I want to write, act and essentially be an outspoken humanitarian and advocate of human rights, sexuality and gender identity, to both challenge and unify people all over the world and make a better and more accepting world for my children and anyone who has gone through the pain and anguish of institutionalised discrimination.”

Source: From Blues to Rainbows: the mental health and well-being of gender diverse and transgender young people in Australia, 2014

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Gary Cattanach’s love of teaching has extended well beyond the classroom, into an innovative project with long-term benefits for a whole community.

BY CYNDI TEBBEL

Extreme makeover

Gary Cattanach, recipient of the 2014 Arthur Hamilton Award for an outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, is the trade school coordinator at Nambucca Heads High School, on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales.

At a school where more than 20 per cent of the students are Indigenous, in a community with unemployment at more than twice the national average, it’s a role with significant social relevance.

But that doesn’t tell half the story. For more than 25 years he has been a leader in the process of reconciliation through education, in and out of the classroom, as a teacher/mentor to students, parents and the school community.

Gary Cattanach, a Gungarri man from Charleville, Queensland, says his love of teaching young people and helping their families is rooted in his own experience of having grown up in similar, sometimes difficult, circumstances.

His spirit, he says, is a gift from his mother, a Gungarri elder and a “great teacher”.

Most recently, in the context of ‘Closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage’, Cattanach has taken the leading role in establishing the first Junior Land Council (JLC) in NSW, and possibly Australia. The project, a partnership between Nambucca Heads High School and the Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council and other community organisations, was launched in 2010. The catalyst was a neglected plot of land at the Bellwood Aboriginal Reserve that was ripe for a makeover.

“The area was a dump, which was great for me,” Cattanach says. “I like dumps. I was raised next to a dump.”

Cattanach and his team reimagined what was a no-go zone for most of the community. They enlisted an enthusiastic team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, teachers and community members.

With many obstacles to overcome, it hasn’t all been a walk in the park.

“I was an experienced teacher when I started the project,” he says. “But there were staffing issues, and I needed to be able to make changes to the curriculum, timetable and school calendar with the co-operation of the principal and staff.

“I also had to gain the trust of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, establish Aboriginal autonomy and leadership and overcome the fear of failure.”

Small start

Cattanach’s push into the reserve had a small but cleverly practical and inclusive start. He showed the students how to build a letterbox for each house at the reserve.

Then he called in the bulldozers to smooth the “mongrel bush” into a beautifully turfed playing field. Next came a children’s playground, vegetable gardens and fruit trees.

The young JLC members were actively involved in every stage of the transformation and made important policy decisions that went beyond the cosmetic. For example, it was their idea to...
designate alcohol-free zones at the reserve, which the community supports and enforces.

Cattanach is justifiably enthusiastic about the measurable results at school and in the wider community. As a result of the JLC, participation in the Nambucca Heads Local Aboriginal Land Council has jumped 300 per cent. Students involved in the JLC, and others in their immediate and extended families, are more engaged at school. There are more Indigenous students on school committees, relationships between students and staff are more positive and respectful, and school attendance has improved.

Cattanach is excited about the JLC’s evolution, but also realistic when considering its future. For one thing, he returned to full-time teaching this year, so others will need to step in to help keep the project on track.

Ongoing funding is another concern. “Given the budgetary constraints around the country, principals and administrators are running scared, wondering how they are going to survive the moment.”

In a move not directly related to his work, “but quite a story if people are willing to listen”, the Land Council has applied for a grant to set up a cultural tourism project that would bring visitors to the reserve to teach them about its historical significance.

“If they can get the application up - and I’ll help - I think people would be interested in this yarn about what the kids in the JLC have done to help the community and themselves.”

It is, of course, a yarn with applications for other disadvantaged Indigenous communities around Australia. “This program is transportable, and educators get that. We can tie everything into curriculum outcomes and mandatory units in syllabuses, and the kids can be part of it and drive it for their communities,” Cattanach says. ⬤ Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.
Putting fairness back into funding

In case you were in any doubt about the motives driving neo-conservative policies, let UK Prime Minister David Cameron make it clear: “What you have to realise about the Conservative Party is that it is a coalition of privileged interests. Its main purpose is to defend that privilege.”

Our ruling party isn’t quite as flagrant, but nevertheless seems blissfully ignorant, wilfully misleading or in total denial about the realities of its policies. Education minister Christopher Pyne, for example, doesn’t believe there is an equity problem in Australia.

Researcher and Save Our Schools (SOS) convenor Trevor Cobbold begs to differ. His presentation to the 2015 AEU Federal Conference favoured facts over rhetoric to explain the truth about Australia’s equity problem.

In short, it’s real and it’s getting worse. Cobbold’s research, using the latest NAPLAN data, shows that a large proportion of disadvantaged students are not achieving an adequate level of education and there are large gaps of four to six years’ learning between the results of disadvantaged and advantaged students.

Despite this huge inequity in education, Cobbold says massive funding increases in recent years have actually favoured the more advantaged school sectors at the expense of the disadvantaged.

This funding bias disproportionately affects students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students, those living in remote areas, and those with a language background other than English (LBOTE). A large majority (over 80 per cent) are enrolled in public schools, which face far greater challenges than Catholic or independent schools in getting all students to the national standards.

The burden of disadvantage

As Cobbold points out, it’s not just the neediest students who suffer from social inequity in education. He says research from overseas and in Australia shows that, in schools with high concentrations of disadvantage, all students achieve significantly lower results than in schools with low concentrations of disadvantage.

So how does Australia stack up among other nations? International data on resource gaps between low and high SES schools confirm a worrying trend.

“The OECD has labelled Australia a low-equity nation in the resourcing of schools,” says Cobbold.

In addition, teacher shortages in Australia’s low SES schools are high by OECD standards: only eight out of 34 OECD countries have higher shortages. Whereas, in countries like Estonia and Korea, teacher shortages in low SES schools are actually less than in high SES schools.

Awar of attrition

Who’s winning the education war in Australia? By all accounts, it’s privilege.

“Every time public school organisations raise the issue of disparity in available resources between public schools and private schools compared to their relative tasks, private schools and their political representatives cry ‘class warfare’ and ‘class envy,’” Cobbold says.

Yet at the same time they continue to wage a campaign aimed at “grabbing as much government funding as they can”.

“They complain that private schools get less government funding than...”

Public schools do the heavy lifting, but are vastly under-resourced for the challenges they face, new research has found.
public schools, but if they did they’d have an even more massive resource advantage because of their income from fees,” he explains.

Cobbold singles out Independent Schools Victoria, a “bastion of privilege in education”, as an example. Its head is the chair of Geelong Grammar – the wealthiest school in the country – who doesn’t accept that low SES students need more funding.

Geelong Grammar, along with many other advocates of privilege, prefer to ignore hundreds of studies showing the enormous effect of low income and education on student results, he says.

Indeed, they support the abolition of the Gonski low SES funding loadings.

Cobbolt not only has the data, but some powerful allies, to support his claim that Australia must decide whether the future of school funding is about “increasing equity or compounding privilege in education”.

They’re people like American investor and philanthropist Warren Buffet, who’s in a better position than most to judge which way the wind is blowing. As Buffet famously opined: “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war – and we’re winning.”

A treacherous path to austerity

John Falzon, CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society, is another advocate in the fight for equity, with vast experience dealing with the casualties of the government’s austerity policies. Or, as Falzon bluntly put it to delegates at the AEU Federal Conference, “its viciousness toward ordinary people”.

Measures in the budget, he said, “ripped the guts out of what remains of a fair and egalitarian Australia”. Falzon criticised the Prime Minister’s “solemn promise” that his government would stand by the vulnerable, saying it had been “spectacularly broken”.

“This government has walked away from its responsibility to its people. It has shied away from the challenge to build a broader and more sustainable revenue base so that no one misses out on the essentials of life, such as a place to live, a place to work and a place to learn,” says Falzon.

For Falzon it’s an issue of class masquerading as a fiscal crisis, and if we “embark on this treacherous path of US-style austerity we will be staring down the barrel of a social crisis.”

The Prime Minister, he says, “is fond of claiming that he is simply fighting the scourge of intergenerational theft”. But Falzon says that’s simply “code for protecting the perks of the wealthy by cutting social expenditure rather than engaging in genuine tax reform.”

The intergenerational theft the government should be worrying about, says Falzon, is the theft of opportunities for the next generation. “It’s intergenerational theft if we fail to invest properly in education, from pre-school right through to TAFE and university, making it accessible to all, not just the wealthy.”

Where disadvantaged students are enrolled

Enrolments of disadvantaged students by school sector 2013 (%)

Source: Equity or privilege in education? Trevor Cobbold, February 2015.
Almost all children with autism spectrum disorder experience difficulties at school, but there’s work underway on many fronts to find more effective ways of teaching them.

**Enabling inclusion**

Getting an education can be a difficult experience for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It’s also a challenge for their teachers, who don’t always receive the training they need to achieve the best learning outcomes.

Researchers, not-for-profit organisations, government and the education sector are trying to improve the situation on a number of fronts. The importance of this work is obvious when you consider that about 5 per cent of the population is living with autism, so most teachers have at least one ASD child in their classroom. Only 5 per cent of children with autism attend school without experiencing any educational restrictions, according to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data (2012). Of the other 95 per cent, 6 per cent are unable to attend school because of their disability and 44 per cent need to attend either a special class in a mainstream school or a special school.

Among those attending school, 86 per cent report ‘having difficulty’ at school, with the major issues being learning, communication and fitting in socially. Autism Spectrum Australia describes autism as “lifelong developmental disabilities characterised by marked difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours, and sensory sensitivities”.

**Shedding light**

The first Australia-wide analysis of students with ASD and their educational needs was launched last year by Dr Beth Saggers from Queensland University of Technology. The study has invited input from parents, school administrators, teachers, specialist and ancillary support staff, and older students with autism (11-18 years).

It’s just one of 11 projects in the Autism Cooperative Research Centre’s education program (see breakout story...
on page 32) aimed at shedding light on why children with ASD underachieve relative to their cognitive abilities, says Griffith University professor Deb Keen. “That means honing in on areas where they have difficulties, but also trying to look at building on their strengths,” says Keen.

Practical resources can help teachers build understanding, but experts stress there is no one-size-fits-all approach. “It’s important to recognise that autism presents very differently in every single child, in every single personality,” says Anissa Rajendra, assistant principal and K/1 autism class teacher at Corrimal East Public School in NSW.

That view is supported by Keen’s new research on ASD students’ academic achievement, which shows that students with autism won’t necessarily be strong in one particular area and weak in another. “It’s quite diverse,” she says, adding there can be fluctuation across academic skill areas. “Sometimes we see peaks and troughs in [the same] individual whereby they might be quite strong in maths, for example, and then not so good in English, and then we get the reverse.”

The results suggest educators should start with some in-depth assessment of the child’s individual skill areas, but that doesn’t always happen, says Keen. Another good starting point can be a conversation with the child’s parents, and possibly their previous teacher, suggests Jenny McLeod, a special education teacher at Biloela State School in Queensland. The school’s special education program currently works with 13 students with ASD. “The parents first and foremost are the people who know that child the best,” she says, adding that teachers should ask about the child’s special interests and use them in their teaching.

It’s also important to understand their unique sensory sensitivities, says Macquarie University’s Dr Kathy Cologon, author of *Inclusive Education in the Early Years: Right from the Start*. “There are things that someone who doesn’t have autism might not even notice,” says Cologon, “whereas for someone labelled with autism, it might overwhelm them so completely sometimes that, in that moment, not addressing it closes the opportunity for them to really learn.”

It might be particular smells, such as the teacher’s perfume, particular sounds or the pitch of sounds, or particular situations that create difficulties.

Rajendra gives the example of an adjustment that has been made for a boy who is very academically competent, but who needs “a quiet throw of a ball against a wall” after the stimulation of the playground before he’s ready to focus in class.

“In a nutshell, inclusive education is good for everybody.”

**Behavioural triggers**

Knowing about potential triggers can help divert a ‘meltdown’. Sometimes a child with ASD will get upset all over again about something that happened a week ago. “It takes a lot to get what is really triggering some of their behaviours,” says McLeod.

Sudden changes in routine, such as wet weather affecting an aqua-therapy class, can be a trigger. Forewarnings of possible changes can help. “If you can, give them a day or two’s notice and keep reminding them about it.”

If a child is to encounter a new teacher or student, showing them a photograph of the person in advance can be a good idea.

Teachers also need to be aware of how children’s low social skills and different methods of communication can have an impact, says McLeod. “Some kids take things very literally. If you tell them to ‘pull their socks up’,

**Resources**

www.amaze.org.au
www.suelarkey.com.au
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www.autismtraining.com.au
they freak out because they don’t have any socks on.
   “We have one boy who is non-verbal at the moment and he blows raspberries all day and pinches you. He tries to get your attention in different ways. But he’s very good on the computer.”

Teachers may need to think about what actually matters in an educational experience or assessment, says Cologon.
   “For example, some people labelled with autism might find it quite difficult to make direct eye contact.” If children need to give a short presentation to the class, the important thing may be that the child is engaging with the content alongside their peers. Making eye contact may not matter.

Adjustments can also be made in the way children are taught. That may include hand gestures, or even modelling clay, to reinforce teaching, says Rajendra.

The playground and fitting in socially are often areas of difficulty. Children with ASD can have little concept of joining in a game or asking if they can play. If they are in a game and the rules change, they can suddenly become upset, says McLeod.

To build positive play experiences, Rajendra’s school has a space for children who may be overwhelmed by playground noise. Also, the teacher on duty can intervene in games at critical points without stopping them.
   “We work on how to manage that situation – how to enter and exit a play situation, and how to disagree when you think the game’s not being fairly played.”

Cologon says having a play bucket filled with different items can help provide focus in the playground for many children, including those with ASD.

Benefits of inclusion
For teachers of students with ASD, another major challenge can be dealing with other children and their parents.

Cologon notes that research supports the value of an inclusive education for all children. There are social and academic benefits for children with and without a disability, in terms of behaviour and also communication and language. There are even positive outcomes in relation to physical development.
   “In a nutshell, inclusive education is good for everybody,” she says.

There are benefits for teachers, too.
   “The research has found that, when teachers have the experience of being inclusive, it leads to really positive attitudes and they become more flexible and more skilled as educators for all children.”

Cologon acknowledges that school cultures can vary and says the journey towards inclusive education means taking into account a diverse range of families.
   “When teachers get complaints from other parents, a lot of it is associated with the parents’ own lack of opportunity to learn about these things and their own stereotyping or prejudices and assumptions that go with it,” she says.

“As the starting point, it’s important that teachers and leadership in schools have the attitude that they are going to make it work. They then need to create an inclusive culture within the setting, and an important part of that is bringing families on the journey as well.”

Christine Long is a freelance writer.

Groundbreaking research
The Autism Cooperative Research Centre’s 11 education-related research projects include looking at autism, anxiety and school functioning; using remote technology to support training and development for rural and remote teachers with ASD students; and using assistive technology in combination with explicit writing strategy instruction.

A number of projects are aimed at addressing sensory issues by making classrooms more autism-friendly, says Griffith University professor Deb Keen.
   “There’s an emphasis on looking at whole-of-class approaches to creating environments that are good for kids with ASD while also having potential benefits for other students.”

Adjustments might include using auditory amplification or a loop system to help students who are hypersensitive to noise to tune in.

Another project involves the use of structured teaching strategies to support students.
   “Many students with ASD have difficulties with self-regulation, so times of transition – for example, moving from one task to another, or from one lesson to another – can be quite stressful,” says Keen.

Providing visual schedules is one way to make it easier for students to know when a task is finished and they should begin a new task, she says.

The Autism Cooperative Research Centre, based at Long Pocket in Brisbane, in association with the University of Queensland, opened in mid-2013.

For more information, visit: www.autismcrc.com.au

“Autism presents very differently in every single child, in every single personality.”
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Andrea Flew (left) was a Teacher Trainer with the Monastic Education School in Yangon, Myanmar (Burma). Andrea is one of hundreds of Australian volunteers who have shared their skills in Asia, the Pacific and Africa.

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My best app

123D Sculpt+
(formerly 123D Creature)Android, iOS, free
123D Sculpt+ is part of a suite of 123D apps by Autodesk, from photos to electronic circuits. Students can create 3D sculptures with a skeletal modelling system. “Students get straight into the apps within an hour to create a model that goes into a 3D printer. The apps are easy to use, and all of them have YouTube tutorials.” Howell’s Year 7 class taught the prep class how to use the app to design zoo animals, which they were studying in class.
www.123dapp.com/sculptplus

Planbook
iOS, windows; annual subscription of $11.99
This lesson planning app helps Howell to be more organised, entering her two-week timetable and lesson plans. “I like that I can customise the format of my lesson plans, so each plan has a learning intention, revision and reflection. Plus, it is flexible. For example, if there is a year level assembly, I can easily move my lesson plan to the next lesson without having to cut and paste.”
www.planbook.com

PureFlow
iOS, free
Howell uses this simple-to-use mind-mapping app to make fast, editable mind maps to brainstorm with her class. “The app allows you to save and share your creations as PDF files. I often connect my iPad up to the interactive whiteboard and we make mind maps as a class.”
www.itunes.apple.com/au/app/pureflow/id600955222?mt=8

Renee’s tips
Using apps in the classroom gives Renee Howell another tool to enrich her teaching. “Apps give students the opportunity to engage with the curriculum content in a different way, or make for a great starting point when introducing a topic,” she says.
“When I introduce an app to the classroom I always display my iPad on the interactive whiteboard and we work through an example together (with the students using their iPads).”

worth a look ...

GarageBand
iOS, $6.49
A recording studio for students to create music for multimedia projects, podcasts or presentations. For example, as part of a book report, students could think about scenes and build soundtracks for them, or create a trailer for the book. Up to 32 tracks can be used to build songs, as well as instruments such as piano, drums and guitar. It’s easy for students to create a song, even if they ‘don’t do music’.
www.apple.com/au/mac/garageband

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Android, iOS; free, with in-app purchases
Students can add text and artwork to photos, for example a quote, caption or insightful comments from their assignments. They can get creative and overlay artwork or poetry. There are more than 30 font styles. In-app purchases include more fonts and artwork packs.
www.madewithover.com

SHARE YOUR SECRETS
Which apps do you find useful in the classroom? Let us know at educator@hardiegrant.com.au
Clever computer devices and applications are enhancing the education, and lives, of students with disabilities and learning difficulties. Here we round up some popular aids.

BY CYNTHIA KARENA

Aiding to learn

New assistive technologies are enabling students with disabilities or learning difficulties to participate in lessons and perform the same or similar tasks as their peers.

The assistive technologies can create an equitable playing field, says Dr Dianne Chambers, an associate professor and special education coordinator at the University of Notre Dame Australia, in Fremantle.

“(Computer) tablets, for example, act as both an instructional and assistive technology, making them versatile and cost-effective when compared to a dedicated voice-output device, which can cost $10,000.”

Carefully matching the device and technology to the needs of each student is critical, she says.

For children with autism, that means catering to their need to be taught visually, says Craig Smith, from Autism Spectrum Australia. “Cut down on the words used in the classroom and reinforce all academic and behavioural concepts with visual examples.”

Smith used iTunes U, a section of the iTunes Music Store with free educational audio and video files, to create an Anzac Day course with visual learning activities. Students select a photo, then create an Anzac scene using the building-block-based video game Minecraft.

“Finally, in Explain Everything [an interactive whiteboard and screencasting tool], they record a narration of their understanding of the scene their composite image articulates. They visually add notes to the image as they narrate to further highlight their understanding,” says Smith.

Vision-impaired students can use the iPad’s VoiceOver feature, which reads the screen and guides them through accessing each learning activity.

“They can even type in braille on the screen, straight into any app.”

Motor skills

At Coolbellup Learning Centre, a specialist primary education support school in Perth, non-verbal students use an app called Magnetic Board to learn how to recognise and spell their own name. Students with poor fine motor skills, who can’t use a keyboard, can point to and drag letters around the screen, creating and matching words.

“It allows them to participate in a lesson alongside others who may or may not need the support of the device,” says principal Pauline Winrow.

The Maths Slide app is another favourite for those who can’t easily manipulate objects during maths lessons.

“It’s an easier way for them to show their understanding of the concepts being taught. The games section, where students compete, is a great motivator,” says Winrow.

Primary students at Mosman Park School for Deaf Children, in Perth, use cross-curricular apps such as iMovie and Explain Everything.

“Students can insert videos of themselves explaining their understanding of the concepts [such as fractions] being taught at the time,” says principal Monique Smith.

Switch activation

Another valuable tool is a switch that children with motor, visual or cognitive impairments can trigger with voice activation, controlled breathing or simple motions such as head movements to access devices.

At Rockhampton Special School, a co-educational P-12 in Queensland, Bigmac switches are used to access interactive whiteboards and the Jelly Bean interface. Whiteboards can be touched with a finger rather than having to write everything, says Kellie Verrall, the school’s senior occupational therapist.

“Choices can be made by selecting pictures rather than using words. This increases engagement as many students with autism and vision impairment have difficulty engaging with plain text in books,” says Verrall.

A class of five students with severe and multiple impairments turns pages...
using switches while reading books on an interactive whiteboard. They answer questions about a book using Clicker word processing software, or eye-gaze boards that enable them to choose pictorial responses instead of pointing to them.

“We have a Clicker 6 page for their writing,” says Verrall. “It displays and automatically scans through the letters of the alphabet. When students hear the letter they want, they ‘press’ their switch to select it.”

**Text-to-speech app**
The text-to-speech Proloquo2Go app is useful for students who can’t speak or have difficulty speaking. They can tap on a comprehensive, customisable list of word and phrase icons, or type in words, to create sentences that ‘speak’.

Harrison School, in the ACT, which caters for students from pre-school to Year 6, used readers for a non-verbal Year 1 student that were programmed into Proloquo2Go.

“With the combination of Proloquo2go and a hard copy of the reader, the student could reference each page to the buttons on the device to hear the story being read aloud,” says support staffer Tracey Collins. “He was so excited that he had control of the story. He would often want to read several readers in a row, clapping his hands after each page.”

“**He was so excited that he had control of the story. He would often want to read several readers in a row, clapping his hands after each page.**”

**Tracey Collins**
Support staffer, Harrison School

At Perth’s School of Special Educational Needs: Disability, which helps schools support students with disabilities, associate principal Angela Rees tells of a Year 2 student with cerebral palsy who has been using a laptop, head switch and Clicker word processing software as a reading tool. Now, with the addition of an onscreen keyboard, he’s working towards using it as a writing tool.

Many TAFE students with disabilities use digital smartpens and the text-to-speech Read & Write Gold software suite, says Graham Smith, physical disabilities head teacher and consultant at Nepean College in Sydney.

Smartpens, which have an inbuilt camera and audio recorder, are useful for students with memory problems. After class, they simply tap anywhere in their written notes and the accompanying audio is replayed. These notes can then be downloaded to companion desktop software for later retrieval and review.

Cynthia Karena is a freelance writer.
Why do you teach?

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Teacher to teacher

Three teachers share stories of life and learning.

VICKI LUCAS
Deputy principal, Gilmore Primary School, ACT
I chose early childhood education because I want to be there at the beginning of the story. The first time a child learns something is always exciting for me.

There are just under 150 children at Gilmore Primary, so every teacher is every child’s teacher. This year we’re doing some things differently, based on learnings from the Stronger Smarter leadership program. We were inspired by a process developed by the Mithaka Aboriginal people from south western Queensland called Engoori, presented by Scott Gorringe. It teaches you how to deal with complex challenges by stepping back and reviewing your strengths and how to honour those strengths, and the values that underpin them.

As a result, everything we’re doing now is defined by four heritage values: resilience, interpersonal understanding, high expectations and keeping it real. We developed a cultural action plan based on work from the Torres Strait Islands, which uses a tree as a representation of the model.

The roots are the values, the branches are the cultural practices and the trunk embodies the rituals and traditions. The idea is, if a storm or fire knocks off the top of the tree, it will continue to grow if the roots and values are strong.

That’s reframed what we’re doing. At the leadership level, rather than rushing to identify and solve a problem, we consider a plan that’s consistent with our heritage values. That fits in with our social and emotional learning program, which has resilience as one of its keys.

It’s all very new and exciting. There’s a positive energy, and we hope Scott can do more with us to develop our system around high expectations, relationships, challenging the discourse of how we approach things, and coming from a strength-based process.

BRENT BROWN
Junior secondary teacher, School of Distance Education, Charleville, QLD
After my fourth year of teaching, I applied for my rural and remote service and was allocated to the Western Alliance School of Distance Education, which teaches children living in the western corridor of Queensland.

I teach 10 students in Year 8 history and English. Because we communicate over a telephone, I have to establish protocols for them to contribute to class discussion. There is access to a webcam, but unreliable internet connections are a challenge for students who are geographically isolated.

Collaboration between home and school is vital to ensure students are working in their home schoolroom when they’re not in media contact, because I can’t look over their shoulder.

We get together during two Multischools at Longreach each year, where teachers and students have lessons as they would in a mainstream school. There are also regular social functions during school events to help build relationships and strengthen the link between home and school.

In November we’ll be putting on our first musical production. It’s an exciting opportunity to teach the arts right across the streams, from dance, music and drama to visual arts and media.

I’ve been welcomed here and feel like I belong. The only downside is it takes you longer to do your shopping because you’ve got to stop and talk to everyone! I’ve committed to the school until the end of next year, then I’ll see where the wind blows me.

WE ASK …

PATRICE RYAN
Prep teacher, Wooloowin State School, Lutwyche, QLD
I started teaching 29 years ago and I’ve been at Wooloowin State School for 11 years.

I enjoy watching children develop in the foundation years and working with their parents. It’s an honour to help them negotiate the school journey with their child.

When my own children were young, a friend once criticised parents who were still doing their children’s hair in the school car park. I told her: I’m one of those parents. I get that!

Many parents at Wooloowin have become my friends. When I broke my leg last year, my husband had to take time off work. The support from the school community was amazing. They looked after us every day bringing meals. It was a very humbling experience.

Each fortnight I speak about values at the school assembly. I cover subjects such as trust, friendship, loyalty and responsibility – the things that make up a whole person, not just the academic side. It helps the school strengthen as a community and allows students to learn respect for themselves, the school and those around them.

Teaching is a rewarding but sometimes difficult profession. You often hear about improvements that need to be made in schools, but many people don’t recognise the wonderful things teachers do in classrooms for their students every day.

I love mentoring student teachers. I like the fact that graduates work with experienced teachers in their first year. I didn’t have a lot of support as a young teacher. I have, however, met many wonderful teachers, parents and children over the years who have influenced my teaching style. And for that I am very grateful.
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