Public education // Enrolments boom but funding falls short

Rebuild with TAFE // Driving growth with a vibrant TAFE sector

Bright lights // Meet the winners of the Arthur Hamilton Award

Mixing it up // New educators, new approaches

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PHOTOGRAPHY Richard Whitfield

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Going for gold

In April, the AEU wrote to every federal MP calling for ongoing funding for 15 hours of preschool for all four year olds and for funding to be extended to all three year olds.

It was a final push ahead of the federal budget to make sure that early childhood education was at the front of MPs’ minds.

The AEU’s preschool funding campaign has run for eight years, with preschool teachers, educators, allies and parents advocating to end the temporary, year-by-year funding arrangements that create so much uncertainty for the sector.

SIGNIFICANT WIN

The announcement in the budget that preschool for four year olds would be funded for the next four years and then ongoing, was a significant win for the campaign.

However, the AEU will seek more details about the government’s policy settings attached to this funding, as it still doesn’t go far enough.

Funding for preschool in the year before a child starts school is an important step, but the ultimate goal is universally accessible, high-quality early learning for all children in the two years before a child starts school. That’s the gold standard and Australia is falling behind the rest of the world by not recognising this important investment.

The evidence is very clear; children who have access to two years of high-quality preschool delivered by a qualified teacher start school ready to learn and have a stronger foundation for their future beyond school.

Our campaign will continue to go for gold and call on the federal government to fund 15 hours of preschool per week for Australian children in the two years before school and to address the shortages of qualified staff in the early education workforce.

EVERY SCHOOL EVERY CHILD

Sadly, there were no significant wins for public schools in the budget. They will remain underfunded by almost $5 billion in 2021 and by $14 billion over three years through to 2023.

In addition, the budget was silent on capital works funding for public schools, despite this being a prime opportunity to stimulate the economy by creating...
around 37,000 jobs – many more than the 1,000 jobs created by the JobMaker scheme.

This lack of investment flies in the face of public opinion. The AEU released a poll earlier this month showing that 83 per cent of Australians believe that increasing public school funding should be a priority issue at the next election.

The next federal election will provide the opportunity for political parties to deliver the funding needed for all schools – a minimum of 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard and investment in capital works. Imagine the difference if every school was provided with the full funding needed for every child to succeed.

Despite over a decade of national dialogue about the importance of needs-based funding and the critical link between equitable funding distribution and student outcomes, the federal government has failed to ensure that public schools have the resources necessary to work with all students, in particular those who have higher needs for education support.

Unfortunately, instead of making public school funding the top priority at the recent Education Minister’s meeting, the federal government launched yet another review into Initial Teacher Education.

We know what is needed to help Australia’s students achieve. And that is not another review. Funding public schools properly will deliver better pay and career prospects, better induction and mentoring, ongoing professional support and protection from ever-increasing workloads for the teaching profession.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

We are building a broad coalition of community support and we need you to add your voice to the Every School. Every Child. campaign so we can send a clear message to all politicians that it is time to fund public schools properly and fairly.

Join us at everyschoolverychild.org.au

Correna Haythorpe  AEU federal president

Know your union

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Three Rs + climate
A new campaign is calling for climate education, based on science and with a civic focus, to become as fundamental as teaching reading and writing. Education International (EI), which represents 32.5 million educators worldwide, is leading the movement for climate education with earthday.org.

“Teachers know that the most important long-term investment our societies can make towards a sustainable future is ensuring every student is literate about climate science and equipped with the civic knowledge and skills to change course,” says EI general secretary David Edwards. The campaign will culminate at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in November 2021. EI will call on world leaders to make “ambitious” commitments to reduce carbon emissions, prioritise social justice and a just transition in their climate change responses, and provide climate change education for all.

EI president and AEU federal secretary Susan Hopgood says the fight against climate change must have “an education face and a teacher’s voice”. teach4theplanet.org

Understanding trauma
Students and staff at schools with high suspension rates report a lower sense of security and a less positive school climate. Those schools also have lower levels of achievement relative to others that make less use of suspensions, according to an OECD working paper.

The paper, Improving Education Outcomes for Students Who Have Experienced Trauma and/or Adversity, compiles evidence on causes and effects, factors that worsen educational outcomes, and effective practices in education systems.

The paper was commissioned in response to growing demand among educators for practical, evidence-based guidance on how to recognise and respond to students’ needs. The paper says applying harsh discipline in response to students’ trauma-related behaviours compromises their ability to perform well in school and increases the risk of dropout. tinyurl.com/2nn96ejh

Growing interest in Aussie books
English teachers, schools and curriculum authorities are increasingly including Australian texts in reading and study programs, according to the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE).

The AATE is a partner in Reading Australia, a free online teaching resource that promotes Australian literature. Reading Australia’s popularity has grown rapidly in the eight years since it began and more than 21,000 educators are registered. During the height of the pandemic in April last year, 34,000 lessons were downloaded.

“Reading Australia’s 21,000-subscriber milestone is a testament not only to the quality of the resources, but also to the ongoing relevance and resonance that the stories have for teachers and students around the country,” says Adam Suckling, CEO of the not-for-profit Copyright Agency, which created Reading Australia.

There are now 90 primary and 134 secondary resources, spanning Foundation to Year 12 and linking closely to the Australian curriculum and cross-curriculum priorities.

The resources are written by teachers and reflect the growing interest in books explaining diversity, social issues, First Nations writing, gender fluidity and the impacts of climate change and COVID-19. readingaustralia.com.au
Teachers know that the most important long-term investment our societies can make towards a sustainable future is ensuring every student is literate about climate science ...

David Edwards
Education International general secretary

First Nations webinars
The AEU is hosting a series of online webinars exploring topics and issues relevant to First Nations education.

The next webinar will be held during Reconciliation Week on Thursday 27 May at 5.30pm. Entitled Reconciliation (in education) – More than just a word, the webinar will feature a discussion from recent winners of the AEU Arthur Hamilton Award for excellence in First Nations education on how they engage with First Nations communities and embed First Nations perspectives in education.

Keep an eye on the AEU website and social media channels for details of past webinars and how to join the conversation.

Career inspiration for students
The Public Education Foundation is calling for public school alumni to join its Acacia Program, to give back to public education through scholarships, mentoring and advocacy.

The Foundation wants to expand the program to public schools across the country, says CEO David Hetherington.

The program was launched in March with 10 inaugural Acacia Fellows, including human rights barrister Jennifer Robinson, academic, writer and Indigenous rights advocate Professor Larissa Behrendt, comedian Adam Hill and author Kathy Lette.

Robinson, who attended Berry Public School and Bomaderry High School in NSW, came up with the idea of program to help public school students understand the diversity of careers and possibilities available to them.

The foundation says the program aims to connect students with people from their own local areas who have succeeded in a wide variety of careers.

"It doesn't matter what field you've pursued after school or how famous you are," says Hetherington.

tinyurl.com/ynfyjds4
info@publiceducationfoundation.org.au

EVENTS

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More than two-thirds of Australia’s four million school students attend public schools, but federal government funding agreements, set to last for years to come, have locked in deliberate funding discrimination.

While the federal government makes false claims of record funding for public schools, analysis by economist Adam Rorris has found a funding shortfall of $27 billion over the next four years. But private schools will be overfunded.

In his 2021 report, Investing in Schools Equals Funding the Future, Rorris says schools are underfunded in every state and territory based on the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), except the ACT. The SRS is the calculation of how much each school needs to meet students’ educational needs. It includes a base amount plus six needs-based loadings.

“It’s not an aspirational benchmark,” says Rorris. “The SRS is the minimum funding required to achieve learning outcomes.”

But less than half of all public schools will reach 95 per cent of the SRS by 2023 because of federal school funding legislation and bilateral funding agreements between federal, state and territory governments. Meanwhile, the
The fact that the vast majority of public schools across the country are funded below the minimum benchmark creates deep inequality and denies schools the support they need.

Correna Haythorpe
AEU federal president

The federal government has ended capital works funding for public schools but ramped up its support for private school buildings and facilities, promising $19 billion from 2018 to 2027.

A new AEU campaign – Every School. Every Child. – calls on the federal government to fund the full SRS amount for all public school students and establish a capital works fund for public schools to help provide the infrastructure to accommodate rising student numbers.

The AEU also wants an urgent restoration of funding for students with disability. The federal government cut $31 million in support for students with disability in 2018 when it introduced a new funding system that included revised benchmarks for different levels of support.

AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe says the Every School. Every Child. campaign is designed to remind political leaders about the importance of ensuring that every school has the resources it needs for every child to succeed.

“The fact that the vast majority of public schools across the country are funded below the minimum benchmark creates deep inequality and denies schools the support they need,” she says.

“And we know the campaign has strong community support. Eighty-three per cent of Australians say they believe school funding should be a priority issue for the next federal election,” Haythorpe says.

Every school.
Every child.

1. Fund public schools to a minimum of 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS)

2. Remove the legislated 20% cap on the Commonwealth share of the SRS for public schools

3. Remove the 4% capital depreciation tax in school funding bilateral agreements

4. Establish a Capital fund for public schools to help meet rising enrolment growth and infrastructure needs

Pictured right (top to bottom): AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe and Labor’s shadow minister for education Tanya Plibersek; Whites Hill State College principal Andrew Beattie and Queensland Teachers Union president Cresta Richardson; Victoria Road Primary School principal Lisa Branch with AEU Victoria branch president Meredith Peace and branch secretary Erin Aulich.
Invest where it matters

Public schools don’t need new polo fields, but they do need permanent, properly maintained buildings that allow students and educators to get the job done.

Government spending on school facilities and buildings has favoured private schools to an “astonishing degree”, says a new report by economist Adam Rorris.

The report, Investing in Schools Equals Funding the Future, examines government funding for capital works over the 10 years to 2018.

Private schools received more funds for capital works in seven out of the 10 years, despite having about half the enrolments of public schools.

In only three of the years of the period Rorris studied, capital investment in public schools exceeded private school funding due to the Rudd government’s economic stimulus program – the Building Education Revolution (BER) – in response to the global financial crisis.

“Investment in private school facilities is at least double that of public schools per student in any given year and, in some years, almost four times more,” says Rorris. “The imbalance is enormous. It’s not just a little. It’s totally off the scale.”

Capital investment per public school student over the 10 years varies from an annual average of just over $1000 in Tasmania to as high as $2141 in the ACT, the report finds. But the average annual expenditure post-BER (2013-18) collapsed across all jurisdictions with Tasmania, South Australia and NSW having the lowest levels ($500, $572 and $610 respectively).

Rorris calculates that public schools were deprived of $21.5 billion in school investment for the first five years the Coalition was in power (2013-18).

As Australia looks to shake off the effects of the pandemic, there have been widespread calls on governments to accelerate capital investment to help stimulate the economy, says Rorris.

Public schools are ready-made sites for this kind of investment, which offers a long-term return that can’t be produced by private operators, he says. “And public schools’ distribution across the country in urban, rural and remote communities provides a scalable and effective way of delivering stimulus. Not to mention the positive effects on school participation and learning outcomes.”

Drawing on OECD research, the report estimates that capital investment in Australian public schools could help generate approximately $5.2 billion every year at an extra annual cost of $3.8 billion.

MISSING OUT

Rorris says a particularly troubling aspect of under-investment in public school facilities is that it tends to be most deficient in areas where it is needed most. For example, in lower socioeconomic regions or in schools with high numbers of students with disability.
More than 70 per cent of students with disability attend public schools and, with rising enrolments, many schools urgently need new or improved facilities that are fit-for-purpose.

At the South Australian School for Vision Impaired (SASVI) in Adelaide, the gym is the size of a small classroom, says physical education teacher Andrew Whisson.

Despite the inadequate facilities, the school has built a strong sporting and athletic tradition. One former student is Paralympian Kieran Modra, a swimmer and tandem cyclist who won a swag of medals at eight Paralympic Games and the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games.

The school’s blind tennis program is also attracting strong student support. SASVI introduced the first blind tennis program in South Australia in 2015 and it has produced medal winners at the world championships. Some of the program’s juniors are in line for national selection, says Whisson.

“But our gym is less than a full-sized badminton court, so we can’t even fit one blind tennis court in there. It’s also a concrete box. The concrete echoes and the kids track the balls audibly.”

Whisson says the school is forced to hire a full-size gym and tennis courts but it’s not an ideal solution. The tennis courts are outdoors but blind tennis is usually played indoors away from glare. And the gym belongs to a nearby school, meaning that access is limited for SASVI students.

RESTORING EQUITY
Rorris recommends federal, state and territory governments stop providing capital investment to private schools, and that they instead direct these funds toward rectifying the $3.8 billion capital investment gap in public schools.

Rorris finds that this change could return more than $5 billion a year in the long term in improved educational outcomes. He recommends greater co-ordination among school communities to identify critical infrastructure gaps in schools and that modern monitoring and reporting systems be used to quickly draw attention to problems with facilities. He also recommends that schools facilities boards be established at regional and state levels, with the active participation of teachers, parents and students.

“The decades-long neglect of Australian public schools has been facilitated by the effective absence of accountability towards the community members who need and use these facilities,” says Rorris.

“Bureaucratic systems prevent this neglect from being communicated and thereby block demands for effective and efficient investment in schools.”

“The democratic participation of teachers, parents and students in the oversight of school facilities can give voice to reasonable demands for justice and equity across all school systems.”
The future begins at school

When this year’s Year 12 students started school in 2010, the idea of carrying a small computer in your pocket was just taking off.

Smartphones have changed our lives in ways we could never have imagined from the social, physical and mental effects, to wider influences on work and community.

Given the rapid pace of technological and scientific advancements, how do we prepare 2021’s Year 1 students for the world they’ll enter as adults?

Andrew Beattie, principal of Whites Hill State College in Brisbane says schools need to make “massive changes” to equipment and buildings, program delivery, curriculum and educators’ skill sets.
Repositioning the country for the 21st century begins in schools.
Reconceptualising an entire education system, however, costs money. The current level of school resourcing is stifling the ability of many of our schools to teach the skills required to support the transition of the economy. These include critical and creative thinking, communication, collaboration and teamwork, personal and social skills and ICT skills.

For Australia to remain an advanced economy into the future, all students, regardless of where they go to school, deserve the opportunity to be at the forefront of the new economies as they emerge. This opportunity starts in every school and the federal government has a responsibility to greatly increase the funding to schools in order to achieve this goal. The federal government cannot continue to deflect responsibilities to the states. You can’t say we’re going to be a nation of world beaters without actually investing in education. Just maintaining the current system is not sufficient. Too often, the upskilling of pedagogical approaches, technologies and programs that is urgently required in schools is stifled by under investment in education. It is no secret that keeping pace with rapidly changing technologies is expensive. However, our students of today and the future need access to the latest industry standard equipment and resources that is renewed and replaced in real time rather than three-, five- or 10-year schedules.

Professional development for teachers must be a priority. It is crucial that our teachers are continually equipped with the skills to deliver this constant change in education. Our students do not become innovators, collaborators and team players, and critical and creative thinkers, with high levels of social, personal and ICT skills through osmosis. These critical skills are developed and refined over time by highly skilled, resourced and supported teachers delivering cutting-edge pedagogical practices underpinned by research. The federal government has an inherent moral obligation to ensure every school, teacher and student across the country receives the funding and support to undertake this transformational journey together. There’s the economics of creating the workforce of the future and there’s also the focus on developing the citizens our future country needs.

Schools strive to develop the whole child, intellectually, personally and socially. At the moment the under resourcing means we’re already very stretched. I honestly believe schools are doing their best for our students with what they currently have, but I sit in my office and imagine what we could do if we were actually funded to the full amount of the Schooling Resource Standard. It’s about creating the Australia we want for the future. Let’s invest in well-rounded citizens who are life-long learners. Our future global citizens, leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs who will guide the transition of our economy depend on this.
Students in the Top End attend some of Australia’s most remote schools in often challenging conditions, yet government funding is the lowest in the country.

Analysis by economist Adam Rorris has found that public schools in all states (except the ACT) are underfunded by between $1000 and $2000 per student per year. Schools in the Northern Territory are underfunded by more than $6000 per student per year.

By 2023, NT schools with be 20 per cent short of the funding they need, says Rorris in his 2020 report, The Schooling Resource Standard in Australia: Impacts on Schools.

A NT government report, leaked to ABC News in November 2020, has confirmed the funding crisis.

The internal review of the NT’s Homelands schools found “a lack of clarity, support and accountability”, according to the ABC.

At Arlparra School in the Utopia Homelands, 250 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs, principal Stephen Nimmo – who is the NT representative on the AEU Federal Principals’ Committee – oversees five school sites with a total of 300 students from early childhood to Year 12.

The Utopia Homelands cover 3500 square kilometres and include 16 different communities and several language groups. A fleet of 12 school buses travels long distances each day on dirt roads to pick up and deliver students to their classrooms. The longest trip is 96 kilometres each way.

On Nimmo’s wishlist is more staff: teachers and specialists, Aboriginal educators and administrative support. In one remote site, one teacher has 24 students in six age groups — from preschool to Year 5. The students’ basic needs are being met during their classes, but Nimmo worries about the depth of learning. “It’s hard enough in a class of 24 when the students are all the same age. It’s very difficult when there’s a mix of ages,” he says.

Ideally, he’d like more teachers – preferably Aboriginal teachers – and more Aboriginal assistant teachers. “English is the third or fourth language for many students so it’s essential to have Aboriginal educators in class who can translate.”

Nimmo says the order of priority for any spare funds in schools is teachers and assistant teachers, then specialists and finally, administrative assistants.

“Principals tend to lose out in terms of backroom support,” he says.

After five years at Arlparra, Nimmo has worked out a balance of classroom and administrative support, but he says a shortage of administration staff is typical in NT public schools.

Other staff, too, are missed.

“Most of the librarians disappeared long ago. The special ed teachers started to disappear and you began to talk about sharing special ed teachers. School counsellors are also now shared within a region. We have one school counsellor who services eight schools in a region that
We have one school counsellor who services eight schools in a region that is slightly larger than the state of Victoria, so there’s a bit of travelling.

Stephen Nimmo
Arilparra School, NT

The loss of these specialists can have a big effect on education, says Nimmo. “If you don’t have a special education person or a counsellor in the school, things can get missed. You end up with a sort of bare-bones operation. I’ve got a teacher in front of every class and a teaching assistant with them, and that’s the minimum I need. Phew! I’ve met my obligations and I’ve just about got enough money to get through the year.”

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Authorised by Susan Hopgood, Federal Secretary, Australian Education Union, 120 Clarendon St, Southbank 3006
Undervalued and overworked

An inquiry into the teaching profession in NSW has recommended significant changes to teachers’ salaries and working conditions.

The report of the Valuing the Teaching Profession Inquiry noted a dramatic increase in the work of teachers and principals at the same time as a significant decline in teacher salaries.

Some of the factors contributing to increased workloads include constant policy change, a substantial rise in student need, rapid changes in technology, the expansion and reform of the curriculum, new compliance, administration, data collection and reporting responsibilities, and greater community expectations of schools and teachers.

Teachers’ salaries have declined compared to other professions, the report says. It calls for an urgent 10-15 per cent increase in teacher salaries and improved career options. It also recommends the return of specialist staff to assist teachers, more time for collaboration, planning, assessment and monitoring student progress and extra school counsellors to help address the rise in student mental health issues.

The independent inquiry, commissioned by the NSW Teachers Federation last year, investigated the work of teachers and principals and how it has changed since 2004.

Its expert panel was chaired by former WA premier and education minister Dr Geoff Gallop. The other panel members were former justice of the NSW Industrial Court and deputy president of the NSW Industrial Relations Commission, Dr Tricia Kavanagh, and former chief executive of the NSW Institute of Teachers, Patrick Lee.

The inquiry received more than 1000 submissions from teachers and schools, professional bodies, academics, economists and education experts.

NSW Teachers Federation president Angelo Gavrielatos says teachers and principals have unsustainable workloads without the time and support to do the job expected of them, and without the competitive salary necessary to attract and retain teachers into the future.

“The current policy settings are failing, they’re failing teachers, but they’re also failing kids. And that’s already now manifesting itself in teacher shortages,” says Gavrielatos.

“Unless there’s a policy reset so that the profession is much more attractive for young people to enter and to stay, the teacher shortage we’re now experiencing will pale into insignificance.”

Gavrielatos says more than 10,000 extra teachers will be needed in the next 20 years for an expected 25 per cent rise in student enrolments.

“This is a report that will not be gathering dust,” Gavrielatos says.

Despite “profound changes” in the work and workload of teachers, and uncompetitive salaries, teachers’ dedication and commitment to public schools remains high, the Inquiry found.
The AEU’s Rebuild with TAFE campaign says a strong and vibrant TAFE sector would boost our economic recovery, address the apprentice shortage, reduce youth unemployment and provide career pathways.

TAFE has a significant role to play for young people and workers needing to reskill in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, says AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe.

“Governments must understand the value of TAFE to the community. A fully funded TAFE system should take priority in the delivery of vocational education to rebuilding the economy, and rebuilding the social contract that governments have with Australians,” Haythorpe says.

Almost all Australians (94 per cent) believe it is important to increase federal funding for TAFE to help economic recovery, according to a survey of more than 1000 people by research organisation Fifty Acres-Pollinate.

The AEU and leading economists say that vocational education and training (VET) has been mishandled by governments for more than a decade. The VET system was overhauled during the early 2000s, with huge public subsidies paid to private providers to compete against TAFE, Australia’s most reliable national provider of VET education. The restructure led to an explosion of low-quality training providers, many of which collapsed leaving students stranded, while TAFE suffered massive funding cuts. The federal government alone has cut $3 billion from vocational education since 2013.

The disastrous overhaul of VET and the dismantling of TAFE have “deeply damaged” once-reliable vocational pathways, according to a report by the Centre for Future Work economist Alison Pennington, An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System.

Rebuild with TAFE

• Guarantee a minimum 70 per cent of all government VET funding to the public TAFE system
• Restore funding and rebuild the system
• Re-invest in the TAFE teaching workforce
• Develop a capital investment strategy for TAFE
Liz Lillie has seen many inspiring students make their way through the TAFE system in her 22 years as a teacher and sees the lifelong effects the experience has on people’s lives. Lillie, who is head teacher of early childhood education and care at Tamworth TAFE in NSW began as a casual teacher. She remembers one young woman who began as a TVET Year 11 student studying a Certificate II course. After finishing school, she continued to a Certificate III and then a Diploma in early childhood studies and found work in the sector. She also enjoyed helping others completing early childhood studies at TAFE and returned to study a Certificate IV in training and assessing so that she could teach. Twenty years after first studying as a TVET student, the woman is now teaching at TAFE. Lillie says the woman chose to teach TAFE rather than at a private provider “because she loves it so much.” “She grew up with TAFE being a major influence in her life,” Lillie says.

Lillie wants to see TAFE properly funded and resourced with highly qualified staff who are adequately supported. “Our passion is education, that’s why we’ve become TAFE teachers. It’s very disappointing to have that passion continuously knocked out of you as a result of not being able to get funding,” Lillie says.
The AEU’s ACT branch has negotiated an increase in the superannuation guarantee for members and, for the first time, employer super contributions will continue for the first 12 months of unpaid parenting leave.

The superannuation guarantee – the employer’s contribution – will increase by one per cent to 11.5 per cent.

AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe says the improvements to the enterprise agreement for ACT teachers are a significant step forward.

“In particular, the payment of super contributions during parenting leave will help women improve their retirement incomes while raising their families,” says Haythorpe.

An estimated 40 per cent of single, retired women live below the poverty line, while 44 per cent of women in relationships rely on their partner’s income in retirement, according to the advocacy group, Women in Super.

Women earn less money than men and are more likely to work part-time and take time out of the workforce to care for children or others. That means they have less invested in superannuation savings.

Women in Super CEO Sandra Buckley says that while there is no quick fix to ensure equality, increasing the super guarantee is one part of the solution. She also strongly supports the payment of super on parental leave.

“It’s still predominantly women who take parental leave, so it’s women being affected by not receiving super during that time. Then they return to work, and in order to get that part-time flexible role, they’re in lower paid jobs,” says Buckley.

“Teaching is a prime example of that. If you think about the number of relief teachers, often they’re women with young children at home who don’t want to go back full-time, but do want to keep working.”

Eventually, women might return to full-time work but their careers are interrupted again if a parent or a partner becomes ill, which has a further effect on their super balances, she says. “Other countries have introduced so-called ‘caring credits’, whereby they notionally credit someone’s
... it’s not a welfare payment; it’s a workplace right. So, super should apply to paid parental leave just as it does to any other form of leave.

Emma Dawson
Per Capita

account for the amount of time they’ve spent out of the workforce while caring. Effectively, the country is saying you are saving our economy money because you’re carrying out this caring role."

SETTING A STANDARD
Women in Super’s Make Super Fair campaign calls for the superannuation guarantee to be applied to the government’s paid parental leave.

Emma Dawson, executive director of think tank Per Capita, says the move would set a standard.

“Parental leave is the only form of workplace leave that doesn’t attract super,” says Dawson. “When you go on annual leave or sick leave, you’re paid your super. And it’s not a welfare payment; it’s a workplace right. So, super should apply to paid parental leave just as it does to any other form of leave.”

The discrimination in retirement incomes is compounded by super’s flat tax structure and a number of policy interventions in the years since compulsory super’s introduction that have “deliberately favoured higher-income men”, says a 2020 Per Capita discussion paper.

Dawson says the current debate over whether to increase the super guarantee for all workers is frustrating.

“We had the freeze in 2014 under the Abbott government, and it was meant to start rising at 0.5 per cent a year in 2014. So we should have been at 12 per cent by now,” says Dawson.

Per Capita has called for a bi-partisan commitment to producing an annual gender equality performance scorecard – including women's retirement incomes – funded federally and informed by rigorous data analysis by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Flexibility fail

The poverty experienced by many female teachers in retirement is due to inequities over previous decades.

AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe says super was previously available only to those who worked full-time and were available for any position across the state. “That meant that many women with family responsibilities were excluded,” she says.

Many women were usually forced to resign to have children before unpaid maternity leave was introduced in the 1970s.

Teacher Laura Green* was faced with a difficult choice in the 1980s. She could take maternity leave for 12 months or for six years.

“That was the rule. There was no flexibility,” she says. “I could have hung on for two or three years, but not six. I had a mortgage and I wanted to keep the house.”

She chose 12 months but, after returning to school a year later, quickly realised she wasn’t coping.

“I couldn’t handle the pressure of teaching, all the preparation and everything else. And if my daughter was sick, I wanted to be there.”

Green was forced to resign and take on relief teaching and other jobs to make ends meet. Three years later she went back to teaching, but the break was enough to put a hole in her super balance. She used the super accrued from her first 10 years of work to keep up the mortgage payments until she returned to work.

Nonetheless, she’s grateful to be better off than many with less or no superannuation. She’ll receive just over $1200 from super and $306 per fortnight in a part pension.

Teacher Christine Burke, who ended her 43-year teaching career in January, hadn’t given super much of a thought until five years ago.

Then, as she began investigating her options, she was surprised to find a “completely different language” and was shocked at some of the prices quoted for financial advice.

One financial institution promised a financial plan for $12,000, and another failed to include an important element in a statement of advice.

“You really need to dedicate time to learning as much as you can,” she says.

Burke believes the curriculum should include a greater emphasis on financial literacy so students learn early about their opportunities and responsibilities.

She mentions a male colleague who told her he’d be retiring with a super balance of more than a million dollars thanks to salary sacrifice early in his career.

“I didn’t even think of it,” she says.

*Real name not used
On solid ground

Connections to history, family and culture run deep for Kayla White, who has her eyes on the future of community education.

BY LEANNE TOLRA
IN SHORT
// Kayla White and Jeanene Booth have been named joint winners of the 2021 Arthur Hamilton Award.

// The Award recognises AEU members who are committed to ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the right to high quality public education throughout their lives.

Kayla White and Jeanene Booth have been named joint winners of the 2021 Arthur Hamilton Award.

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People often comment that I am a young teacher and have a lot to learn. But they overlook the 30 years’ experience I have in my culture and my connection to local lands, in which I still live and teach.

Kayla White
Hastings Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

Kayla White says her mother’s gifts were the lessons of selflessness and how to care for others, while her father taught her about culture, connection to local lands and identity.

These strong foundations helped to build a career in education that has had a lasting effect on countless students within the Camden Haven on the lower-north NSW coast for the last five years.

Kayla, who grew up in Laurieton on the mid-north coast, began working at Melville High School in South Kempsey in 2010 as the first Indigenous School and Administrative Support Staff (SASS) member in the school’s front office.

“I met community and took phone calls and I loved this time, but I found myself drawn to the kids and the classroom,” says Kayla. “I spoke to our AEO (Aboriginal Education Officer) about her role and what it entailed. Before I knew it, I was enrolled at the University of Sydney undertaking a Diploma in Aboriginal Education, which then turned into a Bachelor of Education, Aboriginal Studies.”

Today, the mother of six and proud member of the Birpai Nation, is a classroom teacher trained in Aboriginal studies and a joint winner of the 2020 AEU Arthur Hamilton Award for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education.

“The power of education is immeasurable, it is what we do with this power that changes lives,” says Kayla. “This is why I do what I do.

“Being a teacher is something I am very proud of, I love setting a good example for my children, nieces, nephews and community. I am proud to say that I, too, struggled in school with reading and writing, but look at me now.

“I think it is important for our youth to learn that your limitations do not define you. You can be anyone you want to be.”

Mentors have helped to shape Kayla’s career and her culture has been a constant source of pride. A teacher in Year 11 and 12 was an initial inspiration. “She believed in me and she is one of the reasons I am teaching today,” she says. Another early influencer once told her “it was important for Aboriginal people to be leaders in our own culture”.

“This is something that has always stuck with me,” she says. “I reflect on this statement regularly and continue to challenge myself to do better, to do my bit to help ‘close the gap’ for our people.

“In my early career of teaching, I was supported by a mentor through the Department of Education. Kim Hogan is a non-Aboriginal woman who has continued to support me, not just through my first years of teaching, but every day since.

“In schools where you are the minority, having someone understand you as an individual is the difference between ‘fight or flight’. Kim helped me to grow my
wings and now she is watching me fly.”

Kayla is an executive member of the Hastings Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and a regional AECG representative and advocate for the Aboriginal Community viewpoint to “walk together and work together”. She describes this role as “improving relationships, understanding and educational outcomes for our students, staff and communities”.

Kayla was the 2018 Hastings Aboriginal Education award winner and the 2019 Aboriginal Education Council/Prime 7 News Young Achiever award winner.

In 2018 she worked on the NAIDOC Road Show, a program developed for students studying via distance education. Her role involved working with local Elders, community members and organisations to localise each program to students’ local nations.

In 2019 she received a $5000 sponsorship from her local op shop to provide the Hastings education network with access to the NAIDOC 2019 Star Planetarium. “The highlight for me was seeing our Aboriginal Elders enjoying the Aboriginal Stories in the Stars program, mixing with our youth and discussing how we could develop our own community stories,” says Kayla.

In 2020, the op shop provided a $10,000 grant for a Sky Stories event that aimed to build on the planetarium experience, using local knowledge and local people. When the event was postponed due to the pandemic, Kayla worked with the Hastings NAIDOC committee to create a Sea Life event that would allow people celebrate virtually.

She contacted nine local schools in the area and, although COVID-19 again had an impact, up to 10 students from each school were able to participate.

“Each school was gifted a sea animal significant to the Birpai Nation and they created it on the beach from sand or seaweed. When the animals were done, we sifted coloured sand over each student’s hand to connect them to the project,” says Kayla.

Drones were used throughout the event to unite the wider Hastings community and a video was created so it could be shared. “In a difficult year, where we felt the isolation, we held each other close in spirit through a virtual platform.”

Teacher and mentor Kim Hogan says Kayla has also initiated a preschool wellbeing program for the Camden Haven community of preschools as part of an emerging leaders’ program helping to build cultural connections for secondary school distance education students.

“She aimed for achievable goals such as reading dreamtime stories aloud and face painting. Each term, Kayla increased the capacity of her students and by term four they were leading workshops and becoming leaders in their own communities. Some have started traineeships,” says Kim.

Kayla balances her teaching load with family duties, which include supporting her extended family, while also studying for her Master of Education Leadership through the University of Sydney. Much of her community work is voluntary and “sometimes this means before school, staying back later in the afternoon or on weekends”.

“I am hopeful that I will lead Aboriginal Education within my community one day soon,” she says.

“People often comment that I am a young teacher and have a lot to learn. But they overlook the 30 years’ experience I have in my culture and my connection to local lands, in which I still live and teach.”

Leanne Tolra is a freelance writer.
Indigenous Australians have been fighting for generations to have a voice in education. As she finds her own voice as a teacher and academic, Jeanene Booth says she stands on the shoulders of many ancestors and Elders. She feels privileged to have the opportunities their groundwork has provided, allowing her to work in “much kinder spaces”.

A Gangalidda woman from Burketown in Far North Queensland, Booth was raised and educated in Melbourne. “I didn’t grow up on Country, so the way I’ve gained most of my knowledge is the way most non-Indigenous people have, through books and academia and building relationships with people,” she says.

She says living in largely non-Indigenous urban environments caused her to question her “right to teach Indigenous content” that isn’t her own. She knows many non-Indigenous teachers also share similar tensions and insecurities. Booth received a teaching degree at Monash University in 2009. Since then, she has taught in public primary schools across Melbourne and in Aboriginal education settings in remote schools in far north Queensland and the Northern Territory, and in Melbourne at Worawa Aboriginal College and in the Yiramalay program at Wesley College. In 2019, she completed her Graduate Certificate of Educational Research at Monash University as a prerequisite to begin her PhD. It was while studying that Booth began to question her teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, languages and perspectives.

“I was not happy with how I had been embedding Indigenous perspectives in mainstream education,” she says. “As passionate as I am, I still wasn’t doing it right. But I knew that if teachers didn’t start doing something, nothing would change.”

While working on her thesis, Booth noticed that most Indigenous education research investigated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ needs to fit into the existing education system.

“There was a lot less focus on the responsibility of everybody else in the country to learn about Indigenous people,” says Booth. “That made me realise this was a space I could contribute to because I have the ability to step across both worlds.”

She spent hours at Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Melbourne Museum listening to storytelling by Victoria’s Indigenous people and reflecting on how they could influence her classroom teaching. “The more I learned about Indigenous people, the more I wanted to know and the more connections I could easily make with the school curriculum.”

Booth taught at Caulfield South Primary School before taking maternity leave in 2018 and later returned to the school one day a week while also studying.

In 2019 she began leading the school’s Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), which involved providing knowledge to staff and students that would help start making changes.

Jeanene Booth is inspiring teachers and students to embrace reconciliation and start making changes in their own schools.

BY CYNDI TEBBEL
“Working with Indigenous content or a variety of Indigenous communities can be challenging for a gamut of reasons including cultural, intergenerational trauma and colonisation,” says Booth. “And sometimes I hear racist or ignorant things, but because this space is open and we’re being honest, we’re able to break down the myths that prevent us from moving forward.”

BUSTING MYTHS

Confronting myths starts with what we know ourselves, then inviting students along on the journey with us, says Booth. And children have a knack of pointing out myths and injustices that make us question where our knowledge comes from, she says.

She recalls a Year 5 history lesson where students declared they’d never seen a statue of an Indigenous hero, and a Year 3 workshop using Terra Nullius to illustrate pre-1788 Australia. The students wondered if there was a name for the battles between the colonialists and First Nations peoples.

“I said, ‘We call it the Frontier Wars … but it’s not actually recognised as a war’,” says Booth. “Their response was, ‘That’s silly’.”

Linking activities to historic events, and people past and present, was played out when Booth asked the student RAP team whether the school’s house names reflected “who we are and what we stand for”. The inquiry prompted a whole-school probe in 2020 – even during COVID-19 lockdowns – correlating to the 1967 referendum “so students could learn about what that meant for Aboriginal people and voting”.

The school approached Aunty Fay Stewart-Muir, an Elder and traditional owner of Boon Wurrung Country and a senior linguist in Boon Wurrung language, who gave permission for the children to name each house after a Boon Wurrung animal.

“Obviously with any child-led project there’s a lot of teacher support,” says Booth, “but there were 11 students on that RAP team, from Year 2 to Year 6, who met once every three weeks at lunchtime to make that happen. They took little steps, but it gave every child the opportunity to take action.”

Booth has helped teachers embed Indigenous perspectives in lessons that included introducing elements of Indigenous cultural astronomy in Year 5 space units, using possum skin cloaks to teach Year 2 students about area in mathematics and discussing current issues such as the Djab Wurrung sacred trees issue in western Victoria.

ENRICHED LEARNING

Booth was named a joint winner of the 2021 Arthur Hamilton Award for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education for her work at Caufield South Primary School.

“There are no Indigenous students at my school, but I believe the work we’ve done has enriched their learning. We’re doing this to make a difference to Indigenous Australians, but it also provides a vehicle and an opportunity to enrich the learning for all students irrespective of their background.

“What we’ve done here is not groundbreaking. It’s just step by step. I drive a lot of things, and I support and empower people. But reconciliation is a job for everyone. That’s a huge message at our school, and a huge shift in our thinking.”

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.

Mapping a path for real change

Jeanene Booth shares her advice for educators looking for ways to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and culture into their curriculum:

1. Understand why

“The Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP) for schools have lots of information and that helped us to build our ‘whys’. Everything we do aims to normalise Indigenous content and make our school look and feel welcoming to the Indigenous community. Knowing why, helps to eliminate fears of being tokenistic because we are all driving for the same goal.”

2. Start with what you know

“Be honest about the fact that this space can be complex, there can be tensions, and we can be limited in our knowledge. Then draw a line in the sand and decide that wherever you’re at, you’re going to move forward.”

3. Take small steps

“Teachers have a million balls in the air all the time, so goals have to be realistic. Set a goal and take small steps. Back yourself – teachers are creative and constantly make connections between content, student’s interests and the curriculum. We started by using picture books by Indigenous authors. Then we saw the small steps across the school beginning to add up.”
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Different times, new ways

After the frustrations of COVID-19 shutdowns, new educators are finding innovative ways to engage students and help them appreciate the value of community.

BY MARGARET PATON

NIKKI DAVIES
Yinnar South Primary School, VIC

DRIVEN TO INCREASE ENROLMENT

As a senior high school teacher, Nikki Davies was a little frustrated at not being able to implement her own programs, so she applied for the principal role at a two-classroom primary school in regional Victoria.

Davies, who began her new job in the final term of 2019, says she was more overwhelmed about the switch to primary teaching than the thought of becoming a principal.

"While I quite enjoyed teenagers grunting at me when I asked them questions, I was nervous about how I’d go with younger students as a teaching principal."

Davies took a longer route to teaching than many. Her initial qualifications were in psychology and she worked for a time in mental health, including management roles. But the idea of teaching was always in the back of her mind.

"My husband came home with an admissions booklet and said, ‘You’re always talking about teaching. Why don’t you apply?’"

By late 2009, she’d completed a two-year part-time graduate diploma in secondary teaching, specialising in English and psychology. Her husband’s work as a police officer saw them move across the state as Davies taught at high schools in Foster, Laverton and Morwell. She was also a learning specialist at Traralgon.

To get up to speed on primary teaching, she has focused on professional development in teaching literacy and numeracy. She teaches three days a week, and has two part-time teachers and an administration staff member at Yinnar, in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley.
In her early days as a principal, Davies bounced many ideas off mentors and others, but is now feeling more confident.

“I’ve got a lot more faith in myself ... and I understand more about what would be right for my staff and students.”

Managing budgets has taken some extra work, she says.

“Being a small school, our budget is always very tight. Having to implement yet another department program can be tricky.”

Davies earned her stripes leading change at her school during the COVID-19 shutdowns.

Keen to keep the students engaged after she noticed them flagging near the end of the first shutdown, she ran a three-day virtual experience during the second shutdown.

“We sent home packing lists so each student could live in their lounge room as if they were on a camp in Melbourne. I called in every single favour of everyone I knew, including my former high school students. I also ran live online crosses with experts at Melbourne Zoo, police officers, the Immigration Museum, the Melbourne Shrine and more. We ‘virtually’ visited Queen Victoria Market and I sent home recipes for them to make fried rice with the ingredients we’d ‘bought’.”

The camp paid off with 100 per cent attendance for the whole shutdown. The students are still talking about it.

Despite “a lot of cool things” happening at the school, such as the kitchen garden program and learning Mandarin, maintaining enrolments is a challenge. Davies recently completed a public relations course and plans to build her school’s brand and promote offerings to the township’s 1000 residents.

“I expected to be working 10 to 12-hour days but I’m not working any more than I was as a teacher,” she says.

Her tips for managing time include writing a list of achievable goals each day and ticking them off. She eats lunch while on yard duty, delegates, and works hard at building relationships with staff. “They support me, so I have the freedom to choose how I spend my workday.”

Davies recently became a member of the AEU’s principals’ association executive and is hoping to be a voice for those, like her, at the helm of small schools.
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New educators

I’m realising that, as a teacher, you get to impact a child’s life in a number of ways, and not just their education.

“’I’m the co-teacher for a few subjects, so I get to work with other teachers and learn a lot from them. I also do one-on-one teaching for particular subjects.’

BUILDING RAPPORT
A big benefit of working in a small school is the smaller class sizes. Price’s largest class, Year 8, has just 13 students.

“Each day I teach the same kids multiple times, so building rapport makes it easier and more pleasurable to teach. You get to see them grow and learn, which is very rewarding,” she says.

Apart from the “occasional adolescent outburst”, behavioural management issues are rare.

Looking ahead, Price is planning to undertake professional learning to help her incorporate a wider range of technology in her classroom, such as simulators for science and geometry software for maths. She’s also about to begin TAFE studies to further develop her skills in primary industries.

Meanwhile, Price is building up the school’s agriculture studies, working on a merino and chook-breeding program, although with limited resources. Students will show the school’s livestock and garden produce at the Trundle Show in term 3.

“Learning the skills of showing livestock teaches students incredible responsibility and life skills,” she says.

“We’ve made our program relevant to the district because it’s a sheep and cropping area.

“I’m realising that, as a teacher, you get to impact a child’s life in a number of ways, and not just their education.

You’re someone they look to for social and emotional support, their physical needs, and guidance. I enjoy that side of teaching.”
MODELLING THE MINDSET

Teaching is like a team sport, says Justin Pronin, who has just begun his fourth year as an educator.

“It’s important to have a collaborative mindset as a teacher because you can’t do it all by yourself. I love learning from the strengths and talents of my peers, and respect they all have their own style.”

Collaboration and “culture building” are made easier at Harrison School in the ACT, where Pronin has taught since early 2020, because all 70 teaching staff sit in the same staff room.

He’s a firm advocate of grabbing professional learning opportunities, especially because he has been teaching out-of-field in several subjects including Year 7 and 8 maths, Year 9 English and physical education for Years 7 and 8.

Pronin attends training even if he thinks he knows the topic, saying, “You may pick up one little thing that can help you more than you think.”

That happened when he attended a five-day maths conference and got lost in a senior maths problem.

“I had no idea what the teacher was writing on the board and felt like a student again. I had to really pay attention, and it built my empathy for my students. In my classroom, I now wait for a second longer before I give students the answer. A tiny tweak like that, waiting before going onto the next step, is an improvement in your teaching practice. You can always get better.”

He’s challenging himself to improve his student assessment processes, such as through differentiating strategies for learners and peer feedback.

“I get students to write on a Post-it note so I can check their understanding of a topic. I’ve learnt to not assume knowledge, and instead focus on explicit teaching, making my language clearer. It can be tempting to talk a bit too high-level to some students. I now set clear expectations for what students should do, so they know what they’ll get out of the lesson.”

He’s also mindful of the push for educators to take on board evidence-based pedagogies and data-informed practices, which he says are his areas for improvement, too.

USING MINDFULNESS

Pronin says he has been surprised by how much teacher action and behaviour can affect student learning and development.

“For example, it can be frustrating when students are stubborn, so if I can model for them by admitting when I’m wrong and saying sorry, then students intuitively pick up on that.”

Pronin’s master’s in secondary teaching focused on mindfulness and metacognition, which he’s been using in his classes to build students’ social and emotional learning skills.

“I might start a lesson with a three-to-five minute guided meditation that allows the students to calm their thinking and prepare mentally for learning. Another strategy is to get students to draw their problem-solving process, which helps them visualise their thinking process and become more aware of their thoughts,” says Pronin. He also delves into metacognition and mental health tips on his Promysta YouTube channel.

Teaching keeps Pronin on his feet, which suits him, rather than an office job. In his downtime, he plays competitive basketball and next year will return to another passion, competitive volleyball.

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual K-12 teacher.
An inclusive, frank and funny guide to navigating consent for teens and tweens of all genders, from Yumi Stynes and Dr Melissa Kang.

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United response to Fiji’s plight

Teachers and students in Fiji are struggling to find living and learning spaces after two cyclones hit the country in December and January.

BY CHRISTINE LONG

Many of Fiji’s students began their school year in tents – both as classrooms and accommodation. The tents are hot and uncomfortable in temperatures of more than 30 degrees, high humidity and rainy weather, says Agni Deo Singh, general secretary, Fiji Teachers Union (FTU).

“If there is a heavy downfall you can hardly hear anything.”

Many teachers and students lost their homes and are living in “quite bad” conditions, says Singh.

Fiji was already reeling from the devastation to the northern island of Vanua Levu caused by Cyclone Yasa in mid-December last year when, just over a month later, Cyclone Ana hit heavily populated areas around Suva.

Yasa was a category five storm and brought winds of up to 345 kilometres an hour to the island nation. While Ana was rated as a category two storm with winds of up to 140 kilometres an hour, locals say they were surprised by its intensity.

Hundreds of homes, businesses and schools were badly damaged or destroyed. Education was put on hold as any schools left standing became evacuation centres.

At least five people were killed during the storms. Eighty-five schools, as well as the homes of hundreds of teachers and students, were demolished or destroyed.

The FTU leapt into action after Yasa hit in December and met with social welfare organisations and the Ministry for Education to look at ways to help students.

The union teamed up with a social organisation that runs several public schools and assisted about 1700 students with stationery and school bags, at a cost of $40,000, and later provided funds for lunches for students who “were coming to school without food”, says Singh.

The FTU provided financial assistance for student lunches three days a week, in the wake of COVID-19 earlier in the year. This successful program prompted 100 per cent attendance on the days lunch was provided.

When cyclone Ana hit Fiji in January, villages were submerged, and more schools were damaged or destroyed. Sanitation is also a serious issue.

“Some of those that we had assisted previously lost everything again,” says Singh.

The FTU provided further financial aid for stationery, school bags and lunches and support for those who lost crops and livestock.

At the end of March, the situation remained challenging for teachers and their students, Singh says.

MAJOR SETBACK

The natural disasters are a major setback for Fiji, which was already suffering economically because of the COVID-19 pandemic, says Council of Pacific Education (COPE) general secretary Govind Singh. COPE is a sub-regional arm of Education International, the worldwide federation of teacher unions.

“All these events happening against the backdrop of the battered and bruised economy spelt great disaster for Fiji’s poor and vulnerable, the women and children and thousands of school students,” he says.

But the Fijian government lacks the resources needed to rebuild.
Union members took it upon themselves to remove mud and debris from classrooms and restore equipment and resources completely destroyed by hurricane and floods.

Govind Singh
Council of Pacific Education

“The Fijian government in the aftermath of the two back-to-back hurricanes and a major flood announced that it has set aside $3.5 million for disaster assistance when the actual bill is expected to run into billions of dollars,” says Govind Singh. It is expected that donor agencies will be left to cover the shortfall. Singh says the civil society, non-government organisations, international agencies and the governments of Australia, New Zealand and Canada have made donations. Extra funds are expected to be sourced via loans from other countries and organisations. Through COPE, education unions in the region have rallied to provide resources and financial aid.

“Union members took it upon themselves to remove mud and debris from classrooms and restore equipment and resources completely destroyed by hurricane and floods,” says Govind Singh. Local businesses have also come to students’ aid temporarily, donating via an Adopt a School campaign.

“The union and teachers have demonstrated tremendous leadership and set a new benchmark for mobilising and organising to achieve the goals of education. Education International and COPE development partners are sincerely thanked,” he says.
Storytelling is a significant tool for teaching us about ourselves, our history, and how to understand people and their cultural histories. Listening to the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is essential to appreciating their lived experiences and how their lives have been shaped by a history of invasion and oppression.

Larissa Behrendt, a proud Eualeyai/Kamilaroi woman, has been absorbing written and oral histories from First Nations people since she was a young girl. A respected intellectual, human rights lawyer and award-winning author and director, she is the director of Research and Academic Programs at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney.

Behrendt moved into filmmaking to disseminate stories that need to be shared as part of the national reconciliation process. Her most recent film, After the Apology (2017), used painful accounts from a group of unyielding First Nations women battling injustices in social welfare and law enforcement to illuminate a staggering indictment of government inaction on the Stolen Generations since Kevin Rudd’s apology in 2008.

Since the apology, the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care has almost doubled, from 9054 in 2007 to 16,816 in 2016. One reason is that there are now more points at which reporting is required, says Behrendt.

“I knew if I only wrote about why the rates were increasing, people would say, ‘If DOCS is moving kids, there’s probably a good reason for it.’ But until you see those stories, you just don’t understand those nuances.”

Challenging stories

Bringing the voices of First Nations people into the classroom is one step towards facing up to and understanding Australia’s past and another towards a more equitable future.

BY CYNDI TEBBEL
“There are still a lot of negative assumptions made about Indigenous parenting, and a lack of commitment to implementing the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles,” she says.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY
Behrendt says understanding racism in all its different forms is something everyone needs to take responsibility for “because everything else flows from that”.

Increasingly, there’s an understanding of disrespectful language and labels, but she says unconscious bias and assumptions, behaviour and actions should also be challenged.

She cites child removal as a good example. It demonstrates bias and misunderstanding about the meaning of family and ignores the horrific repercussions. These include an established link between child removal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody.

The Aboriginal Legal Service has reported deaths in custody are getting close to 500 since a royal commission into the issue was completed 30 years ago. Behrendt says governments are more concerned about removing children than tackling the underlying issues.

“Even though child protection is state-based, this crisis is happening across the country. Numbers are going up in every jurisdiction.”

Correcting systemic injustices against First Nations peoples will come if there is a change in the conversation, which begins at home, in schools and in workplaces, she says.

IN THE CLASSROOM
Including more voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in classrooms is a start. Resources such as After the Apology and director Maya Newell’s documentary In My Blood It Runs – which follows a young Arrente/Garrawa boy from Alice Springs and his struggles in an education system that doesn’t value his culture – complement one another through a spectre of child removal.

The latter’s focus on school experience and teaching, says Behrendt, is “a really good resource to speak to students about what it means when Indigenous students don’t connect”.

Connecting with members of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is another way to get direct knowledge of histories and cultures.

“If your school has Indigenous students, there’s already a pool of parents and grandparents who would probably be quite happy to be more involved to ensure their children are having experiences in the education system that are better than theirs,” she says. “Plus we know that the stronger the relationship between the Aboriginal community and the school, the better the retention rates and student performance.”

Narragunnawali, the education program of Reconciliation Australia, has some great activities for schools and advice on how to connect with the local community, says Behrendt, whose own contributions in this space are considerable.

A new edition of Behrendt’s book Indigenous Australia for Dummies is out now, with updated sections on child removal and deaths in custody. And a children’s version is due for release in August.

Behrendt cautions that schools shouldn’t expect Aboriginal elders to give their knowledge for free. “A good starting point is to acknowledge and value their time and knowledge, ensure some recognition for sharing their cultural stories, and remember that knowledge is retained by them.”

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.
Natural learning

Having been around the world and back, Trish Forsyth couldn’t be happier as the principal of the primary school she attended as a child.

BY MARGARET PATON

M aths and spelling were a struggle for Trish Forsyth, who was disheartened not to receive more support from her teachers.

“From as early as I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher who helped learners like me. I knew exactly who I didn’t want to be like as an educator,” she says.

Forsyth studied early childhood education at Charles Sturt University and settled on primary teaching after completing her third practicum in Indonesia. Based in Yogyakarta, the CSU students taught both primary and adult classes and toured a number of schools during the placement.

Back home, and in just her second year of teaching, Forsyth was appointed principal of Rugby Public School, in a village nearly 300 kilometres south-west of Sydney. At age 21, she was the youngest principal in the state. With just 17 students, she was able to take the entire school, along with some parents, on a 10-day excursion to Central Australia. The trip sparked an interest in experiential learning that continues today.

After four years at Rugby, Forsyth moved on to senior leadership roles in Sydney, and spent a year working in Canada. Eleven years ago, she returned to rural NSW, to O’Connell Public School, near her childhood home, south-west of Bathurst.

CLOSE CONNECTION

It’s a place where Forsyth puts her ideas about hands-on learning into action, particularly in the nearby Yarrabin forest, with which she has felt a close connection all her life.

Last year she won a Public Education Foundation scholarship to spend $10,000 to expand her knowledge of forest education.

O’Connell’s 81 students spend two days each term in the forest, bushwalking, cycling, rock hunting and the like, and say it’s their favourite school activity. The visits cover all the key learning areas and develop curiosity, says Forsyth.

A recent find of Aboriginal artefacts belonging to the local Wiradjuri people may provide a further area of study and discovery.

Officially, forest days are field trips requiring a standard risk assessment. Each child has a whistle for signalling, should they get into trouble.

“We’ve had only one accident, when a student tripped and broke her arm. It’s comforting to know that, with 80-odd kids, snakes aren’t stupid. They’ll exit stage left with all those feet trudging through.”

START SMALL

Forsyth says she’s grateful for having the AEU behind her when she makes big decisions to take such calculated risks.

She encourages schools without a locally accessible forest to start small.

“Visit a park for observation and exploration. Or even transform a disused area of the playground into a mini forest. Even if it’s just a mud kitchen. We’ve had one for a couple of years, where the kids run a café making all manner of mud creations.”

Forsyth will complete her forest leadership certificate this year and says she will continue to use the forest as a resource across the curriculum.
Fund of the Year

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