Educator

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Funding panel will be hamstrung

Island life
The long-term benefits of volunteer teaching

Facing challenges
New educators find creative solutions

Breaking the ice
Changing students’ lives in the Arctic

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Defending working rights and conditions

Teachers’ labour rights are too frequently ignored by governments, despite their protection under International Labour Organization conventions, according to Educational International.

It’s deputy general secretary Haldis Holst told the International Labour Conference in Geneva that quality education depends on quality teaching, which involves a well-trained and highly motivated teaching force.

“This requires fair terms and employment conditions, as spelt out in the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Teachers,” Holst says.

But the list of countries that are violating teachers’ rights is long, she says.

They include: Algeria, Bahrain, Botswana, Cambodia, Ecuador and Turkey. In Bahrain and Ecuador independent education unions have been delegalised. In Turkey, more than 28,000 teachers and academics have been dismissed and replaced.

Education unions have a dual mission, says Holst.

“Firstly, to defend the interests of their members and the profession at large through social dialogue and, secondly, to promote education quality and equity. These two missions are intertwined and at the same time complementary.”

Throughout history, teacher unions have been at the forefront of improving education quality and educational opportunities for all. It is no coincidence that countries with strong education systems most often also have strong education unions,” she says.

The AEU is a member of Education International, which is the global union federation for more than 30 million teachers, academics, researchers and education support workers.

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Writing by design

A funny and educational card game, designed to inspire Years 5 to 8 students to write creative stories while increasing their literacy levels, has won a gong in the annual Good Design Awards run by Good Design Australia.

Developed by the New Zealand education ministry, the ‘Game of Awesome’ was named overall winner in the Communication Design category.

Game of Awesome has been published under the ‘Creative Commons’ licence and is distributed free to schools.

The card game’s creators say it “inspires students to write by stealth”.

Meanwhile, a system to help children with autism has won the Design Innovation award for HUG, a wearable tracker that monitors the child’s stress levels. It’s an early-warning system, via mobile app, that lets carers and parents know when the child is about to have an aggressive outburst. A ‘hug shield’ then guides the child through breathing exercises and it can be wrapped around the child to comfort them.
G20 campaign pays off for education

Following a worldwide campaign that attracted celebrities including Rihanna, the G20 meeting in Hamburg has agreed to step up financing for education and to include a focus on education at the next G20 summit to be held in 2018.

Former prime minister Julia Gillard, who is chair of the Global Partnership for Education, welcomed the historic recognition of education in the G20 communiqué.

“The G20 Leaders Declaration: Shaping an Interconnected World emphasises the importance of education in achieving sustainability, women’s empowerment, bridging the digital divide and boosting employment,” Gillard said in a statement.

President Mauricio Macri of Argentina reaffirmed that education will be a signature of his country’s presidency of the G20 in 2018, saying “nothing is more important for our future than education.”

More working two or three jobs

More than 750,000 Australians are working in second and third jobs just to survive, an Australian Bureau of Statistics study has found.

“The growth in second and third jobs is extremely disturbing and should have every Australian worker, economist and politician worried,” says ACTU president Ged Kearney.

“While politicians are giving themselves massive raises and cutting tax for millionaires, there are people working round the clock for days just to keep their house, feed their family and keep the lights on.

“No one working normal full-time hours in Australia should need to take a second job. We need to raise wages and we need better job security, and we’re going to change the rules to make sure that happens,” Kearney says.

Join the ACTU’s Change the Rules campaign at australianunions.org.au/change_the_rules

Events

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Celebrate World Teachers’ Day

World Teachers’ Day recognises the work of teachers in educating and inspiring young people each year.

It was established by UNESCO in 1994 to recognise the role of teachers and is held internationally on 5 October. But in Australia it’s celebrated on the last Friday of October (this year 27 October) to avoid school holidays.

Get involved

The Queensland Teachers’ Union suggests ways to promote the day, including:

- celebrating teachers during assembly and presenting certificates of acknowledgement
- holding a morning tea or event
- working with parent and community groups to acknowledge teachers
- encouraging teachers, parents and caregivers to join the department’s Facebook and Twitter campaigns.

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Schools are forced to buy-in a substantial volume of educational products and services that were once provided by education departments, the Commercialisation in Public Schooling report says.

The report was commissioned by the NSW Teachers Federation from Professor Bob Lingard of the University of Queensland’s School of Education and a team that included academics from Manchester Metropolitan University and Queensland University of Technology.

A national survey of more than 2,000 AEU members, carried out as part of the report, found evidence of “significant” commercial activity in public schools.

Around 74 per cent of those surveyed saw the ethics of having student data in commercial hands as a major concern and 72 per cent were also highly concerned at the way public schools are being run as a business.

Australian schooling has the most developed national data infrastructure in the world, due to standardisation rollout, the study says.

Edtech market worth billions

Overseas, the value of the US education technology market was estimated to be worth over $8.38 billion in 2014 by the Software and Information Industry Association.

“Testing and assessment as well as data analysis and integration are identified as key growth areas for the industry in the coming years,” the report found.

Professor Lingard says the trend may change work practices for teachers and learning for children.

“There’s a lot to think about here and there’s a lot going on under the radar which is escaping scrutiny,” he told a NSW Teachers Federation conference.

Thirteen commercial vendors are already operating education projects in Australia that comply with standards set by the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF), according to the report.

Australian schooling has the most developed national data infrastructure in the world.

Who’s really paying?

Teachers are concerned about commercial influences in schools, according to a new report.

These include assessment and reporting software, cloud-based student identity management and learning apps. SIF was launched in Australia in 2009, following the launch in the US by Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates.

US opposition to private dollars

However, further education involvement in the US by Gates has met with resistance. Opposition from activist groups shut down a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation program in the US to establish a standard infrastructure to manage school data across schools, districts and states.

Concerns about data privacy and technology companies profiting from personal data led to the closure of the program in 2013.

In the US, privacy concerns have provoked “outrage” from parents, students and educators, Professor Lingard told the conference.

He carried out research for another case study on the parent activist Opt-Out movement, where 26 per cent of parents in New York and 50 per cent on Long Island last year opted their children out of standard testing from Years 3-8 to boycott tests in the schooling system. The Trump Budget cuts of $9 billion to public education are also likely to strengthen the resolve of those opposed to the corporate reform agenda, Professor Lingard says.

Importantly, a high percentage of respondents to the AEU survey wanted governments to learn from the failed models of commercialised and privatised schooling in the US and UK, as well as the recent reforms made to Australia’s TAFE sector.
FROM THE PRESIDENT

The I Give a Gonski campaign has been a powerful movement, connecting schools and their communities through the sharing of inspiring stories that show how resources can really make a difference to student outcomes.

The campaign has changed the national dialogue about schools and funding, forcing the Turnbull government to recognise that this is an issue that's top of mind for the nation. And, it’s an issue that will become even more critical as we head into the next federal election.

Unfortunately, the government's solution to needs-based funding doesn’t solve anything. Instead of ensuring every school across the country has the resources it needs to close the education gap for students, the Turnbull plan entrenches disadvantage.

Agreements with state and territory governments have been torn up and $3 billion in funding that was to have been delivered in the next two years has been cut. Meanwhile, the government’s long-promised disability loading has turned out to be nothing more than a severe cut for five states and territories.

The flat-share-for-everyone model doesn’t take that into account. Funding and outcomes go hand-in-hand; you cannot separate the two. So it’s a pretty ridiculous situation to have a review that ignores that link.

When it comes to resourcing our schools, the choice is clear. The AEU will continue to campaign until every school has the funding it needs to properly support every student’s learning needs.

Labor is committed to the needs-based funding model. Shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek says the ALP will restore “every dollar of funding that's been cut” if it wins the next election.

The Turnbull government may consider this a settled matter, but there is absolutely no doubt that we will never give up or give in, until we secure proper needs-based funding for every child. across the country.

Correna Haythorpe
AEU FEDERAL PRESIDENT

Only needs-based funding for every child will eliminate entrenched disadvantage in Australian schools.

New review won’t change the facts

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Funding for many public schools will fall well short of what’s being promised to some of the richest schools in the nation.

Smoke and mirrors

Despite the Turnbull government’s promise to confront the overfunding of private schools, the government’s new plan means that, for the first time in Australia, we will have legislation that directs 80 per cent of federal funding to private schools and only 20 per cent to public schools.

Schools in the areas of highest disadvantage, such as Northern Territory and Tasmania, will receive the lowest increases in funding.

In fact, funding for many public schools will fall well short of what’s being promised to some of the richest schools in the nation. These public schools will be left severely under-resourced even after six years.

In seeking to deflect public attention from the obvious link between school resources and student outcomes, the federal government has empanelled a new Gonski Review.

The panel will not look at funding, but rather, under the terms of reference, the “effective and efficient use of funding”. In other words, what schools do with the money. But that’s only one side of the story.

If the panel is not permitted to consider both sides, it cannot hope to solve the problems facing our most vulnerable and disadvantaged students.

No retreat

Funding was and still remains the most important aspect of the Gonski review, particularly the recognition that states and territories are at different points in terms of their capacity to achieve the schooling resource standard.

The flat-share-for-everyone model doesn’t take that into account. Funding and outcomes go hand-in-hand; you cannot separate the two. So it’s a pretty ridiculous situation to have a review that ignores that link.

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The new Turnbull school funding plan will entrench disadvantage and inequity according to commentators, sparking a renewed and determined campaign to oppose it.

Lost opportunities as kids miss out

“It was a once-in-a-generation opportunity and now it’s lost,” says Peter Rouse, principal of Canley Vale High School, referring to the changes to the Turnbull government’s changes to the Gonski schools funding model.

“It’s not about teachers, it’s a benefit for the whole community that’s been lost. That’s the sad part,” says Rouse.

But AEU president Correna Haythorpe says educators and school communities are not about to give up.

“We’ll continue to fight until every school in Australia receives the funding it needs,” she says.

The Turnbull government trashed the Gonski funding agreements with five state and territory governments and slashed $3 billion in funding that was due to be delivered in the next two years. Some schools will only get 10 per cent of the money they need to ensure they can keep improving teaching and learning and provide the one-on-one support that children need.

Severely disadvantaged schools had been relying on the boost in funding to expand literacy and numeracy programs and support for students with disabilities, as well as vital professional development for educators.

While the early Gonski dollars flowing to schools for the past few years had been making a big difference, it was the next tranche of funding, more than ever before, that was expected to cement the new programs and build on them to provide a more positive and certain outcome for each student.

Under the Turnbull plan, the federal government will provide a fixed proportion of funding to public and private schools and it’s spending less money than under the previous Gonski funding model, the government has confirmed.

We’ll continue to fight until every school in Australia receives the funding it needs.

$17 billion shortfall

Labor’s education spokesperson Tanya Plibersek told Sky News that the gap between the Turnbull plan and the full Gillard plan was $17 billion over a decade and Labor was committed to “restoring every dollar of funding that’s been cut”.

By the end of 2023, public schools will be receiving 20 per cent of their public funding entitlement (measured by a Schooling Resource Standard or SRS) and private schools 80 per cent, with state and territory governments kicking in the shortfall.

As part of the original Gonski agreements, the states and territories agreed to put one third of the funding needed to ensure that public schools
Disability cuts hit hard

The Turnbull school funding plan is bad news for students with a disability who already suffer a shortage of adequate resources and support.

There will be cuts to funding in public schools in South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. The cuts will be most significant in Tasmania (44 per cent less) and the Northern Territory (37 per cent less). The funding cuts will make it harder for schools already affected by the chronic lack of resourcing in this area.

Haythorpe says public schools in six states and territories will still be under-resourced in 2023.

“Under the government’s plan, schools in the areas of highest disadvantage, such as Northern Territory and Tasmania, will receive the lowest increases in funding,” she says.

“And those increases will come in well below the funding boost provided to some of the richest schools in the nation.”

That blatant discrimination has provided a whole new level of motivation in school communities to fight for proper funding, says Haythorpe.

“In particular, the next federal election will be critically important because we’ll have a clear choice: Labor has committed to restore the funding,” she says.

While Peter Rouse has yet to receive confirmation of next year’s funding, he already knows it’ll be much less than he was expecting.

Canley Vale High, in Sydney’s south west, has 1,487 students and 83 per cent are in the lowest two quartiles of socio-economic advantage. Of those, 96 per cent are from a non-English-speaking background and for 95 per cent English is a second language.

Rouse has large numbers of students with a “very high level of need” and says the extra funds would have helped them to “hit some serious targets”.

**Widespread effects**

“In fact, it would have been a boost for the whole school and the broader community,” he says. “It really is a lost opportunity and we’ll now have to wait for a generation to have that chance again.”

Shelby Papadopoulos, principal at Colac Primary School in western Victoria, is well aware of the relationship between the wider community and the school.

Her school is in a region where many families suffer disadvantage and there is a high incidence of family violence reports. Last year, the area was hit hard by the ‘dairy crisis’ - when the milk price paid to dairy farmers plummeted.

Most of Colac Primary’s 250 students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and a large number are developmentally vulnerable, particularly in language, and need intensive support.

“Those early interventions are crucial because the employment opportunities that exist in this district probably won’t exist in the future. We need our kids to have the best shot,” says Papadopoulos.

Her original allocation for next year was $100,000 and Papadopoulos planned to extend the welfare support, literacy and speech programs from part time to full time.

“It would have ensured all needs were met and we had full-time staff available to work with students and families on any given day of the week.”

But her hopes have been dashed by a letter confirming that her allocation under the new funding arrangements is a little more than a third of the original expected amount: $34,000.

The staff and school community are “immensely disappointed”, says Papadopoulos.

“Our vulnerable students will not get the support that they need.”

reach 95 per cent of the SRS in 2019 (2022 in Victoria). Now states and territories will be forced to increase their spending to 75 per cent of the SRS over six years and they face the loss of federal funding if they don’t. Even so, public schools will not reach the 95 per cent point until 2023.

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Taking action on threats and assault

Schools across Australia have reported an increase in staff being threatened, intimidated, verbally abused and physically assaulted by students, parents, caregivers and community members.

But education departments have been slow to address the problem, which is made worse by cuts to funding and resources.

AEU branches report that many schools are curtailing programs for dealing with students who display challenging behaviour and reducing staff who take on the role.

In just a few years, violent incidents in schools have doubled in the ACT and tripled in Western Australia. The AEU has called for better data on the extent of occupational violence because there are indications that many violations are going unreported.

When the AEU’s ACT branch surveyed its members on occupational violence last year, more than 50 per cent of respondents had experienced or witnessed a physical or verbal incident. Almost a third had sustained a physical injury.

But less than half of these respondents had reported an incident. Some had been actively discouraged from reporting. Others were unaware of their own or their employer’s obligations to report under the Work Health and Safety Act.

Two phrases dominated comments, says AEU ACT branch secretary Glenn Fowler: “This is part of the job” and “I should suck it up.”

“It’s the elephant in the room,” says Fowler. “But being hit, kicked and spat at isn’t an acceptable part of the job.”

Support systems
The AEU is committed to ensuring public education environments are safe and free of violence. Branches are ramping up campaigns, tools and training to support members in evaluating and dealing with violence before it reaches the point where critical incidents occur.

Queensland Teachers' Union president Kevin Bates is disturbed by the changing nature of violence.

"It’s no longer just the case of a student lashing out," he says. "It’s becoming accepted in the community that it’s okay to come into schools and yell, scream and potentially assault somebody doing their job.”

In July last year, the Queensland government launched the Respect Our Staff, Respect Our School campaign in response to 174 teachers lodging worker compensation claims after being assaulted by students, and threats of violence against teachers that resulted in 150 parents being banned from school grounds.

Taking action against offenders can be intimidating and arduous. Permanent staff worry that a report will be seen as a poor reflection on their ability to manage a classroom.

Those most vulnerable to
occupational violence — casual, contract, paraprofessional and support staff — are the least empowered to speak for themselves.

Drawing the line

“People are scared,” says Mary Franklyn, general secretary of the State School Teachers’ Union of WA. “We want members to know that the union is with them all the way. Assault is a criminal offence, so we are supporting our members to charge and prosecute. We will take the legal action and collective branch and member action.”

Under the union’s Draw the Line Against Violence in Schools campaign, enforcement of members’ right to a safe workplace has become the number one job. Franklyn says watching behaviour in schools go from “low-level naughty with the odd spike” to “widespread outside the box behaviour” prompted the union’s change in direction, with a new plan for dealing with violent behaviour.

Most violations are minor and generally sorted out. It’s only when things escalate that the OSH Act and police come into play. If all else fails, the executive will direct members to down tools and walk out.

Franklyn recently addressed 120 school staff about two members who had received death threats from a secondary student with a lengthy police record.

“We had agreement from members of all three site unions to enforce OSH rights and formally refuse to work with the student if the student stepped back in this school.”

At another school, a student dealing drugs was threatening anyone who didn’t pay up with a fractured skull and other serious injuries. When the principal took a stand, the department position was that it would be a black mark against his name if he pushed for the student’s exclusion.

“(The principal) stood his ground, and the union and union members were there shoulder to shoulder.”

Domestic violence link

Occupational violence in schools is heavily gender-based. Like domestic violence, most of the victims are women and most of the perpetrators are boys and men.

Fowler thinks it’s an important link, and he raised it with the ACT Education Directorate during discussions with the AEU that resulted in an occupational violence plan for ACT schools being adopted earlier this year.

“I wanted to know how we will ever get over the scourge of domestic violence when we have mainly boys hitting mainly women in their workplace, and those children coming straight back to the classroom without any apparent consequences,” says Fowler.

He cites the case of a young primary school teacher driven to despair in her first year due to ongoing occupational violence.

“When a large metal bracket thrown at her head smashed into the wall next to her, she wrote in her evidence, ‘I wished it had hit me in the face because at least something would have been done.’”

A national issue

Departmental neglect of occupational violence has already driven many teachers from the profession and convinced potential newcomers to rethink their career in education.

Occupational violence is an issue of national importance affecting the working conditions of school employees, so it fits comfortably in a work, health and safety framework.

Bates is surprised that “we’re still having conversations about how to respectfully get along with people”.

But he’s optimistic about the future.

“Unions have the capacity to work with employers when they’re willing to do so, or take them on to ensure wins for members.”

“We need to make it clear, once and for all, that we won’t tolerate violence towards any worker in a school context, and we want to protect the kids as well.”
Job insecurity and the fight against inequality are two of the top agenda items for ACTU secretary Sally McManus who talked about some of her ideas with AEU federal secretary Susan Hopgood.

**Using the power to inspire**

**Susan Hopgood:** Let’s start with your Year 11. When your teacher was sacked along with 2,500 other teachers in NSW, you joined more than 50,000 teachers marching on Parliament House. You said you had a strong feeling about people power, union power. How does that experience influence your work today?

**Sally McManus:** It’s hard to explain. It was the act of the strike itself, and the injustice that was happening with our teachers being sacked. But in the end, it was the feeling of togetherness and the power there was in that.

That fight was won, but it wasn’t won immediately. There are lots of lessons in that, too. Sometimes it’s a longer battle.

Getting a traineeship in the trade union movement and eventually being a branch secretary in my union, then having interactions with members of the NSW Teachers Federation all along the way, have been important.

Cathy Block was a really important mentor of mine. I met her in the first two months I started as a trainee organiser. Jennie George was a big inspiration when I was a younger union official and she was the first woman president of the ACTU. Everyone looked up to Jennie, she was an inspiration as a strong union leader and as a woman.

Then, of course, Sharan Burrow. I guess NSWTF has a lot of that history. There are others, too, outside of the NSWTF. They went out of their way to support young people, to mentor us. Not because they were told to but because of who they were as unionists and teachers. That made a huge difference to me.
SH: That was my experience as well - predominantly women leaders who encouraged and fought for our positions in the organisation; fought for rule changes to ensure women were represented. Do you now feel that you have an obligation?

SM: I feel that now, I’m in a leadership position, there’s an obligation on me to do the same as well. Part of being a feminist and also a trade unionist is that it’s an obligation to support other women but not a burden. It’s a really nice thing and an important part of the work we do.

SH: Let’s move on to issues you’re dealing with now. Penalty rates are being cut, the minimum wage is failing to keep pace with the cost of living, and our right to take industrial action is being threatened by changes to the law. Workers need protection more than ever and yet union membership is declining. What do you think is the best path for the union movement?

SM: We have to take a very clear-eyed look at what is happening and quickly diagnose what’s going on. We haven’t seen wage growth this slow and union membership this low since records have been kept.

We also have not seen insecure work at this level - one-in-four workers - for a long time. There’s a big interaction between all of these issues.

We now have over one million temporary visa workers who are hyper-insecure. If they put up their hands and ask to be paid properly, let alone get a pay rise, they can be deported. So they’re the most vulnerable to exploitation.

...our rights at work aren’t strong enough. They haven’t kept up with the growth of corporate power.

On top of that, 40 per cent of the workforce is in insecure work while 94 per cent of union members are in permanent employment. So, if you’re a casual worker or a labour hire worker and you say, ‘I want to stand up for my rights or be a member of my union’, that’s a harder choice than if you’re a permanent worker.

It’s incumbent on us to fight to improve the rights of workers so we don’t have the situation where everyone is at the beck and call of employers and have no job security whatsoever.

We’ve got to remember that this has happened in a short time - only 25 years. We’ve gone from most people having a chance of good, secure work to young people not knowing what it’s like to have a paid sick day or paid annual leave.

It’s because our rights at work aren’t strong enough. They haven’t kept up with the growth of corporate power.

Secondly, we need to inspire a younger generation of working people to be part of a movement that’s going to change the rules and to be at the front of the fight against inequality in Australia.

Finally, we need to use technology to make it much easier for people to join their union and stay members in their union. We have a membership system that operated in the same way 30 years ago when we had 50 per cent membership and everyone had a secure job.

These are the things we control. At a time of 15 per cent union membership we can’t afford to be putting up any barriers to people’s membership.

“" Sally McManus
ACTU secretary
We haven’t seen wage growth this slow and union membership this low since records have been kept.

SH: To what degree should unions step outside of industrial relations to address broader community problems like poverty, homelessness and family violence?

SM: We’ve got a proud history of doing that. We’ve always seen the worker as being a whole person, not just when they’re at work.

I can’t see our trade union movement moving away from that. There are a couple of initiatives I want to talk about.

Obviously there’s the domestic and family violence leave case we’ve taken up. We haven’t got what we wanted there, which is another sign of how broken the rules are. But we’re the first in the world to try and push for this.

And, there’s a really important campaign against the community development program (CDP) – a terrible program. It only operates in regional and rural areas and 80 per cent of those participating are Indigenous people. They’re forced to work 25 hours a week otherwise they don’t get any social support at all.

That doesn’t happen to any other person who’s unemployed. We’re hearing stories that in lots of places they are sacking their workers and bringing them back on the CDP. For example, people used to be employed to mend fences in communities but now they’re not. For-profit companies get paid to use these CDP workers. So it becomes a business decision - why should I employ workers and pay them the minimum or award wage when I can get paid to hire people.

That’s a discriminatory program and something we want to change.

SH: Mental health issues are becoming more obvious as workers begin to feel confident about being open about their conditions. Are the current laws and awards adequate to ensure workers’ rights are protected?

SM: We’re seeing an evolution in both culture and also in, law. In the period of time I’ve been a union official, I’ve seen a big change.

I think there’s a lot of work to be done in terms of educating some employers, especially those with insecure workers who are less likely to disclose a mental health issue because they could be just dropped off the roster.

Also, it’s inevitable that there’ll be an increase in mental health issues where there’s job insecurity and intense workloads.

I know that for teachers the expectations and the work intensification over the last 20 years has been quite incredible. I’ve heard from some of your members about the high turnover of young teachers because of the stress of the job.

So if you think of job insecurity and work intensification, are we surprised that we see more depression and more mental health issues being triggered? We’re shifting the risk from employers onto employees, and there are consequences for that.
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Ray Boyd, Principal, West Beechboro Primary School, WA, after using PRIME for the last 2 years.

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It’s amazing what a difference a patch of bushland and a pond of frogs can make to a school.

BY JANINE MACE PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK MONGER
When Jane Turner became the new principal at Mount Gambier North School, in southern South Australia, she looked at a barren, steeply sloping, seemingly useless patch of land in the school grounds and had a vision. "When I arrived at the school in 2002, it had been losing student numbers for a long time and the community had lost connection with it," she says. "We wanted the school to belong to the community and be something it could be proud of."  
Rehabilitating the land into a bush reserve about the size of two average house blocks has been central to achieving that turnaround.
The first step was to move the local kindergarten so it was on one side of the potential reserve, with the primary school on the other.

Although the initial plan was for a garden with a frog pond, an Envirofund grant from the federal government enabled Turner to think bigger.

Extensive earthworks and landscaping were undertaken, with hundreds of tonnes of stone brought in during a year-long construction phase.

Support from parents and the Greencorp youth program provided the necessary muscle. Local businesses and government agencies supplied resources such as rocks, plants, project equipment, fencing, pumps and signage.

**Almost spiritual**
The concept was always about more than just beautifying the site, says Turner. “I believe children need real-life natural experiences to grow both emotionally and physically. They need to challenge themselves and take risks, relax and enjoy their environment.”

The established bushland area is now open every lunchtime for an extended play period. The children build cubbies, dig holes, catch frogs, paddle in the creek and observe the seasonal cycles.

“They use it for their nature play, fitness and reflection. It’s a deep, almost spiritual place where individuals and groups can find a little space of their own to create in.”

Turner has witnessed the profound difference the reserve can make to individual students.

“One very angry boy came to the school and took part in the development of the area. After a year, we asked him what land care meant to him and he talked about learning...
that, when he was angry, he could
go outside and watch the creek and
pull out weeds. He now knew how to
control his anger.”

It’s not a formal curriculum
requirement that teachers use the
reserve as a learning tool. That means
they can feel free to get inspired
about using it as they see fit, such as a
prompt for poetry or model landscape
for geography studies.

Students aren’t the only
beneficiaries. The bushland is shared
with the wider community.

“When the first plantings were done,
it was exciting to see everyone getting
involved, including the local Aboriginal
elders,” says Turner. “For the local and
school communities, it has become a
place to love and be proud of.”

A big drop in the previous problem
of school vandalism has been an
unexpected bonus.

Muddy and wet
To the surprise of some, the school
has had fewer injuries in the bushland
area than in its plastic playground.

Risk management is maintained during
lunchtimes with constant checking of
what the children are up to, and the
pond is very shallow and fenced off
from the kindergarten.

“We explain to parents that their
children will get muddy and wet, and
they understand and embrace it. They
are fine with it because their kids are
happy,” says Turner.

Getting this type of project off the
ground isn’t hard, she says. Start with
a small idea and other people will want
to become part of it.

“Be brave, talk to people and make
connections. People will put you in
touch with others who can help.”

Turner, who will retire at the end of
this year, adds that Mt Gambier North’s
“little” bushland project will never be
completely finished.

“We now have a reconciliation garden
and an orchard, the area is linked to
a community hub with a bike track
circling the school, and we have plans
to build a pickleball court.”

Janine Mace is freelance writer.
As confidence builds through the school year, the four new educators we’re following have found smart and creative solutions to some of the issues they face.

BY ROMONY ROGERS

Rising to the challenge

At Narangba Valley State High, near Brisbane, information technology and business teacher Oliver Baumeister’s year 12 class began 2017 disengaged, unenthused and a long way behind.

But Baumeister has worked hard to turn around the performance and students’ attitudes. Not only have the students caught up, they are now on track to gain their year 12 competency certificates ahead of schedule.

“It’s quite fantastic how much the classroom environment has changed. It feels like a productive learning space,” he says. “In the past, students dragged their feet and asked, ‘Why do we have to do this?’ Now the question has changed to ‘What can we do with this?’”

To ensure next year’s cohort of seniors have a better starting point, Baumeister has taken on an additional year 11 class this year. Only halfway through 2017 and his students have already completed the year’s content.

“They’re doing phenomenally. I revamped the course and it has really worked out. Rather than completing spreadsheets because it was a requirement, they’re doing it because they can create a website or games. They see real-world applications and a relevance for the course.”

Work-life balance

In Tom Price, in Western Australia’s Pilbara, early years teacher Trish Chapman has been keen to improve her work-life balance. Having done a lot of planning during the Easter holidays, she found last term’s workload much smaller.

“Not only have I freed up my Sundays, but also my Saturdays. I’m having a weekend most weekends,” she says.

In Victoria, the workload has been especially heavy for year 4/5 teacher Sara Husi.

“I do a lot of work at nights and more on weekends,” she says. “I wake up in the morning and I’m thinking about something to do with teaching. I can’t let go. Some people enjoy doing lots of work at home, but I don’t.”

Husi’s experience highlights the importance of the new Victorian enterprise agreement that the AEU has negotiated. It includes more time out of class for teachers to plan lessons and write report cards.

“I don’t think I anticipated the effect the workload would have on me. I’m still questioning if teaching is for me just because of the work-life balance.”

In Tasmania, year 6 teacher Hannah Papworth has been focused on becoming comfortable with more areas of the curriculum. After talking to
experienced teachers, she found online resources that helped her with in-depth explanations of science content and pedagogy.

"Now that I’m in my third year, I don’t feel as daunted by the curriculum," says Papworth. "You get better at structuring and organising your year. For example, I used to think there was a lot to get through in the year 6 maths curriculum, but now I find if I break up my year into the different strands, it works well."

**In the community**

In WA, Chapman and the school’s Indigenous liaison officer have continued to make regular after-school visits in the Tom Price community and are starting to see some pay-off.

"We’re building really good networks. I can go to homes now and not feel uncomfortable knocking on the door." Nevertheless, student attendance has been poor this term and a group of children broke into the school’s resource room and trashed it.

Chapman says it’s a fine balance between trying not to intrude and wanting to know more about what is happening. Some families are being more open with her about the difficulties they are having in getting their children to school, which is a step in the right direction.

In a more unconventional sign of establishing a rapport, one family gave her four puppies it was struggling to take care of. Fortunately, she’s a “sucker for puppies”.

"It’s not part of my teaching role, but I think the fact they let me take them shows there’s some kind of trust factor there."

**Challenging behaviour**

Papworth and Husi have had to struggle with some challenging student behaviour this year. They each have a student who has repeatedly stormed out of the classroom.

Papworth says it was confronting at first and she was encouraged to take a strict approach. But as she learned more about the child’s home life, she realised the child didn’t have the skills for regulating emotional reactions. So, instead, she taught and modelled appropriate behaviours for when the child gets upset.

Husi has given her student ‘cool down cards’ with similar...
strategies and taken more time to speak quietly with her. The child has a lack of confidence in herself, but is beginning to attempt her work, especially when she is partnered with a classmate. Both students have improved their ability to stay in the classroom without disrupting others.

Working together
Both Baumeister and Chapman contrast the high level of interpersonal skills required for teaching with the individual nature of their previous careers. Baumeister notes wryly that he had “very rare” opportunities to show leadership in his previous role conducting internal audits. Leading his students on their learning journey is the aspect of teaching he enjoys most and he has his eyes set on further leadership roles at the school. Chapman says there is a lot of consultation involved in creating a whole-school approach to curriculum and behaviour. Regular meetings, open communication and consensus building with her school’s new Positive Behaviour team have been a highlight of the term. Parents responded well to the team’s recent survey and the team is looking forward to the difference it can make to the school.

For Husi, working in a small school has meant that the opportunities for collaboration and support have been limited. “The school is trying to support us and implement collaborative planning, but it’s difficult because I’m the only person teaching year 4/5 and I don’t have anyone I can bounce ideas off who is teaching the same age level.”

Creating a consultative culture
Meanwhile, Papworth has sought union advice on how to deal with some confronting behaviour at work. “Because I’ve now got PRT [permanent replacement teacher status], I feel more confident about saying when something’s unacceptable.”

As the acting union representative, Papworth also became aware that a large number of staff were unhappy about not being given a say in matters that affected them. She took a constructive approach by organising a meeting to discuss grievances and possible ways forward. “My colleagues appreciate that I’m a positive person who’s not prone to complaining.” She is working with staff at all levels to create a more consultative culture in the school.

Diverse successes
Once again, the four teachers’ different stories demonstrate the diverse range of situations and communities that those in the profession must deal with.

For some, success means fast-tracking students through difficult content by making it more exciting and useful for them. For others, success means building trust with a local Indigenous community, or encouraging an emotional child from a low socioeconomic background to stay in the classroom.

Yet all of our teachers have demonstrated creativity, empathy and intelligence in rising to meet, and move forward in dealing with their range of challenges.

Romony Rogers is a freelance writer.
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Susan Hopgood: aeu@aeufederal.org.au
Sun, sea, surf and textbooks

Julie Spencer admits she knew very little about the Federated States of Micronesia when she accepted a volunteer role there as an early grades teacher in 2015. But that was part of the appeal for her, her partner and two children when the offer came from Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID).

“We’re risk-takers and we wanted a bit of an adventure,” says Spencer. “It was great to go somewhere really remote, and there were a lot of geopolitical things we learned about. It was fascinating.”

The family travelled from Melbourne to the island of Kosrae, one of the four federated states, with a population of 6,000, and stayed for a year.

During 15 years working with students and families who had recently arrived in Australia, Spencer had developed expertise in teaching English as a second language. It proved invaluable as she worked with six elementary schools, establishing in-classroom development and literacy and numeracy workshops for teachers.

She also reviewed the curriculum and developed a new culturally relevant, educationally engaging English curriculum for third and fourth grades.

It was immediately obvious that the textbooks weren’t culturally appropriate. “They were made for American kids,” she says. “For example, there was a story about snowmen, and ones for the older years about American towns and history. The teachers didn’t really know how to use them.”

An Asian Development Bank pilot assessment program for grade three and five students showed that, while the children could read simple texts, they couldn’t talk about them or apply them to their lives.

Spencer was prompted to write and generate new materials, leading to the development of the Micronesia English Language Learning Program (MELLP). Her work there is being used as a model for other AVID projects around the world.
Spencer was prompted to write and illustrate 30 books relevant to children living an island life.

illustrate 30 books relevant to children living an island life. Each one has a week of work attached to it, designed to fit in with a school term theme such as island animals, island food or family and home life.

“The kids played communicative games with the texts and did a lot of speaking, listening, predicting, retelling and questioning, then writing around it and applying it to their own lives. It just sort of evolved.”

Seeking mentors
These teacher trainer skills are what Australian Volunteers International (AVI) is seeking when it recruits for education assignments, says recruitment manager Sean Lynch.

The AVID program that Spencer’s assignment was part of is an Australian government initiative with AVI as one of its delivery partners.

“In many of the places we work in, there is already a cohort of teachers, so the host organisation is looking for people with experience who can do training and assessments, who can observe and mentor individuals or groups of teachers,” says Lynch.

More than 35 teachers are on AVID assignments and AVI is looking to

Resources

dfat.gov.au/australianvolunteers
avi.org.au

Spencer and her family discovered that Micronesia is a world away from life in Melbourne.
recruit another 10. Roles are updated on the website each month, with assignments ranging from 12 to 18 months and locations including Indonesia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands.

As Spencer found, the program also supports volunteers’ partners and children by providing airfares and a living allowance that is a percentage of the volunteer’s allowance.

Apart from a requirement for certain qualifications for different roles, other skills are also taken into account. For example, someone may volunteer at the local footy club where they are dealing with a group of recently arrived migrants.

**Giving rewards**

Volunteers may be giving their time and sharing their skills and experience but they reap rewards as well. Through international volunteering, teachers generally develop their personal competencies including cross-cultural skills, says Lynch.

“They are going to develop their resilience, adaptability and flexibility.”

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**The host organisation is looking for people with experience who can do training and assessments, who can observe and mentor individuals or groups of teachers.**

Sean Lynch
Australian Volunteers International (AVI)

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A 2007 study of international volunteers and the Australian employment market found that many of the skills that employers value highly are well developed in volunteers. These include: communication (general and cross-cultural), teamwork, organisational, management, initiative/resourcefulness/adaptability and problem-solving skills according to the study, by AVI and Monash University.

One of Spencer’s greatest learning experiences came from adapting to the island culture’s less direct way of communicating.

“Professionally, I’ve always gone in with guns blazing to fight for what I believe in. In Kosrae I realised that, actually, saying less is sometimes more powerful, and being strategic about when you say things is important.”

The assignment also enabled her to be involved in education at a higher level, in island-wide decisions. She also made connections with the education sector at the Asian Development Bank and Pacific Research Education Lab.

“I got this pan-Pacific view of education and how various organisations are trying

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Music is an often underrated and sometimes ignored area of primary and secondary education in Australia. It speaks for itself that up-to-date statistics are hard to come by but Music Australia, in its 2013 report *Music to Our Ears*, found that about two-thirds of primary schools and a third of secondary schools offered no classroom music.

Two schools that have run successful, quite different music education programs for many years are Bathurst High School in regional NSW and University High School in Melbourne. Some of their students have gone on to work in music throughout Australia and the world.

At Bathurst High, which specialises in jazz, head music teacher Andrew Smith says schools looking to set up a music program should be patient, seek out funding opportunities and tap into their local conservatoriums of music. “With our limited resources, it has always been a challenge to compete against private schools, but we’ve proven we can punch above our weight,” says Smith, who began teaching at Bathurst High in 2000, eight years after its jazz program was established.

Smith was previously a professional drummer and event manager, and he chairs the Mitchell Conservatorium in Bathurst.

He says his goals at the school are to further develop its concert band and orchestra, keeping in mind that, with music programs generally, “if you start developing one thing, you take away from the other”. For those looking to set up a band program, he advises: “Adapt to the musicians you have. Stylistically, they may have a totally different style to yours or previous students, but you still need to have high standards and impose some discipline.”

University High’s music program dates back 45 years and is regarded as one of the best in Victoria. The school’s 23 ensembles range through orchestras, concert bands, choirs and jazz groups, and there are about 400 instrument lessons each week. Some students play more than one instrument and music is a core subject in years 7 and 8. Head teacher performing arts Geoff Campbell attributes the school’s success in music to the subject being valued “from top to bottom”.

“Showing that music is an important part of the school is good for the development of young players. Our current principal is a violinist and will perform at our mid-year concert.”

Impressive results

Smith, who oversees three music teachers and visiting instrumental teachers at Bathurst, says the past 17 years have taken him from being a musician who taught, to being a musical director who really understands how to direct and develop a band program.

“We’ve run music workshops for our staff over the years and I regularly run professional development sessions.”

The results have been impressive. The program’s HSC students consistently achieve strong band 6 results and graduates who have gone on to achieve success include folk musician Sam Martin, *The Voice* finalist Kath Adams, and James Morrison Academy graduates Anna Leckie, Brendon McLeod and James Sewell. Abby Smith is half of the duo Smith and Jones, which recently topped the Australian country chart with Abby’s song ‘Baby Blue’.

Current senior students Cameron Smith (Andrew’s son) and Aidan...
McBurnie are the latest in a long list of musicians who have been members of the AIM NSW State Jazz Orchestra. In early June, the school’s junior and senior jazz bands, totalling some 30 students, played at the Big Band Blast festival in Port Macquarie for the fifth year in a row.

“It was pretty overwhelming,” says Cameron, a year 12 student who played six times at the festival. “It gave me a lot of opportunities to learn from professionals such as Ross Irwin and Denis DiBlasio, just by playing with them. I learnt how to just go for it while improvising, and to hear and feel where the music needs to be.”

Bathurst High’s music program has also offered a sound and lighting engineering vocational course since 2004. Enrolments have risen, aided by use of the school’s 250-seat theatre, built in 2015.

“Students are doing the vocational course because of the venue and the production facilities. If you build it, they will come,” says Smith.

Forty-two year 11 and 12 students are doing the course this year to earn a Certificate III in Live Production and Services. Previous graduates have gone on to work in theatre, film and TV production, the Bell Shakespeare Company, and in London’s West End, New York’s Broadway and Las Vegas.

“The jazz program and the entertainment course go hand in hand,” says Smith. “Knowing how to use sound and lighting will be useful for students in the management of their musical performances.

“Sometimes I get messages from those I taught 10 years ago who say, ‘You’re still an inspiration to me.’ Which inspires me. I don’t know what I’d be doing without music.”

With our limited resources, it has always been a challenge to compete against private schools, but we’ve proven we can punch above our weight.
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Strength in numbers

University High’s Campbell says many schools have student rock bands, but they don’t involve students in large numbers. Thirty or 40 can play in an orchestra.

“Last year, for a piece at our annual musical concert, we joined the orchestra with the senior choir.”

Campbell has four music teaching staff plus 17 instrument teachers, who work with pairs and small groups, and one-on-one for Victorian Certificate of Education students.

“There’s a balance between learning music in the classroom, building that theoretical understanding of music and supporting students’ instrumental performance. It’s mandatory for students who learn an instrument to be in an ensemble.

“Our instrumental program is a proven method. Our teachers are very experienced musicians who attend conferences and work with the latest ideas in education. But when they are teaching an instrument they work at the level of the individual student, developing a rapport. They teach towards what the student needs.

“Many of our students have proven there’s a pathway to employment in some sort of work in the arts.”

Notable graduates (some of whom attended University High before the latest version of its music program was established) include Olivia Newton-John, composer Eric Austin-Phillips (a founding member of the Melbourne Youth Orchestra), internationally acclaimed violinist, conductor and composer Wilfred Lehmann, and numerous Melbourne and Sydney symphony orchestra musicians.

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual teacher.

In rhythm

At Lyndhurst Public School, near Bathurst, NSW, principal Viktoria Rendes had numerous reasons for applying for a grant last year to buy African djembe-style drums. Nine drums were bought with the $1,000 grant from Charles Sturt University.

“I knew there were some students who found sitting and learning difficult. They needed a more physical outlet,” says Rendes.

“Drumming is good for hand-eye coordination, and building confidence and self-esteem, plus students really have to listen to one another and work as a team.”

Djembe are hand drums that don’t need sticks. Hitting them in the middle or on the rim produces different sounds.

“Students can hear that straight away. They learn the rhythms through phrases they can say, and the motto is ‘if you can say it, you can play it’.”

The school organised in-school drumming workshops through a regional arts organisation.

“Small rural schools such as ours can find it difficult to offer students a broad curriculum,” says Rendes. “This project is more than just a music program. It’s about equity and access to opportunities that students at larger urban schools enjoy.”
Coming in from the cold

The Inuit community of Salluit lies deep in the arctic north of Quebec, Canada. It can’t be accessed by road — the only way in or out is by plane — and it has some of the harshest weather conditions in the world. For 10 months of the year, snow and ice cover the tundra, with temperatures plunging as low as -50C. It is here that Maggie MacDonnell, winner of the 2017 Global Teacher Prize (awarded by the Varkey Foundation) resides, and it is here that she has had to cope with perhaps the most harrowing challenge a teacher can face: a suicide crisis.

Since arriving in Salluit (pop. 1,350) six years ago, MacDonnell has witnessed more than 30 funerals. In one two-year period, she attended 10 funerals of young people lost to suicide. In her presentation at the Education International (EI) Unite for Quality Education and Leadership Conference in the Netherlands in May, MacDonnell reflected on this as “one of the hardest things I’ve ever gone through” and said, “I never want to be in that position again.”

For the Inuit youth of Salluit, MacDonnell’s presence and approach to education have signalled new hope. She has introduced a project-based classroom, with no set curriculum, where she works with some of the most ‘difficult’ youth in the community. She says her students are those who have been in criminal trouble, known for vandalism, dropping out of school and bullying.

Since her arrival, her students have been able to give up alcohol and smoking (including marijuana), and have become recognised leaders in their community. Some have even returned to the school as employees.

**Traditional skills**

MacDonnell’s revolutionary approach has been to recognise that “local children who are the issue are also so often the solution.”

For MacDonnell, this has meant trying to find projects that encourage them to contribute to the community in meaningful ways.

For example, she cites the alarming rate of domestic violence among many of the girls she teaches. She estimates that 50 per cent of girls and women in the town have experienced some form of domestic or sexual violence.

To tackle this epidemic, she employs a feminist approach, combined with an integrated, community-based education mentality, to empower the girls affected. It includes teaching them skills tied to their Inuit cultural heritage, such as hunting and shooting for food, which can feed the community.

Many of the girls don’t get to experience their culture because they
don’t have families to take them, or the families privilege the boys. So I teach them basic cultural skills like kayaking,” says MacDonnell.

“That’s one of the things I want to spend my prize money on. Reintroducing these traditional Inuit skills to a new generation of young people who have forgotten them.”

Kayak symbolism
As part of the prize, MacDonnell will receive US$1 million to invest in educational programs designed to benefit the community. Her choice to invest in a kayaking program is a strategic one, since the kayak is symbolic of “physical activity, transportation and connection with the land, which is very transformative and healing for Indigenous people”.

The Inuit invented the kayak, but in contemporary times the boat is very rarely used within Inuit communities. She says this is one example of the kinds of intergenerational trauma that Inuit people have experienced after colonisation. In many ways similar to the experience of Aboriginal Australians, the Inuit were subjected to a variety of traumas including the “residential school experience”: an assimilation-based policy that forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them in residential boarding schools, often run by the Catholic Church.

Since arriving in Salluit, MacDonnell has been in the often difficult situation of asking for the trust of a community that is understandably suspicious of outsiders.

“I always say I went to the Arctic very humble. My goal was to do no harm, and hopefully do some good. I was so aware of what I didn’t know, and I’m still learning now.

“The community was right to distrust me — as an outsider, given the history — and the first few times in the classroom were very hard. But it’s about perseverance.

“It’s said that there are three types of people who go to the Arctic: misfits, missionaries and mavericks. I’m not sure which I am. Maybe some of all three.”

Kate O’Halloran is a freelance writer.
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**My best app**

**Scratch Junior**
(Android, iOS; free)

With Scratch Junior, students learn to program their own interactive stories. Schicker says this app is good in science classes where students can use characters and scenes to program by describing a step-by-step method. "For example, students write code to state the method for a bicarb soda and vinegar bottle experiment. It's hitting both technology and science outcomes where students need to give and follow a sequence of steps. It's good fun. The benefit of visual coding is that students don't need good literacy skills to do it."

**Kahoot!**
(Android, iOS; free)

Kahoot! is a learning game where questions appear on a shared screen and students answer on their own device. Schicker uses Kahoot! as a quiz and survey app, generating lots of pre-made quizzes for students as revision. "I use it like a Family Feud style game as a quick, fun pop quiz or to revise content. Students can make their own surveys too."

**Popplet**
(iOS; $7.99)

Designed as a way to capture and organise ideas, Schicker uses Popplet as a brainstorming and recording tool for students. "It is a quick way for students to show they have understood a topic. At the start of the topic it can provide great information about their prior knowledge."

In a group situation, Schicker asks students to take photos of an activity and then add text. "For example, if I have created eight activities with magnets, the students will take a photo at each station, and add observations (to show they understand the principle). They post it within the app and take screen shots that I print and put up on the wall and record group tasks in individual folders."

**Another app to explore...**

**Clips**
(iOS; free)

A digital storytelling tool, Clips is great for younger students or any student who is not familiar with using Final Cut Pro or iMovie. It is a fun, easy-to-use mobile video editing app allowing students to put together short videos and photos, add filters, text, emojis and music. As well as practising their video editing skills, students can use the app to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a topic. Using a voice-to-text feature, students can generate captions to add to their videos by simply talking about a topic. The feature also helps to teach students to speak clearly.

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**Jodie Schicker**
Science specialist
Bungaree Primary School, WA

Technology provides a way to explore the world and, for students whose families can’t afford to travel, that’s a valuable learning tool, says Jodie Schicker.

Schicker, who has been teaching for 23 years and last year was awarded the WA Premier’s Primary Teacher of the Year, likes apps in particular because they’re multimodal.

“From a science point of view, apps are an alternative to recording things, such as experiments. Rather than just writing everything out, apps enable students to capture valuable data and measure results.”

**Jodie’s tips**

“Rather than being overwhelmed by using loads of apps only a handful of times, I prefer to use just a handful of apps well, and in a variety of ways.

"While I always think it’s great that students are having fun while using apps, I like to make sure they’re also hitting learning outcomes.”

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**SHARE YOUR SECRETS**

Which apps do you find useful in the classroom? Let us know at educator@hardiegrant.com
International comparisons based on student test results might grab the headlines, but they miss the important points.

BY NIC BARNARD

How to put the best topping on your PISA base

In Scotland in 2012, 15-year-olds taking the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test were first shown a motivational video. It being the year of the London Olympics, they were likened to Scottish athletes and urged to make their country proud.

Mexico went further that year, with radio announcements, manuals for teachers and practice sessions for students. This kind of thing doesn’t happen here – yet – but it shows how high-stakes the testing has become, not for students but for education ministers and policymakers.


Its authors, Australian and American academics Sam Sellar, Greg Thompson and David Rutkowski, hope to prompt a more informed debate about what the PISA test is, how it works and what it can, and more importantly can’t, tell us.

PISA has been with us for 18 years and six rounds, each time garnering bigger headlines. Every three years across the world, samples of students from selected schools sit a two-hour test that covers the mathematical, scientific and reading literacy skills that their future workplaces will require. A 10-hour test would be needed to achieve the accuracy that the exercise requires, so the questions each student is set are themselves a sample.

Each round focuses on one of the three main subjects in turn, with 60 per cent of the test devoted to it. The results take a year to process and the ultimate report can run to thousands of pages.

Digging deeper

The media headlines invariably focus on the global rankings that comprise just one per cent of the report.

The tests produce extraordinarily rich data and are at the cutting edge of educational psychometrics, says Thompson, associate professor in the faculty of education at Queensland University of Technology.

But the rankings aren’t precise and the OECD doesn’t pretend otherwise. The difference between, say, third and 10th may be within the margin of error.

The book’s authors say it’s better to look at a more general measure: whether your education system is above average, roughly average or below average. Then dig deep into the data to see which parts of the system are working well and what factors might lie behind that.

It makes little sense for a government to set a blanket target of, for example, being in the top five by 2025, as Australia has enshrined in legislation.

“We have a narrative in Australia about there being a decline since 2000, and the data does bear that out,” says Thompson. “But we don’t really know why we were successful in 2000 and 2003, and therefore we’re not really sure what it is we should be doing to return to the success we had then. Or if it’s even possible.”

It also raises the questions of what PISA is measuring and whether it fits our wider goals for Australian education. “We may return to the top five, but not have an improved education system.” This is particularly the case given that the focus on rankings
and the success of vastly different education systems, such as Finland and Shanghai, mean that politicians can easily cherry-pick the features of successful systems to suit their agendas. Asian schools’ large class sizes can easily be trumped by Finnish schools’ high levels of early intervention for students and relative autonomy.

**Wag the dog**

Australia isn’t the only nation to dwell on a narrative of apparent decline, and PISA is in danger of becoming the tail that wags the dog. “Our big concern is that the OECD doesn’t set educational goals in individual nations. Governments do,” says Thompson.

But education ministers often don’t have a clear idea of what they want to learn from the PISA assessments or how it can be used to set their long-term policymaking. Better than chasing rankings as a goal in itself would be to decide where you want to go, then use PISA to track your progress. Its data on equity and resources is particularly useful, says Thompson.

“Governments – not the OECD – have to own and set the agenda with PISA.” Some of the most useful PISA data concerns the equity of education systems. Australia actually over-samples for the tests to give more ‘fine-grained’ data that allows it to pull apart the results between states and systems. Such comparative data can be more useful than international comparisons.

The book cites research by Australian academics Radhika Gorur and Margaret Wu into the 2009 PISA round that highlighted the variance in outcomes between states and territories, and even between different test items. In some maths items, for example, Australia came top internationally. In others, world-beater Shanghai did poorly.

“It may be more useful to focus attention on particular areas where a sample of students has performed poorly, rather than lamenting mathematical performance across the board and making sweeping changes that could be counterproductive in areas where students are already performing well,” the book suggests.

It’s important to note that this is not an anti-PISA book. Instead, it illuminates its strengths and weaknesses to prompt discussion.

Its conclusion is perhaps best summed up in the title of the foreword by educational equity gurus David C. Berliner and Pasi Sahlberg. PISA, they say, makes a good servant but a bad master.

Nic Barnard is a freelance writer.
For award-winning principal Wilbur Klein, a close sense of Indigenous community more than compensates for being a long way from anywhere.

BY MARGARET PATON

Schools don’t get much more remote than Tjuntjuntjara Remote Community School, 680km northeast of Kalgoorlie, Western Australia.

“There’s nothing in between. It’s a dirt track,” says principal Wilbur ‘Charlie’ Klein. “The drive is eight hours, or 10 if you have kids on board.”

That hasn’t deterred Klein, his staff and the Tjuntjuntjara community in building a solid learning program that celebrates the local Pitjantjatjarra language and Spinifex Country culture while teaching the western curriculum.

Klein’s achievements have earned him a 2017 Commonwealth Bank Teaching Award, which recognises great teachers and principals who work in challenging and socially diverse communities.

Tjuntjuntjara RCS has about 32 students up to Year 12, from a community of 80–150 residents that can swell or decline depending on Western Desert cultural cycles.

“Right now, 12 of our students are away in other communities for family and cultural reasons,” says Klein. “If the kids are in community, there’s above 90 per cent attendance. The community supports its school.”

**Driving forces**

Klein is of Swiss-German stock and grew up with Indigenous people in Northam, WA, where his father was a Lutheran pastor.

He began his career as a graduate teacher in Halls Creek and has since worked mostly in remote schools in the Kimberley and Western Desert.

He has also been the principal of a large regional city primary school.

He says family values and social justice have been his driving forces.

“And the need for remote Indigenous Australia to close the gap through education to move our nation to full reconciliation.”

He still enjoys teaching and seeing children achieve in what is a very challenging environment.

“The school negotiates its path within community cultural activities and changes. It’s an ESL [English as a second language] environment, and the community is dealing with intergenerational trauma and rapid change. Their resilience and strength is awe-inspiring.”

Klein, three other teachers and four other staff at Tjuntjuntjara RCS counter their remoteness with a range of connections.

Bandwidth isn’t that good for interactive whiteboards, but the school has iPads for creative work, standalone computers, laptops and GoPro cameras.

“We don’t lack the tech. We lack the knowledge to run it all, so that’s where we utilise outside support.”

The school collaborates on STEM development with Cecil Andrews College in Perth, and with the Indigenous Literacy Foundation for a Spinifex Country writers’ camp.

For the fifth time, Notre Dame University in Perth will send a group of lecturers and students to Tjuntjuntjara this year to do community service and learn about Indigenous culture. Five attendees from previous years have since qualified as teachers and worked in regional and remote communities.

To those thinking of making the move to remote Indigenous teaching, Klein says: “You aren’t leaving your social network. You’re adding to it.”

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual teacher.

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**Dirt track to achievement**

To those thinking of making the move to remote Indigenous teaching, Klein says: ‘You aren’t leaving your social network. You’re adding to it.’
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