Audit needed
Private schools “dodgy” disability funding claims

Profit seeking
How private players are changing teaching

New educators
Four teachers sum up their year

Fake news
Helping students to find the truth online

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FYI
- Meet with your MP and help win support for TAFE
- Moonhack goes global
- New program for children with autism
- Handwriting in the spotlight
- A year-long focus on girls
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The Turnbull government reform agenda has education hanging in the balance.

“Dodgy” disability funding claims must be audited
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Country schools hit hardest
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The federal government has failed to follow up on a program that has boosted the number of Aboriginal teachers.

Plea for answers
Education International is pressuring the Mexican government to find out what really happened to 43 teachers college students in a mass kidnapping.

Planting the seeds of doubt
The online world of lies and misinformation is proving a problem for students who can't tell fact from fiction.
Education issues making news locally and globally

A year for girls
A year-long effort to improve the educational chances of girls before, during and after crises is underway following the International Day of the Girl Child in October.

Every 10 minutes, it’s estimated, an adolescent girl dies as a result of violence, according to the United Nations. “In humanitarian emergencies, gender-based violence often increases, subjecting girls to sexual and physical violence, child marriage, exploitation and trafficking. Adolescent girls in conflict zones are 90 per cent more likely to be out of school when compared to girls in conflict-free countries, compromising their future prospects for work and financial independence as adults,” the UN says in a statement.

“Across the world, empowered girls are raising their voices to fight for their rights and protection in all contexts. They are working to end violence against women and girls, to recognise Indigenous rights, and to build peaceful and cohesive communities.”

Education International (EI), the global union federation with more than 32-million members in some 400 organisations, including the AEU, says traditional gender roles can become more entrenched in a crisis or conflict and girls may face serious violations of their human rights.

“Sexual violence targeting girls, abduction and trafficking, forced marriage and early pregnancy accompanied by exposure to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections becomes the order of the day in too many situations of crisis,” according to EI.

“Governments have a duty to uphold the right to education and to provide quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocational, higher and adult education. “Education can also contribute to reversing the damaging gender inequalities that may be augmented and exploited during crises,” EI says.

You can help win support for TAFE

The AEU is calling on all politicians who support TAFE to sign a pledge to guarantee funding to the sector. A minimum 70 per cent or two-thirds of VET funding will secure TAFE’s future.

To do this, supporters around the country are asked to make an appointment with their local MPs (state or federal) and ask them to sign the funding guarantee poster, and take a photo.

Because TAFE funding is both a federal and state issue, the AEU wants politicians at all levels and all parties to sign the guarantee.

All you need to do is organise a meeting with your local politician, take a copy of the funding guarantee poster and ask them to sign it. If they do, make sure to take a quick photo of them holding the poster so it can be added to the online gallery.

Everything you need to get involved is available at http://pledge.stoptafecuts.com.au.

The TAFE sector is the lowest-funded education sector and funding has declined by more than 24 per cent since 2008.
HANDWRITING SKILLS in early childhood are a strong predictor of writing fluency and quality, new research has found.

Murdoch University researchers examined 177 kindergarten children enrolled in 23 classrooms from seven primary schools in Western Australia. The students were monitored three times over 15 months to assess the development of their handwriting skills from the end of pre-primary throughout Year 1.

The researchers measured the variation among children in pre-primary to automatically retrieve all letters of the alphabet and write them legibly (known as automacity) and whether any variation could be explained by writing instruction.

“We know that early handwriting automaticity is a strong predictor of both writing fluency and quality,” says researcher Dr Anabela Malpique.

The study found that writing instruction in Australian classrooms is “highly variable”, says Malpique. Under the Australian curriculum, children are expected to learn to identify and correctly form letters, and to create short texts during pre-primary and Year 1. “However, teachers are approaching this goal with very different strategies, with a big variation in how much time is spent on teaching writing and on the nature of the skills being taught,” Malpique says.

The team is now looking at the students’ development of writing skills and hopes to identify classroom-based practices to help improve writing skills.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is publishing program resources including video clips, role-playing activities and take-home practice activities as well as the online professional learning. ACER’s Kate McGough says that, while the program is designed specifically to teach emotional and social skills to children with ASD and intellectual disability, it can also be used to support other children with challenging behaviours or difficulties in dealing with emotions.

**Aussie kids’ hack goes global**

When an Australian not-for-profit education program came up with an idea to help inspire students and improve digital literacy, little did it know it would take off so spectacularly.

Moonhack is an annual coding event that began last year and set a record with 10,207 Australian kids coding on the same day. This year the event went global and more than 28,000 children participated.

Initiated by Code Club Australia, the event is open to children at any level of coding – from those who’ve never tried it to whizz kids.

**School support for children with autism**

A new program to benefit children with autism and mild intellectual disability is available for teachers and parents.

The Westmead Feelings Program is provided both online and face-to-face in Sydney. It was created by the Kids Research Institute at the Children’s Hospital at Westmead and aims to help teachers and parents to support children with ASD and intellectual disability aged between eight and 12 years. It has been designed so that it can be coordinated and administered by teachers in schools.
More than half the teachers employed under the Teach for Australia (TFA) program have left the job by the third year, a new report estimates. The report, commissioned by the federal government to evaluate the program, has noted an increasing rejection of the program by recruits.

In the first year out of placement (third year in the program) an estimated 35 per cent have departed and 45 per cent of those remaining are in disadvantaged schools. By the second year out, 40 per cent have left with 36 per cent remaining in disadvantaged schools. But by the third year after completing their placement, more than 50 per cent of teachers have left with only a third of those remaining in disadvantaged schools. The figures compare poorly to the overall number of teachers who leave the profession – an estimated 10 per cent in the first five years.

Its first intake was in Victoria in 2010 and teachers have since been placed in schools in the Australian Capital Territory, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Tasmania. The program is based on the ‘Teach For’ programs being delivered in countries including the United Kingdom and the United States.

The AEU has urged the federal government to stop wasting taxpayer money on Teach for Australia.

AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe says TFA is an expensive failure and isn’t succeeding in retaining teachers in areas of high disadvantage.

“The federal government continues to pour taxpayer money into this program despite its poor outcomes. Attracting teachers of high academic ability is important for the future of our schools but teachers must be properly trained and qualified before they begin their teaching careers, not thrown into the classroom after six weeks training without sufficient experience or support,” she says.

The “extremely poor track record” detailed in the report is a “serious warning sign” that the program isn’t working, says Haythorpe.

“The federal government’s failure to implement an adequate workforce strategy has left a huge oversupply of teachers in some areas and shortages in others.

“Data provided by the federal education department shows $34.65 million was spent by the federal government on the first five cohorts of Teach for Australia, yet only 124 graduates are still teaching in March this year – and only 37 remain in their original school.”

The TFA report has recommended that TFA recruits and state and territory governments contribute to the cost of the program to help reduce the federal funding required.

But disadvantaged schools need increased resources to close the gap, not expensive and ineffective programs like Teach for Australia, says Haythorpe.

“It is clear this program is not working. It is astounding that the federal government is choosing to fund this failing program at the same time as slashing the original Gonski needs-based funding agreements that were delivering targeted resources to our schools.

“It’s time for the federal government to focus on how to attract and retain students entering teaching courses, rather than directing taxpayer money into a program that is not getting results,” Haythorpe says.
The Turnbull government reform agenda has education hanging in the balance.

At the flawed heart of reform

As this edition goes to press, a vital question is in the balance about the fundamental value Australia places on educating our children for the future.

The PM has announced a Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, to look at how school funding is spent. At the flawed heart of his reforms are terms of reference that prevent this review from considering whether overall funding is adequate and indeed, the allocation of funds. Instead, the inquiry is confined to how schools should use the limited resources provided by the Turnbull School Funding plan.

The AEU will be making a submission to this review, which will highlight the importance of equitable funding for all schools and identify the key components for a high quality public education system. One that will meet the needs of all students and provide the essential systemic supports for quality teaching and learning.

The recent OECD Education at a Glance report revealed our declining investment in education as a share of GDP, while another recent OECD paper highlighted the inequitable sharing of funding between advantaged and disadvantaged schools as a key factor impacting science achievement.

Equity was also highlighted on the recent visit of Andreas Schleicher, head of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), who noted that, on average, school systems with more equitable funding do better.

In short, funding allocated equitably matters.

Agreements struck by the former Labor federal government recognised this with needs-based funding and the fairer sharing of funding responsibilities for public schools between federal, state and territory governments. But that has all changed with Malcolm Turnbull’s so-called Gonski 2.0.

Putting the brakes on

The difference in funding that public schools were to get under the original Gonski plan, and what they are projected to get under the Turnbull plan, is at least $17 billion from now until 2027.

It’s evident that public schools are not going to get vital additional funding that had been committed in the agreements with states and territories.

Compounding this is a clear shift in federal funding towards private schools, with the government legislating to fund them at 80 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) – while it funds public schools to only 20 per cent of their SRS.

State and territory governments with far fewer resources will now carry the burden of funding public schools to 80 per cent of the SRS. This has been arbitrarily constructed by the federal government to suit its budget and its ideology about the funding of private schools. It goes against the recommendations of the original Gonski school funding review, which said there must be a more balanced alignment of state and federal responsibilities for public school funding that reflects the federal government’s greater revenue raising capacity.

The reality is that our schools, public schools, will remain chronically underfunded with 87 per cent below the SRS by 2023, while 65 per cent of private schools will be above it.

The bottom line is that it’s unacceptable that any government should adopt legislation that means the vast majority of public schools will continue to sit below the SRS benchmark.

The National Schools Funding campaign will continue as a priority for the AEU at a national, state and local level to ensure that the public school system is resourced to 100 per cent of the SRS to meet the teaching and learning needs of schools and students.

School funding will be a critical issue for the next federal election and we have no doubt that once again our members, their schools and communities will join our campaign as we fight for funding justice for our students.

Correna Haythorpe
AEU FEDERAL PRESIDENT
Schools funding is shaping up to be the key issue in the next federal election campaign as reports of dodgy disability funding claims by private schools and Labor’s promise to restore Gonski funding dominate the news.

"Dodgy" disability funding claims must be audited

Labor has pledged to restore the $17 billion cut by the Coalition and is talking to teachers, academics and parents about the best way to make the dollars count.

"Under the Liberals, there is much less money for schools, and no plan to improve them – not one more kid graduating high school, no improvement in literacy and numeracy, or teaching quality," says deputy opposition leader and shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek.

“We want all Australian schools to be great schools, where children make strong progress each and every year,” says Plibersek.

“Labor believes that starts with proper funding for schools. But we must also focus on the other changes we need to ensure Australia has a world class school education system, where a child’s postcode does not determine their future.”

Gaming the system

Adequate funding to support students with a disability is also crucial but there have been widely reported accusations that private schools are ‘gaming the system’ to claim more. Some of Victoria’s wealthiest private schools are claiming big increases in the numbers of students with disabilities.

Many wealthy private schools were about to lose government funding to bring them into line with the Schooling Resource Standard. Now, those schools will have their funding increased thanks to their new claims for increased students with disabilities.

Figures obtained by the AEU under freedom of information show that of a federal disability funding increase of $106.8m across all schools over 2017-18, Victorian private schools are set to receive $59.6m, or 55.8 per cent.

At the same time, there will be funding cuts for students with a disability in public schools across five states and territories. Across the eight jurisdictions, public schools will receive an increase in disability funding in only three over 2017-18, while independent schools are set for an increase in six.

The number of students eligible for disability funding has more than doubled from 212,000 to 470,000 but funding for students with disabilities has only increased by around seven per cent, says AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe.

“How can the federal government concentrate a miserly funding increase among wealthy private schools that are suddenly reporting a big unexplained rise in their claimed numbers of children with a disability?”

“...we need to ensure Australia has a world class school education system, where a child’s postcode does not determine their future.”

Calls for a review

The AEU has called for an independent review of the way disability funding is distributed under the Coalition’s new schools funding system.

“We need an explanation, and that may only come with an independent audit of what appears to be a further gold-plating of the private system at the expense of children in public schools,” says Haythorpe.

“It looks like rorting and it’s disgraceful.”
Country schools hit hardest

The disadvantages suffered by students in regional, rural and remote areas are already stark and the federal government’s plan to cut schools funding is an alarming move that further discriminates against them, according to an AEU submission.

The submission is to the federal government’s review into regional, rural and remote education, which is led by emeritus professor John Halsey of Flinders University who is due to report by the end of the year.

Schools in regional, rural and remote areas face significant learning challenges compared to their metropolitan peers.

International measures of learning progress such as PISA also tell a concerning story, with 2015 results revealing a two-year gap in maths literacy between metropolitan and remote students.

And yet, the Turnbull government’s cuts to school funding will hit hardest in country areas. The government has decided to cap its funding of public schools to just 20 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard while private schools are capped at 80 per cent. Most students in country areas (some 70 per cent) are enrolled in public schools, says AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe.

“The Turnbull government’s low-ambition, low-growth trajectory for public school funding will fall most heavily on country students. By 2027, the vast majority of public schools will remain below the Schooling Resource Standard while an increasing proportion of wealthy private schools will be above it,” she says.

‘Already struggling with challenges around distance, facilities, teacher retention, support services and professional development, rural, regional and remote schools need more funding, not less, so that they can provide a broad, rich curriculum for their students.”

The AEU’s submission calls for public schools to be funded at 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard.

There is no doubt that appropriate funding produces improved results for students. One non-metropolitan principal from NSW, quoted in the submission, reports the positive effect of extra funding.

“There have been a number of changes that have had real and significant success. The funding available through Gonski has enabled schools to target low socio-economic students and Aboriginal students like never before. Now all schools have access to some degree of funding for these areas and for many it has provided them with the means to employ additional support staff or run programs for students in a meaningful way for the first time ever,” the principal says.

In Victoria, at Colac Primary School, principal Shelby Papadopoulos used Gonski funding to hire a speech pathologist and extra specialist staff “to provide targeted literacy and numeracy intervention and support for students six or more months behind”.

“We’re coming from a position of never having had the financial ability to provide the level of support our students require. It would be heartbreaking if, having had a sense of what can be achieved through our 2016 Gonski funding, we lost not only the capacity to maintain what has been achieved but also the possibility of being able to make that same difference for all our students,” she says.

The AEU has called on the federal government to release the full details of projected federal funding for schools to enable a comparison with the funds that would have been made available had the government honoured the original state and territory agreements.

“Investing in regional, rural and remote schools will provide the opportunities that country students need to be successful with their learning. Governments will fail these students, their schools and their communities if they do any less,” Haythorpe says. ●
Schools that have trialled the NAPLAN tests going online have raised serious concerns about a range of technology and equity issues.

Off the mark with NAPLAN online

In a world where apps, artificial intelligence and big data are seen as solutions to just about any problem, moving paper-based NAPLAN tests online must have seemed like an obvious idea.

But teachers who have been involved in trialling the computer-based tests say that, rather than improving efficiency, it has highlighted the technological disadvantages many schools experience.

The push for online testing is shaping up to be a big issue for the teaching profession, with equity at the heart of it, says AEU president Correna Haythorpe.

“We have had a high level of engagement with our members over concerns about online testing,” she says.

“Students have unequal access to computer technologies, and broadband connectivity is a major issue. The technological capacity and support is just not in place for this to work in our schools.”

Her concern is echoed by Leon White, principal at Yirrkala Homelands School, in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

“We service six very remote communities that have no reliable internet access. What access there is fluctuates with the weather and the season,” he says.

“Another problem is that the bandwidth is not sufficient to maintain connectivity for online testing, which relies on reliable and sustainable infrastructure. Internet speeds are very poor in the Homelands.”

White says schools like his will need downloadable tests if the process is to have any chance of working.

“My concern is the many variables that can go wrong with online testing.”

In suburban Sydney, Kogarah High School has better broadband connectivity, but principal Julie Ross can still see the problem.

‘Online testing raises huge questions about equity. Students with a desktop and high internet speeds at home have a big advantage,’ she says.

‘I fail to see how regional and rural schools are going to manage this. Schools with the strong P&C funding needed to stay ahead with their technology will be advantaged.’

Keyboard skills
As well as the access issue, there is the question of all students having the technological skills for computer-based tests.

“We are in a mid to low socioeconomic community and our students are adept at using a mobile phones,” says Ross. “But when they sit in front of a keyboard, they don’t have the necessary skills. They can type with their thumbs on mobile phones, but they find it very difficult [to write] with a keyboard.”

This means online tests assess computer skills rather than literacy or numeracy, she says.

“During the trial, students had difficulties manipulating the online ruler in the numeracy test because they had no experience with expanding rulers or using them to calculate measurements.”

White agrees that students need a certain amount of IT knowledge. “For example, in the numeracy test, you need to put things in the right order using drag-and-drop and other IT skills they may not have.”

Straining resources
Schools participating in the trial also found that it created significant resourcing and scheduling difficulties.

“There was no money allocated centrally for testing,” says Ross. “It cost us $1,600 just in staff release for training and supervising the tests. We also had to purchase 100 headsets for students.”
With students using a variety of devices, different screen sizes were a problem, she says.

“Another issue was that our computer rooms are set up so the teacher can see everyone’s screen and everyone can see everyone else’s responses, so there was little privacy for testing,” says Ross.

Kogarah High had to run the tests while Year 11 students were on exams so that it could use every computer device in the school.

“I had to ask everyone not to log on or download during the tests, so people needed to completely change the way they were teaching during that period.”

It was a similar story in other schools, says Haythorpe. Some had to borrow laptops and PCs from elsewhere in the community.

**Computing creativity**

Beyond the practical complications, the most controversial aspect of online NAPLAN testing is the move to computerised marking of the writing component. Haythorpe describes it as “astonishing”.

Students are being taught to write for a human audience. We don’t see how it’s possible for a computer to assess it, for it to make sense of humour and satire, for example. Creative writing can’t be marked by an algorithm, says Ross. “It’s scary that we are thinking about going down this path. We are teaching creativity and critical thinking – and we expect a computer to be able to assess that?”

Taking this approach is likely to see writing tests being ‘gamed’, as algorithms work by checking for simple signifiers such as keywords, conjunctions and commas.

“Coaching clinics will be able to work out what will dupe the test algorithm and they will teach that to their students,” says Ross. “Parents will go down that path more and more, particularly now that NAPLAN is linked to awarding of the HSC.”

Then there’s the language problem. Online tests have added challenges for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

“If you look at the Year 5 numeracy test, it’s testing literacy skills first, then IT skills, with numeracy last,” says White.

For Aboriginal kids with English as their second language, who only hear English regularly on videos or from visitors to the Homelands, this is a real problem, he says.

“Linguistically, it’s difficult for kids without good English skills to tell the difference between ‘a third’ and ‘the third’ in a test.”

From Ross’s perspective in the cosmopolitan city, it’s a similar story.

“Some of our students have completed their intensive English education, but have less than five years’ formal education. They are expected to compete with locally born students who had an iPad in their pram.”

One benefit from the online tests was that students could click on an unfamiliar word and hear it spoken.

**Layer of complexity**

But both principals worry that their students could lose out from the introduction of computer-based tests.

“We will mainly be showing kids what they don’t know, when we should be celebrating what they do know,” says White.

Ross says her students view it as “an unnecessary hoop they have to jump through”.

“The online factor is just another layer of complexity. It is giving them another wall to crash into and is saying to them, ‘The system is against you.’”

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**It’s scary that we are thinking about going down this path. We are teaching creativity and critical thinking – and we expect a computer to be able to assess that?**

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Julie Ross
Kogarah High School, NSW
A timely new report on the commercialisation of public schooling reveals deep concerns.

Profiting from education’s loss

Back in September amid the marriage postal ballot and threats of nuclear destruction, you may have missed it, but new national reading and maths tests were flagged for Grade 1 students.

The tests have been touted as a “light-touch” way to detect development delays earlier but there is concern in the teaching profession that they are the latest stage in creating an increasingly federalised and standardised education system, and that they make it more open to commercial influence.

It was, perhaps, no coincidence that the announcement followed a report by a senior researcher at the market-friendly Centre for Independent Studies.

The growth in standardised testing has opened the door for commercial businesses to move into the lucrative education space, with alarm bells beginning to sound that their services bring the potential to influence education policy in ways that put profits ahead of students.

These fears are outlined in Commercialisation in Public Schooling: An Australian Study, a report commissioned by the NSWTF branch of the AEU. The first report of its kind in Australia, it looks into the extent of commercialisation in public education and educators’ attitudes towards it.

The findings are likely to presage a growing campaign to raise public awareness about the influence that companies such as Pearson could have over policy-making and the ways it could distort decisions about education, curriculum and testing.

As the study notes, Pearson is the world’s largest edu-business, with a $1 billion operating profit in 2015 and a stated desire to help “shape and inform the global debate around education and learning policy”.

Educators fear the imposition of top-down curriculum, teaching and assessment systems driven by commercial imperatives, rather than the organic, classroom-based development of programs based on student need, school context, and teachers’ professional knowledge and experience.

Behind closed doors

Professor Stephen Dinham, president of the National College of Educators, has likened the growing commercialisation in education to a tsunami, while the AEU has rung the alarm over the lack of accountability as governments cede agendas.

“These companies enter into contracts with governments and education departments without any public scrutiny, protected by commercial-in-confidence laws, yet their impact is significant,” says AEU deputy federal president Maurie Mulheron.

“For example, Pearson is heavily involved in NAPLAN testing, yet we don’t know what it’s costing and we don’t see any of the contracts. We don’t know their relationship with ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority). None of it is open to public scrutiny.”
There was widespread fear that businesses were crossing the line into pedagogy, curriculum design, teacher education and professional development.

For Commercialisation in Public Schooling, University of Queensland professor Bob Lingard led a team that conducted a national survey of AEU members, drawing about 2,200 responses.

It found growing buying-in of private teaching and administrative resources, from lesson plans to attendance registers, although respondents were still more likely to access support from their department than from private providers.

While some respondents found benefits in accessing commercial services, there was widespread fear that businesses were crossing the line into pedagogy, curriculum design, teacher education and professional development.

Almost 60 per cent of respondents were concerned about “growing commercialisation in schools and how this was working to de-professionalise teachers by narrowing curriculum and shifting the focus of teaching and learning to assessment, data and prescriptive student outcomes”.

One respondent described a demonstration by education publisher Scholastic of off-the-peg lesson plans: “What teacher wouldn’t pick up the text and do the lesson plan when it’s there? But when a company writes the questions or the lesson plan, they have a one-size-fits-all approach in mind and it isn’t necessarily what’s best for the students in your/my class.”

One school was “reluctantly buying Pearson textbooks because they are the ones that help the students do well on Pearson-designed tests, which are purchased by education districts”.

Filling a vacuum
Some teachers who found benefits in commercial provision said it helped them cope with an overcrowded curriculum, excessive workload and a lack of central support.

“We’ve had policies of school autonomy, principal autonomy and devolution which have seen departments of education totally gutted,” says Mulheron.

More than 60 per cent of school leaders reported moderate to high use of commercial behaviour or attendance programs in the past 12 months. More than 50 per cent had bought in reporting software or professional development. One-third had bought in moderate or significant amounts of data analysis or curriculum provision.

Lobbying power
Perhaps most worrying is the influence exerted behind the scenes, at state and federal level, out of sight of educators and voters.

The report says Australian education has “arguably the most developed national data infrastructure in the world”, and with that comes the “generally invisible” work to standardise data management systems between schools and between school systems, conducted by the National Schools Interoperability Program.

All this makes data a valuable commodity. In the United States, the education technology market was worth $8.4 billion in 2014. The testing and assessment sector alone was worth $2.5 billion after growing 57 per cent in just two years.

With that comes a fierce lobbying capacity, and players such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have been vocal in opposing, for example, privacy concerns around student data, while pushing for deregulation to free access to student data and allow the joining up of datasets.

But concerns arise when data becomes not a tool for improving systems, but an end in itself. In Australia, Pearson has pushed for NAPLAN to go online, with the potential for the tests to be marked by its automated software.

This would distort education even further, says Mulheron.

“It would change what we value in children’s writing. These programs can assess superficial skills, but they can’t assess irony or humour or powers of persuasion or creativity.”

“The other issue is that keyboard writing is very different from handwriting. We know that children who learn to write and spell by hand become more consistent spellers and more fluent writers.”

“What will happen in classrooms is what is valued in the test, and keyboard skills will be valued in the test above handwriting. No educator is asking for this. It’s all being driven essentially by commercial concerns.”

Read the full report here: nswtf.org.au/cipsint

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AGENDA
The immediate results from a new industrial agreement have had some education support staff dancing and crying with joy, and there’s more to come.

Driving home the gains

An amazing thing happened in late September. Thousands of Victoria’s education support (ES) staff received official letters informing them they finally had job security.

The letters, from Victoria’s Department of Education and Training, were sent to as many as 5,000 integration aides and were the product of a new industrial agreement with the AEU, ratified by Fair Work Australia a month earlier.

The letters mark only the beginning of a process that will result in ongoing employment for perhaps thousands more contract staff, both teachers and ES.

The agreement also brought record pay rises for ES – more than 17 per cent over three years for many – and the promise of a further review of role descriptions, with measures to ensure that support staff are employed at a grade that matches their duties.

“It’s been almost two decades in the making,” says AEU Victoria president Meredith Peace.

In agreements since 2000, the union has been attempting to reduce the levels of contract employment that soared under premier Jeff Kennett’s devolution of school management.

The highest levels have always been among support staff, who in Victoria won the right to join the AEU only in 1997 and for years were covered by a separate agreement.

The state government finally agreed to bring the two agreements together in 2013 in the face of a combined industrial campaign by teaching and support staff. Memorably, 15,000 teachers and support staff filled the Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne for AEU Victoria’s largest, noisiest rally as they took stopwork action together for the first time.

That agreement was the first to cover all staff, but this latest one drives home the gains.

At a stroke

Job security and workload topped the list of AEU members’ concerns as negotiations for the 2017 agreement began. Some 20 per cent of teachers and a shocking 45 per cent of Victoria’s 17,000 support staff were on contracts as short as six months.

Most of those in education support were integration aides whose employment was tied to support funding for individual students with special needs. At a stroke, those jobs have been converted to ongoing, a move that more than halves the education support numbers on contract.

“I was rapt!” says Nichola Allen, a classroom ES at Cranbourne South Primary School, Melbourne on getting the news. “I’ve been an ES for almost 11 years and I think I’ve come across one, maybe two, classroom support staff that were ongoing. It’s just so rare.

“I’ve been on lots of different contracts – six months, 12 months, three years and most recently seven years. I won’t have to reapply for my job again unless I want to change schools.”

For Kerrie Hill, who has spent 16 years on contracts at Camperdown...
P12 College, in regional Victoria, it means “a great sense of relief.”
“I had to read it twice when it came through to make sure it actually was there in print,” says Hill.
“I was on contract until the end of 2019, but the boy I currently work with is in Year 12 and leaves at the end of this year, so I would have been feeling a bit insecure until the end of the year and I was allocated another student. This came through at a very good time for me.”

Being on contract meant constant stress, she says. “You’re constantly keeping your résumé up to date and filling as much professional development as you can. And then physically reapplying for positions and going through the interview process was time-consuming and makes you feel quite insecure. Often it was in the last three or four weeks of term 4.
“You’re treated like every other applicant. There could be 60 people applying for the job and you have a couple of anxious weeks waiting to see if you’re successful.
“This new agreement will put all of that to bed. That’s the sense of relief a lot of ES staff in Victoria will be feeling right now.”

Lobbying hard
Meredith Peace credits good groundwork for the breakthrough. The union lobbied the Labor Party hard during its four years in opposition and secured a pledge in writing to address the levels of contract employment ahead of the 2014 election, which Labor won.
Victorian unions were meanwhile campaigning on job insecurity and won the promise of an inquiry from the new Labor government. It opened as the AEU was preparing for negotiations, and ES organiser Kathryn Lewis took six members to give evidence.
“They were nervous as hell, obviously, but they gave their evidence,” she says.
Powerful stories included the member who could not even secure a lease to rent a home. “They had to get their adult children to lease their property because mum was on a contract.”

The inquiry really highlighted the effect that insecure work has on people’s lives, says Peace.
“It’s easy to forget. And support staff are the lowest-paid people in our schools.”
Past agreements had set strict criteria for positions that could be filled by contract, such as backfill for long service leave. Each had an immediate impact, followed by a slow return to higher levels by the time each agreement expired. Partly that was because schools in Victoria’s low-funded and heavily devolved system were worried about their ability to keep meeting ongoing salaries.
Now, in a move against the national trend to devolution, the department has agreed to take back oversight, conducting a central translation process every year. It will look at the number of staff (teachers and ES) on contract in each school, and the reasons. If the reasons don’t match the enterprise bargaining agreement, the employee will be made ongoing.

Unity crucial
All this, plus ongoing status for integration aides. Hence September’s letters.
“There has been a hell of a lot of relief among members,” says Lewis. “I’ve seen dancing, crying, laughing, clapping. It’s been a good time to be an ES organiser, I can tell you.”

Peace says unity was key. “Being in the same union, under the same agreement, has been vitally important. It means you’ve got 50,000 members pushing for something, as opposed to 8,000 or 9,000 ES members. That’s crucial for lower-paid workers.”

In Victoria’s schools, the agreement allows ES staff to concentrate on what they enjoy most: supporting the children in their classrooms.
“I just love going into work every day,” says Allen. “I love helping kids. I can’t see myself doing anything else.”

Hill agrees: “It’s such a rewarding job. My work is varied, which I love, and I feel like I’m making a difference in the students’ lives. Becoming ongoing is the icing on the cake.”
In September 2016 Professor Peter Buckskin submitted the final report of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI). The four-year initiative was dedicated to providing a more equitable ratio of teachers to Indigenous students to support the first priority of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy: leadership, quality teaching and workforce development.

Buckskin reported that its approach was an unbridled success. In 2012-15 the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers increased 16.5 per cent “due to recruitment and improved levels of Indigenous identification... with a growing proportion working in leadership positions”.

Likewise, an independent evaluation found that MATSITI had “raised program partners’ awareness of the connection between increasing the number and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and leaders, and achieving positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students”.

The evaluation also noted that, in many cases, project managers began to seek out, recognise, listen to and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff for the first time.

But despite MATSITI’s success, Buckskin, who is currently the dean of Aboriginal engagement and strategic projects at the University of South Australia, has received no response from government since his report was submitted, and no further funding has been committed to the initiative.

Buckskin has more than 30 years’ experience working in the area of Aboriginal policy and education, and he laments that one of the biggest problems with initiatives like MATSITI is their short-lived funding structures.

“We need funding for the long term,” he says. “You’re never going to get...
parity in four or five years. To get the numbers of Indigenous teachers reflecting the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools would, by our calculations, take two or three generations.

“So why isn’t this being funded? [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people] know what works. We just need to fund it – not fund the latest fad.”

**Lacking a voice**


With more than 20 pages of data to draw on, they conclude that “Indigenous student performance in literacy and numeracy achievement remains significantly lower than that achieved by non-Indigenous students”.

Of greatest concern, they argue, is the fact that, “as Aboriginal students progress through Years 3 to 9, the percentage of them achieving at and below the national minimum standard increases significantly, across all geolocations and nearly all jurisdictions.

“Despite the paucity of improved outcomes, a persistent characteristic of Indigenous education policy development over the years has been the lack of Indigenous voice in its construction.”

“Whatever government is in power thinks they have the ‘answer’ for Aboriginal people,” says Bridge.

“Progress stalled”

The first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) was introduced in 1989, in the era of the Labor Hawke government. Its core message was that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination includes the right, as a people, to have a say in economic, social and cultural matters that impact on their life”.

The statement specifies that this requires “a holistic approach, under the guidance of Aboriginal people, to achieve educational equity while accommodating cultural difference and recognising socioeconomic disadvantage.”

Buckskin, who was involved in formulating NATSIEP as a young educator, says its messaging “transcends decades.”

“We tried to position our voices to shape responses from systems, government and education authorities, and we were one of the very first countries to have a policy for Indigenous education. We had a national voice.”

But, after such a positive start, progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander...
students has stalled, he says. That view is shared by The Case for Urgency co-author Suzanne Mellor, who in 2004 also co-authored The Case for Change: A review of contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes. She says that, in the 13 years since The Case for Change, the state of Indigenous education outcomes has remained substantially unaltered.

“All the social indicators demonstrate that Australia’s First Nations people continue to be the most socioeconomically disadvantaged population cohort in Australian society. This is after decades of continued policy efforts by successive Commonwealth, state and territory governments to ameliorate Indigenous educational disadvantage,” she writes.

The obvious question is why haven’t things changed. For Mellor, the answers are multifarious and complex, but they start with the impact of a history of colonisation and dispossession, and the continuing lack of a treaty, on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

On this, she cites Johanna Wyn’s notion of “historical debt”. The idea (in Wyn’s words) is that “what is called an achievement ‘gap’ between student populations is actually a measure of an education ‘debt’, incurred through past deficits that have been historically and systematically incurred”.

“Although Aboriginal people are paying the price [for that history], they don’t have the debt. Society has the debt, and it’s up to society to fix it,” says Mellor.

“What you hope is that that will take away some of the personal debt – if it’s handled in a particular way. For example, by policy. “Look at the apology [Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to Aboriginal people in 2008]. That was huge. But after the apology the expectation was that some things would follow to manifest the apology, and they never did.

“So, one of the problems is cultural depression.”

Shift to mainstreaming

As is outlined in The Case for Urgency review, Indigenous education policy shifted significantly with the Howard government’s election in 1997. Under Howard, there was a concerted shift away from the ethos of self-determination at the centre of NATSIEP that characterised the policy initiatives of the Whitlam, Hawke and Keating Labor governments.

Howard by contrast pursued an “integrationist stance” on Aboriginal education policy, “averring that Indigenous disadvantage could be addressed by furthering inclusion of Indigenous Australians in the mainstream community”.

This resulted in a raft of sweeping policy changes, most notably the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres
Good practice when you teach for diversity is teaching for difference – and treating that difference not as a deficit, but as a strength.

Professor Peter Buckskin
University of South Australia

Society has a debt to Aboriginal people, says report co-author Suzanne Mellor.

Both men say they identify with the ethos of the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in Education, which argues that so-called gaps in Indigenous education attainment may be seen as a “failure of the system, not of Indigenous people”.

“That to me really resonates,” says Bridge. “It’s saying that Aboriginal people are voting with their feet. I’ve not met an Aboriginal person who doesn’t value education, but they’re saying, ‘It’s not meeting the needs of my children at this moment and, in terms of priorities, this is one of many I have to deal with in my child’s life.’

“That’s really confronting for education systems because it requires them to make transformational change”.

Bridge argues that, to turn the lens onto the system rather than Aboriginal students, there is a need to measure Aboriginal children’s strengths rather than their ‘deficits’.

“Aboriginal students have a strong sense of self-worth. They’re connected to country and community. Think about the kids in remote communities who can speak three or four languages. They’re able to successfully move between different cultural contexts. Why isn’t that acknowledged? Why is success always based on a mainstream tool?”

On the topic of developing an alternative assessment tool for Indigenous students, the review doesn’t take a clear position.

“It does say that there is some argument and research evidence that Indigenous children need variation in order to excel,” says Mellor, “but you can’t make assessment appropriate to one cultural group, because then you won’t have comparable data. And the
point is to find out about relativities, and why there are such relativities."

**Case for success**
Mellor acknowledges the “depressing” nature of working on Aboriginal education policy with its history of failures and stalled progress.

“It can be a field where people just despair,” she says. “It’s important to provide some key to the door.”

As an example, she cites the case of Gunbalanya School in West Arnhem Land. It has “consistently outperformed all other remote schools across the Northern Territory in student achievement.”

This is despite the school’s students coming from 25 different clan groups, being inaccessible except by air during the wet season, and its community members being classed as having “extremely educationally disadvantaged backgrounds”.

Gunbalanya is used in *The Case for Urgency* as an example of a school where partnership with community is central, such that the surrounding community has ‘ownership’ over its education.

To achieve this, Gunbalanya adopts a co-principal model where a fully qualified Indigenous principal from the local community works in partnership with a non-Indigenous school principal. The Indigenous principal takes responsibility for community engagement, and the non-Indigenous principal for administration.

The school shapes its own ‘ethos, priorities and directions’ in conversation with community, and teachers “undergo a rigorous and continuous induction program led by key community members”.

Since the commencement of this program, the school has enjoyed a very low staff turnover rate.

For Mellor, the key to Gunbalanya’s success is the community’s involvement in the school, as well as their sense of ‘ownership’ over their education.

“The community goes into the school all the time. It’s their space,” she says. “It’s extraordinary how successful they have been relative to other remote and

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very remote schools. It has a lot to do with the administrative support, not in terms of money, but in terms of staff commitment. The whole community is beside and with them. There’s a lot of commitment and buy-in.”

For Buckskin, it’s important that such successes are acknowledged. But he says it’s also important that Aboriginal children in the mainstream education system are acknowledged for their resilience.

“I’m so impressed with the kids I’ve seen – their strength of character to want to find out more about themselves, their language, who they are. Despite the uneven playing field, we’re doing really well. Imagine if we had a level playing field.

“We have to change the narrative from ‘close the gap’ to a positive story where our kids don’t see themselves as a burden on the education system or the classroom. ”

Dr Kate O’Halloran is an editor and journalist with The Guardian. She is also a senior researcher at Drummond Street Services.

Professor Peter Buckskin concludes in his final report on the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI): “It is time these government commitments, stated in a wide range of policy documents over a long period, were translated into actions or they risk becoming part of the national shame revealed by the lack of progress in achieving many Closing the Gap targets.”

He argues that the national network of MATSITI advocates is “ready, willing and able to act as a conduit for the implementation of such actions”. All that is needed is funding investment, and trust that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know ‘what works’, as demonstrated by the success of the initiative to date.

MATSITI concludes with five objectives, also described as “responsibility and related evaluation recommendations”:

1. Fund MATSITI or an equivalent employment strategy for a further four years to sustain current initiatives and leverage investment to date.
2. Develop and launch a national campaign for promoting and marketing teaching as a career for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
3. Increase the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers as leaders through bold affirmative action strategies that provide leadership development, succession planning and targeting of suitable leadership positions for filling by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants.
4. Work with public, Catholic and independent education sectors, and universities, to develop culturally safe recruitment and employment practices.
5. Forge stronger links between all Australian universities’ schools of education and Indigenous higher education centres; respond to research findings on reasons for the low completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education students; and implement effective retention strategies to maximise the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher graduates.

Dr Kate O’Halloran is an editor and journalist with The Guardian. She is also a senior researcher at Drummond Street Services.

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The four new teachers we’ve shadowed throughout 2017 sum up the year’s advances and cast their eyes on the future.

BY ROMONY ROGERS

Confidence and pride

Throughout the year we’ve followed the journeys of four new teachers from around the country as they’ve transitioned from previous careers into teaching.

Trish Chapman has gone from being a supply teacher in Perth to permanency in the Pilbara town of Tom Price, where she teaches a range of subjects and year levels. Her confidence has grown in the classroom.

“I was terrified of teaching pre-primary sport and now I’m actually really enjoying it,” she says. “My behaviour management has also improved. There are some challenging kids, but I now have a nice rapport with them. I’m more confident in giving consequences, whereas before I probably used to let things slide a little bit.”

In Adelaide, Sara Husi has also made the transition from supply teacher to having her own class, working with Year 4/5 at Sheidow Park Primary School.

Like many first year teachers, Husi has also found it hard to consistently follow through on consequences for behaviour, not wanting to be too hard on her students. Nonetheless, one of her colleagues recently commented that her students were much more respectful and better behaved compared to the start of the year.

“AT still tend to think about the ways I could be doing a better job, but sometimes it’s easier for someone from the outside to see the improvements.”

Husi also received positive feedback from colleagues about her students’ performance at the school’s Aboriginal Acknowledgment Day. After concerns during rehearsals, she was pleasantly surprised by what they were able to achieve in front of an audience.

“I felt really proud that it was my class and I realised I’d done enough work to get them to that point.”

Oliver Baumeister has had a highly successful year teaching senior IT and business at Narangba Valley State High, near Brisbane. Almost all his Year 12 students have obtained their competencies certificate ahead of schedule, despite having to complete two years of content in only three terms after starting the year behind.

“At the start of the year,” says Baumeister, “it was a very busy time getting to know all my students’

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS CRERAR, FELICITY FORD

Hannah Papworth in Tasmania is enjoying more security and growing in confidence.

We followed new teachers throughout 2017 and featured their challenges and achievements in each issue of Australian Educator during the year.
It’s nice to see myself, now in my third year, reusing some things from the past that have worked and leaving behind things that didn’t work.

Trish Chapman has discovered a passion for teaching Indigenous students in the Pilbara. It’s nice to see myself, now in my third year, reusing some things from the past that have worked and leaving behind things that didn’t work.

Managing workload
Workload has been a recurring theme throughout the year’s interviews.

For Husi, not being able to spend time with her partner because of motivations and personalities but now we’ve developed a strong routine and I’m finding that I have no behavioural issues. It leaves more space for the actual content and the learning to happen.”

Tasmanian Year 6 teacher Hannah Papworth became a permanent replacement this year, which has given her more security and confidence.

“Everyone in the class is really comfortable with each other now and it’s quite inclusive. It’s nice to see myself, now in my third year, reusing some things from the past that have worked and leaving behind things that didn’t work.”

marking and planning has been a significant cause of stress.

“I still think about the job too much and I can’t get to sleep or I wake up early because of it. There are all the hours you do at school, but also all the hours thinking about the job when at home. There’s always more you can do with teaching, and that’s what’s in my head all the time.”

Husi and Chapman agree that the little jobs required for administration and paperwork really add up.

“I talk to teachers who have been doing it for 40 years,” says Husi, “and they’re still working weekends because the workload has increased.”

It’s the same for Papworth, but she’s feeling positive about the AEU’s workload-focused campaign.

“I helped to organise a successful
meeting where we came up with some positive solutions for the union to take to the department. That’s exciting. It feels as though there’s that push for activism and change.”

Papworth notes that demands for teachers in Tasmania to complete mandatory personal learning have been increasing at the same time as teachers have lost student-free days to complete them.

“Time is so limited and, as a professional, surely it’s better to allow more time for good content and it’s okay to lose some class time for that.”

Teachers at the meeting called for extra staff to help with resources creation and photocopying, as well as completing reports on student welfare and duty of care.

Looking forward

With the media reporting that teachers are leaving the profession on average after only five years, it’s perhaps not surprising that some of our quartet are unsure whether they’ve made the right career choice.

Husi still has a passion for the moments when she helps students understand something they didn’t get before, but the lack of work-life balance is a problem.

“I don’t think I’d go back to my old job, but I wouldn’t rule out doing something else – especially if it’s a job where I could leave work and not think about it – or going back to relief teaching and seeing how I feel about that again.”

The statistics show that Husi is not alone in her concerns.

“I just have to remind myself that everyone’s different and we all have our own ways of coping and things we’re enthusiastic about,” she says.

Papworth can fully understand why some people might leave teaching but she’s keen to stay in the profession.

I’m really enjoying the profession and want to have a long-term career in education.

Oliver Baumeister
Narangba Valley State High, QLD

NEW EDUCATORS

Oliver Baumeister
Narangba Valley State High, QLD

I’m really enjoying the profession and want to have a long-term career in education.

After a year teaching senior IT and business, Oliver Baumeister is more committed than ever to a long-term career in education.
What have you learnt about teaching?

Oliver Baumeister

At the start of your first year, there’s a lot of work to do in terms of creating and modifying resources. People tell you that this gets easier in your second year because you can just reuse the stuff from your first year but I’ve found that’s not really the case. I think that to be a good teacher, you have to be constantly updating your work to make it more engaging and relevant. It does get easier, but there’s always something more to do.

Trish Chapman

I was terrified at the start of the year when they gave me K–2 Sports to teach but now I’m loving it. So, I’ve learned not to be afraid when you’re given a different role. I asked for help and the sports teacher was fantastic in supporting me with lesson plans. You’ve just got to remember not to worry if the lessons are not done exactly the way they’re written. It’s OK to make mistakes because that’s where your personal growth is. If you don’t step out of your comfort zone, you’re never going to grow professionally.

Hannah Papworth

Relationships are everything. Every day I make sure I greet every student as they come into the class, including before the bell. Because of that, sometimes they just want to come and share something with me. Sometimes, when I’m really busy or tired, that’s frustrating so I don’t make the eye contact like I should. I’m trying to make myself always give them that attention because it really sets up the respect between you for the rest of the day. It’s really important to look after your own wellbeing so that you can have that energy for your students.

Sara Husi

You can only do so much. Sometimes you plan to get a lot done because you think the kids are able to do it but then only half the class will finish so you can’t just rush through it. You have to slow down to the stage that your kids are up to and if you don’t get to everything, you have to let some things go. That applies in your own life too. You can’t push yourself all the time. You do what you can.

Baumeister knows he has made the right choice and already has his eyes set on applying for leadership roles. “I’m really enjoying the profession and I want to have a long-term career in education. I feel that it really builds on my personality, who I am and what I value. It’s been immensely rewarding to see my students develop into young adults with the knowledge that they’ll need to start a career and succeed in life.”

Romony Rogers is a freelance writer.
Targeted teaching hits the mark

With glossy eyes and on-task chatter, the kindergarten students buzz with excitement as they pace through literacy stations in their classroom. Even after lunch, they’re still revved up to tackle numeracy tasks.

Welcome to Bowen Public School, in Orange, NSW. In five short years it has significantly enhanced its curriculum and learning focus in line with research-based evidence for school improvement.

In 2012, less than a third of kindergarten to Year 2 students at Bowen were achieving stage-appropriate learning benchmarks for literacy and numeracy. Last year, more than 80 per cent hit the benchmarks. In that time, student attendance increased from 89 to 93 per cent.

So what changed? The school helped pilot the Early Action for Success (EAfS) program, which directs extra resources to NSW schools for teacher professional learning and in-class learning and support. Bowen also secured phase-two funding from the Department of Education to the end of 2020, which now supports all of its 145 kindergarten to Year 3 students.

EAfS schools gain resources and the flexibility they need to target action to students’ identified areas for development in literacy and numeracy.

A key part of the program is a well-structured assessment schedule inspired by the Best Start Kindergarten Assessment. Teachers build on this with tailored small-group and one-on-one literacy and numeracy support aimed at the next level of student development.

Guided best-practice

EAfS’s goal is to boost students’ literacy and numeracy levels. An ‘instructional leader’ guides teachers towards best practice through expert professional learning and mentoring. Working as a team, teachers and support staff explicitly and continuously assesses students’ learning needs, and this data informs their next steps in planning and teaching.

The professional learning that teachers gain has been described as “phenomenal” and has led to all teachers reporting greater confidence...
and capacity in the identification of learning needs and the targeted support of enhanced student learning.

**Control shift**

Bowen principal Robert McPherson says the increased knowledge and capacity of some staff members, demonstrated by the strength of their work at Bowen, has led to them gaining positions at other schools and being a highly desirable resource.

For many teachers, EAfS is a different way of approaching learning in the classroom, he says.

“The children have more autonomy and control over their learning. They’re coached and taught to be in charge of themselves and their learning.”

Each student is monitored individually – or as McPherson says, “assessed daily through working closely with their teacher and observable evidence” – then verified once every five weeks. Results are plotted using what are called literacy and numeracy continuums.

“Teachers know where their students are because they’ve read and written with them every day at small-group level. For teachers, it’s not extra work, but different work. The real change is in pedagogy.”

The data wall in Bowen’s staff room is floor-to-ceiling and several metres across. At a glance, teachers can pinpoint where any student’s learning achievements sit on the continuum. (The wall actually tracks student achievement from K to 6 because the school decided to extend the EAfS pedagogy throughout.)

“We update the wall every five weeks to show how the kids are tracking,” says McPherson. “Individually, you see spikes every now and then with their growth. Every time you see the penny drop or see a student has progressed along the continuum, it’s a reaffirming moment. It’s what many teachers live for.”

**At the helm**

The program funds a full-time instructional leader who has a crucial role.

“None of this would have happened without our instructional leader. Her job was to upskill our teachers, and it’s basically training, training, training. But she also monitors and analyses student learning data,” says McPherson.

Mel Morris, Bowen’s instructional leader, took up the role about eight months after EAfS kicked off at the school in 2012. She had been a language, learning and literacy (L3) and targeted early numeracy specialist.

“My brief at Bowen was to lift literacy and numeracy learning for children. It was an initiative the whole staff were excited to be a part of,” she says.

“I began by building relationships within the school because few people knew me there. But I had street cred because of my other work in education in the Central West.

“At Bowen, I taught with the teachers in their classrooms and didn’t change anything too quickly. There was a lot of shoulder-to-shoulder work.” Teachers would seek Morris out for professional dialogue throughout the school day and during breaks because it was “an exciting place of learning and teachers were so focused on what was happening in class”. As well, teachers from each stage level met fortnightly during their release time to collaborate.

“I couldn’t have done that if the principal hadn’t trusted me. We were one of the first schools in the Orange and Bathurst networks.”

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**The professional learning has been a deal-maker – that really deep knowledge those teachers now have. They understand the ability for tight teaching to change every single child’s learning.**

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**Resources**

- Early Action For Success program
tinyurl.com/ycrh3q7j
- Best Start Kindergarten Assessment
tinyurl.com/yc4b9m9c
- Targeted Early Numeracy
tinyurl.com/yccwyhttn
to do that, and a lot of other schools have since followed suit.

“The professional learning has been a deal-maker – that really deep knowledge those teachers now have. They understand the ability for tight teaching to change every single child’s learning. Tight teaching is really catering for every single child’s point of need.

“It’s a hell of a lot of preparation for teachers every day. [But] they can see it really making a difference, particularly for kids who find learning challenging. It lifts everybody.”

Morris says changing the whole school culture was the program’s best achievement.

“Now it is all about the teaching and learning”, and the school is less focused on its social and welfare aspects. Teachers still care deeply for their students and they hold high expectations for all students regardless of their backgrounds.

“It’s all about needs-based teaching – explicit teaching at point of need. It’s quite pivotal. Teachers can plan specifically for future teaching and learning so no children fall through gaps.”

EAfS also benefits the education system as a whole. Highly trained and skilled teachers gain permanent positions and promotions throughout the state.

It has meant a high turnover of staff at Bowen (75 per cent last year and 65 per cent the previous year), but it is a source of pride for the school.

“Those teachers left Bowen,” says McPherson, “because they were temps who had such good professional learning and experience, they were keenly sought by other schools for permanent positions. It was tricky and hard work [for Bowen], but any good training of teachers isn’t wasted.”

McPherson also acknowledges the EAfS program’s outstanding success statewide. He says he is very proud to be a contributor to the state initiative and all it has to offer staff and students in the public education system.

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer, and a casual primary and high school teacher who has taught at Bowen Public School.
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After more than four years, family and friends of 43 kidnapped Mexican teachers college students still hold out some hope of finding them alive.

But the mystery of what happened to the students, from the all-male Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College, in the south-west state of Guerrero, is no closer to being resolved.

On the night of 26 September 2014, their plan was to travel to Mexico City to commemorate an anniversary of the Tlatelolco Massacre at a 1968 demonstration against political suppression that turned deadly when military and police opened fire, killing an estimated 300-400 students and civilians.

The 100 Ayotzinapa students commandeered buses from a nearby town before their convoy ran afoul of a deadly confluence of politicians, police and drug cartels.

Buses were boarded and shots were fired. Three students were killed and many others injured. Some made it safely back to college.

The 43 who were kidnapped haven’t been seen since.

Mired in conspiracy
Protests in Mexico and around the world put pressure on President Enrique Peña Nieto for answers.

But Guerrero is a state infamous for drug-related violence, corrupt officials and paramilitary gangs, and the case remains mired in wild, confusing accusations of conspiracy.

Two years after the incident, the Mexican government released what it called the “historic truth”. It said local police rounded up the students “during a night of street violence”, then handed them over to members of a drug cartel who killed them, incinerated their bodies at a nearby dump and tossed the remains in a river.

An independent investigation by Argentinian forensic experts was unable to confirm that the recovered charred bones were from the missing students. The remains of only one student have been formally identified.

Conflicting stories
It has been suggested that the mayor of Guerrero ordered the kidnapping to keep peace in the town while his wife was holding a function. Another theory is that the students inadvertently commandeered a bus the cartel used to smuggle heroin.

Mexico’s attorney-general formally pronounced the missing students dead in 2015. But an international delegation of human rights lawyers that spent more than a year monitoring the government’s investigation found evidence of complicity and a cover-up. It alleged that evidence had been tampered with and/or collected from people who were tortured.

Education International (EI) has launched a global campaign to demand justice for the missing students and “restore dignity” to their mourning family and friends.

EI general-secretary Fred van Leeuwen says finding the students is not a matter of knowledge or resources, but of political will. He is calling on Mexican authorities to support a thorough and independent investigation, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.

Show your support for the missing students by signing the petition at thunderclap.it/projects/60499-justice-for-missing-students and following the campaign on Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr.
From fake news to tree octopuses, the online world of lies and misinformation is proving a problem for students who can’t tell fact from fiction.

BY CYNTHIA KARENA

**Planting the seeds of doubt**

Fake news is more than a term that Donald Trump loves. Online it is becoming a problem, with evidence that students are struggling to work out what’s real and what’s not.

In the United States, a study by the Stanford Graduate School of Education showed that students at almost all levels couldn’t tell the difference between fake and real news. They absorb media constantly, but often lack the critical thinking skills they need.

It’s important to teach students not to automatically trust what they read, says Dr Nicole Johnston, lecturer in information science at Edith Cowan University, Perth.

“Students need to look beyond the title of the article and evaluate the content, source and author of the news,” she says. “Teaching them these critical thinking and evaluative skills will help them to be able to spot fake news.”

The problem is, it can look very convincing.

“People are paid to generate fake news and it has been used recently to try to influence political situations and undermine people, institutions and countries. It’s becoming harder and harder to spot.”

Further complicating matters is the fact that the more often fake news is shared on social media sites, the more likely people are to automatically trust the information, says Johnston.

“Especially if it has been shared by family and friends or reported on by legitimate news outlets.”

**Cross-checking crucial**

The teacher-designed fake news site All About Explorers (allaboutexplorers.com/about) is recommended by Anne Mirtschin, ICT teacher at Hawkesdale P12 College in rural Victoria, because
it teaches students the skill of cross-checking.

When discussing subjects such as history and current events, Mirtschin asks her students to check several sources to prove or disprove information.

‘Anyone can write and upload content online. Students need to look at the ‘About us’ link on websites to [identify] the organisation that is putting out the information. If it’s a news piece, they need to check who the journalist is and the organisation they are writing for.’

Another idea is to ask students to bring in what they think is an example of fake news, says Mirtschin. And that can include images as well as text.

‘Students are easily fooled even though they are always photoshopping their own photos.’

When using social media, they also need to understand the concept of clickbait, which links to a site that is probably not a reputable source of information.

**Dissecting credentials**

Students need to be “truth detectives” and check their facts from reliable resources, says former university researcher Dr Sam Moyle, now a science teacher at Brighton Secondary School, Adelaide.

“We spend a great deal of time going through how to confirm that something on the internet is actually valid,” says Moyle, citing a website about the ‘tree octopus’ (zapatopi.net/treeoctopus).

In her classroom, she uses the example of a school principal in the US whose appointment was based on fabricated information by which the school’s senior journalism students uncovered.

“I train my students to dissect credentials, look at where these were issued and look for information that comes from reliable, government and peer-reviewed resources. And even then to double-check. I tell them to question everything.”

Taking a single major story and following it across news outlets is a great activity for discussing differing agendas, says Dr Monica Bulger, an educational researcher at the Data and Society Research Institute, New York.

**Confronting biases**

Another helpful exercise is raising awareness of our own biases, says Bulger. Identify the issue being covered and ask students to write down their assumptions about it and what they expect to be reported.

“After discussions of headlines and differing agendas, ask them to consider how their biases affected the way they approached the stories. Discuss confirmation bias – how our minds look for things to confirm what we already believe. How do students feel when reading something they disagree with? Talk about why it is helpful to cultivate diverse perspectives.”

Inviting students to keep a journal of news sources and other information they come across that they think might be fake is a useful activity, says Bulger.

“Discuss these examples in class and demonstrate the process of evaluation.”

*Cynthia Karena is a freelance writer.*

### Valuing the truth

In a democracy, the free flow of trustworthy information is essential for making informed decisions, says educational researcher Dr Monica Bulger.

“What if this information were controlled by the government, as is the case in many countries?” she says.

“We are currently in an environment where we are uncertain about who is producing information and for what purpose. [Ask students] how that impacts personal decisions. How does that restrict everyday life?”

People share links without reading them, says Dr Bulger, who also suggests asking students how they feel when they trust a source someone else has shared, only to realise it is false.

How do students feel when they themselves have shared something that turns out to be false? “Discuss when this matters and when it doesn’t seem important, and why.”

### Resources

Fact checking
- factcheck.org
- snopes.com
- Factitious - a game
- factitious.augamestudio.com
- Lesson plans from The New York Times
  tinyurl.com/h3w7rp8
- ABC Media Watch story about fake news
  tinyurl.com/j34asi2

### STRUGGLE TO PICK FAKE NEWS

**FAKE NEWS**

An 18-month study by Stanford Graduate School of Education into US students’ ability to identify fake news.

“Overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the internet can be summed up in one word: bleak.”

In 15 tests, the study assessed whether students could find out whether the source was credible.

7804 student responses were analysed.

“In every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students’ lack of preparation.” the authors wrote.
**My best app**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Classroom</strong> (iOS; free)</th>
<th><strong>Augment</strong> (Android, iOS; free)</th>
<th><strong>GarageBand</strong> (iOS; free)</th>
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<td>This app helps teachers see and manage what's on student devices. It can also help teachers guide students through a lesson, see their progress, and keep them on track. Teachers can launch the same app on every student device at the same time, or launch different apps for different groups of students. While the possibilities of technology in the classroom are endless, there is no denying that some students can be easily distracted by their technology devices. Classroom app enables me to monitor and direct students to appropriate apps or locations, form groups for collaboration and even lock students into particular applications as we explore concepts. Augment lets students visualise 3D models in augmented reality. “For years I’ve run a science equipment scavenger hunt for Year 8 students but this is incredibly time-consuming to prepare. It required me to place equipment around the school and then collect it afterwards. This always carried a risk that equipment might be damaged or lost.” Now Moyle hides trackers with images of science equipment around the school that students have to find, then scan the tracker with the app to see, for example, a beaker, and then photograph it to compile an Equipédex. “It’s Pokémon Go for science equipment.” Her students use GarageBand with the Live Loops function to compose a musical sound track or sound effects to accompany their scientific statements. “But what I love about this app is that even the non-musically inclined students can very simply create original pieces.”</td>
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**Sam’s tips**

“Most of the really amazing apps I implement in the classroom have been the result of sharing by other educators,” she says. “The other way I’ve discovered apps is by imagining what I would like and Googling it to see if there is an app to fit my needs.”

**Other apps to explore...**

- **Lola’s Alphabet Train** (Android, iPhone, Windows; free)
  Lola’s Alphabet Train is designed to keep primary school students interested in reading. There are games to help them learn their letters and a matching memory game to become familiar with the alphabet.

- **MathQuiz** (Windows; free)
  A mini maths quiz before each lesson can settle a class down quickly. This is an easy-to-use app for teachers, with the ability to set question types and difficulty levels of easy, medium and hard.
FOR STUDENTS
YOUR RIGHTS AT WORK
GO TO: www.worksite.actu.org.au
Squeamishness and insufficient funding are preventing children from receiving the sex education they deserve. A new book argues for urgent national reform.

**BY CYNDI TEBBEL**

**We need to talk about sex**

The Australian National Curriculum includes lessons in sex and respectful relationships, beginning from Year 3, but it’s not compulsory in some states. Students in Western Australia and Queensland, for example, can go from preschool to the HSC without having a class in sex education.

Even where the subject is required, insufficient funding means public schools are embracing it at different speeds. Some children get quality sex education while others get next to nothing, and then only starting in Grade 6.

“Grade 6 is way too late to start sex education,” says Amanda Dunn, author of the book *The New Puberty*. “Imagine if the same were true of English or maths.”

Dunn makes the case that Australian children are starting their transition to adulthood earlier than previous generations. More than half of girls are already menstruating before they set foot in a Grade 6 classroom.

“They’ve had to go through all the physical, psychological and emotional changes without getting any quality information about what’s happening to them, without the opportunity to ask questions and learn that what’s happening is entirely normal,” she says.

Australia is lagging behind countries like the United Kingdom, where age-appropriate sex and relationships classes are compulsory in all of England’s schools, starting with children as young as four. Dunn says we need to catch up because there’s much to be gained from reaching children before their hormones do.

“This is about more than just sex and physical development. It’s how to have relationships, how to negotiate with someone you love, how to say what you want and what you don’t want. All of those things that, even as adults, we grapple with every day.”

**Sense of shame**

Dunn, a former health reporter who is politics and society editor for independent online media outlet The Conversation, expected to start her research with something of an advantage, but was surprised by how little she really knew about sexual and human development.

Unfamiliarity with the subject matter is widespread, and is coupled with a sense of shame or embarrassment when sharing what we know, she says.

“Parents, principals and teachers can be strangely coy when it comes to puberty. We don’t like to talk about it, and that’s to the detriment of our young people.”

Governments have long preferred that parents take responsibility for sex education, and some parents do so with the best intentions. But Dunn suspects that many are still uncomfortable.
Because they don’t know what to say and readily opt out when children shut down attempts at dialogue.

Teachers also struggle because they are often unprepared to tackle the breadth and depth of topics covering what Dunn terms “sexuality education”. Or they self-censor because they worry about “getting into trouble” with parents or other community members.

Principals and teachers, she says, need to stop squirming and be brave in the face of parental or community pushback.

“Sex gets people worked up, but adults have a responsibility to come up with an antidote to moral panic and hysteria.

“That’s why we need to support schools and teachers, because they’re best placed to present something better, earlier, so children know how to deal with it and put it in its proper context.”

Covering the issues
The New Puberty covers the gamut of puberty for girls and boys. From social and emotional development to hormones and body image, as well as issues pertinent to LGBTI young people.

On the curly question of why children are experiencing puberty earlier, Dunn says the reasons are complex, not always entirely clear and “by no means a settled matter within the medical community”.

She is unyielding in her call for sex education to begin early and be treated as seriously as academic core subjects.

The benefits are wide-ranging and include a reduction in unwanted sexual activity when the kids are older, better skills for negotiating relationships and being assertive. In other words, all of the issues that come with romantic relationships as they grow into adults.

“We need to put pressure on governments to do a better job by mandating high-quality sexuality education, ensure it has discrete funding so principals don’t have to find it in their global budgets, and give teachers more training than a one-hour in-service course,” says Dunn.

She sees sexuality education as a core subject that parents should not be able to opt out of (as they can in the UK).

“Children have a right to know about this and that overrides what parents want, in the same way as they have a right to know how to read, write and add up.

“Education sometimes makes us uncomfortable. That’s how we know we’re learning and being challenged. Be brave, because the kids are counting on us to do it for them.”

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.
Rosemary Patonay’s classroom manner may have mellowed over the years, but her lifelong love of teaching remains full-on.

BY MARGARET PATON

Why do you teach?
We’d love to hear your best tips for engaging young minds. Email us at educator@hardiegrant.com if you have something to share. You can provide a written piece or we’d be happy to interview you.

Fashioning excellence

Much like the range of textiles she revels in teaching about, Rosemary Patonay is multi-layered and multi-textured.

For the past 14 years, she has been head teacher in technological and applied studies at Burwood Girls High School in Croydon, Sydney, where she teaches 72 students in years 8 to 12.

“It’s a massive school with 1,200 girls and I always see there’s potential in every girl,” she says.

Last year she won an ASG National Excellence in Teaching Awards for her “passion, creativity and fun” in teaching technological and applied studies.

“I’m one of the fortunate ones. Sometimes you do weave your experience into teaching,” says Patonay, who has survived anorexia, obesity and cancer, and had to cope with her mother’s dementia and the loss of both parents in a relatively short time. Throughout her medical treatment, she continued to teach every day.

“I tell my students to look after their health and be good to themselves, and that personal boundaries are important for them, and for me as their teacher,” she says.

“It’s important to develop the whole person - that’s why I teach. Teaching is beyond just the content. Anyone can teach content.”

After completing a Diploma of Education at the now defunct Sydney Teachers’ College, Patonay began teaching in 1985 at St Mary’s High School near Penrith.

She says that, as a new teacher, she was “ridiculously strict, very much the perfectionist and it was my way or the highway”. But she mellowed over time.

In her third year, she became head teacher at Bidwill Public School, then transferred to Burwood Girls in 2005. By then, she had her Bachelor of Education degree, specialising in home economics.

To fund her travels and penchant for nice clothes, she topped up her income by also working part-time in admin at a local supermarket – for 22 years.

Working weekends
Patonay admits her move to Burwood wasn’t a smooth one.

“I thought I’d be teaching food tech but I was thrown in the deep end, trying to teach textiles and design with limited skills and knowledge. In my first year there, the Year 12 students were constantly complaining to the principal about me.

“I’d remind them the HSC is like a pin in the ocean of life. Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill. I saw one of them recently and she said, ‘You were right about the pin.’”

Patonay sometimes works at school until 9pm, and she’ll come in on weekends to help students access textile resources they don’t have at home.

She says it can be draining trying to convince parents that it’s possible to get a band 6 HSC in textiles and design. But her efforts have been paying off, with her HSC students performing consistently well, including one whose work was included in the recent HSC TexStyle exhibition for being among the best in the state.

“But it’s not about the accolade or accomplishment,” says Patonay. “Some girls have gone into the fashion industry, but others continue the passion for textiles as a pastime. Teaching is about building passion and love for the subject in my students - that’s my accomplishment.

“From age five I was mesmerised by my teachers, and some of them were excellent. I became passionate about home science and started sewing at home because the subject didn’t include textiles back then.”

These days, she likes to wow her students with stories about the new technology that was coming out when she was young. Hearing about when a rotary beater was modern tech in home science classes can leave them “gobsmacked”.

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual primary and high school teacher.
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