

Schools: Is the State System in Decay?

Speech by
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2003 Economic and Social Outlook Conference on
Pursuing Opportunity and Prosperity

Melbourne
13 November 2003

Introduction

- I commend *The Australian* on sponsoring the Pursuing Opportunity and Prosperity conference overall and in particular the emphasis placed on education and training.
- There is a growing consensus in Australia that we need to invest more in nation building infrastructure, including enabling infrastructure of education.
- Within and across our region many countries are growing their economies through mass production, cheap copying and low wages.
- To maintain and improve our own standard of living, we cannot possibly compete on that basis.
- But we can build a very strong competitive advantage – in our region and internationally - through our education and training systems and innovative culture.
- As Australian Nobel Laureate Professor Peter Doherty wrote in this morning's Age:

All the indications are that the strong economies of the future will be built on the capacity to exploit novelty, insight, discovery and innovation.....This country will not continue to prosper if we fail to provide adequate support for public education, at every level.

- This is not just a view coming from the academy.
- Recently, David Murray (CEO Commonwealth Bank) said “we need to be brave enough to invest in the great new things” such as schools and universities.
- Similar comments by Rupert Murdoch, the BCA, ACCI, AiG and other individuals and organisations suggest the business community is now clearly uniting on this issue.
- Social commentary has always supported this view.

- I can assure you that the Victorian Government support a high priority being afforded to education and training, support we have *demonstrated* through considerable investment and innovation.

Commonwealth funding of State government schools

- The Commonwealth's declining relative contribution to public education is a matter of concern to me and certainly does not match the rhetoric espoused by the Commonwealth Minister.
- **Fact:** in its most recent Budget the Howard Government only provided a \$29.1 million increase in funding for Victorian Government schools which represents indexation only - not a single new dollar for public education.
- For the three financial years commencing 2001 and ending 2003, it is estimated that Commonwealth funding to Victorian government schools will have risen from \$458 million to \$504 million, an increase of 10.2%
 - over the same period, Commonwealth funding to Victorian non-government schools is estimated to have risen from \$965 million to \$1.14 billion, an increase of 18.2% and more than double what it provides to Victorian government schools
 - nationwide, Commonwealth funding of non-government schools is approaching the level of its funding of the higher education sector.
- And I make the point that, because of the SES funding model adopted by the present Commonwealth Government, an increasing proportion of its funding to non-government schools is flowing to elite private schools at the expense of the most needy and disadvantaged non-government schools, particularly in the Catholic school system
 - growth of funding to elite non-government schools across Australia has outstripped growth to other non-government schools by a factor of 7 to 1.
- You may think I'm getting into the usual debate about Commonwealth versus state responsibilities.

- But within the context of the critical importance of education to this nation's future, I believe we are now presented with some real opportunities which are not being taken because Commonwealth rhetoric simply does not match the level and direction of its funding.

A new national agreement on schools education

- So, is our education system across Australia, in crisis?
- The answer to that is “no”, but improvement can definitely be made.
- In my view, a new national agreement is needed around education funding, responsibility and accountability - an agreement and not occasional rhetoric.
- A national agreement which has the commitment of the states, territories and the Commonwealth, which identifies the respective responsibilities, resourcing and accountability of each level of government to both the government and non-government schools in the education system.
- Such an agreement would demonstrate a maturity not yet witnessed in Australia towards the provision of quality education.
- It would enable all governments across Australia to focus on the needs of students, the improvements required by both sectors and the accountability frameworks, including identification of the level of government responsible for each part.
- It would put an end to the constant point scoring, bickering and abrogation of responsibility often witnessed in the tortured sessions which pass for negotiation and which are often reported by the media.
- The beneficiaries of such a system would be, of course, students and their parents.
- Proffering advice to government school systems by the Commonwealth, when any analysis of Commonwealth funding would indicate limited responsibility for those systems, is neither helpful nor productive, least of all for the students.

- On the other hand, introducing significant accountability and transparency requirements of the non-government system for the commensurate levels of public funding would assist the national effort in educational provision for *all* students, not just *some* of them.
- The example that springs to my mind is of schools receiving government funding that do not have literacy and numeracy programs in the early years.

State of Victorian education system

- What of the government school system - is it in crisis?
- The answer to that, too, is “no” but there is definitely room for improvement.
- Since coming to office in 1999, the present Victorian Government has invested significant additional resources in education and training to undertake reforms and implement a range of initiatives.
- We have reduced class sizes in schools and tackled the key issues of early and middle years development in schooling.
- Victoria is providing national leadership in the reform of the senior years of school and in pathways from schooling.
- We have also invested heavily in strategic programs to achieve targeted improvement - improvement which has clearly occurred.
- We have set targets to measure the performance across the whole system - and the improvement has been considerable.
- The achievements of Victorian students in national and international tests have been impressive:
 - the percentage of students that stay on to the final years of school has risen steadily every year and is now near the highest in Australia
 - since 1999, literacy and numeracy data point to ongoing improvements in standards across year levels
 - and, most importantly, the results of those students who have previously had low performance have improved.

- Nevertheless, I acknowledge that, despite all that has been achieved over the past four years, we need to concentrate further upon improved learning outcomes for students.

Blueprint for Government Schools

- In that context, this morning I announced the Victorian Government's *Blueprint for Government Schools*.
- The Blueprint is the product of six months of detailed and robust discussion between teachers, parents, students, and the wider Victorian education community.
- The Government recognises that government schools have a specific responsibility and duty to serve all young people in the state.
- The state system guarantees an education for all children, irrespective of their location or background.
- And despite predictions of decline and decay of the system, it still provides for the education and training needs of the vast majority – two thirds, in fact – of our children and young people.
- Victorian government schools do have much to be pleased about.
- However, there is, and will always be, room for improvement.
- Unfortunately, some students still leave school early with low levels of literacy and other core skills.
- And some students are not being sufficiently challenged to the extent they deserve.
- Again, to refer to Professor Doherty, as a nation we cannot afford to waste the potential of a single human being.
- At the very heart of these two seemingly different and unrelated issues are the same three challenges. Research has shown that:
 - One, there remains a **high concentration of poor student results in some schools, in particular regions and amongst identifiable groups** – it is a problem of location and cohorts. These groups and regions face a challenging

range of student needs, interests and talents and highlight the limitations of a “one size fits all” model.

- Two, there are **significant and evident variations in learning outcomes between classes in the same school.** This highlights the central importance of the teaching/learning relationship and suggests that some teaching approaches assist a wider range of students to obtain learning success.
- Three, there are **variations in student outcomes between schools with similar students.** No two schools are the same but some schools do make a greater learning difference than like schools.
- Fundamentally, this Blueprint focuses on overcoming these systemic challenges by consolidating existing strong performance and outlining the directions and strategies for expected improvements.
- The research and consultations undertaken identified three priority directions for increased system effort:
 - recognising and responding to diverse student learning needs;
 - increasing the teaching and learning skills of the education workforce;
 - and achieving continuous improvement in schools.

Diverse Student Learning Needs

- The first direction, - that of **recognising and responding to diverse student learning demands or needs** - calls for a wider range of innovative, flexible and attuned classroom practices and school structures. The more effectively we undertake these tasks, the greater scope we create for each young person to succeed in their preferred learning journey.
- The Blueprint considers in some detail several major reforms that are central to this new direction.

Teaching-Learning Relationship

- A second priority direction identified in the Blueprint is to **further build the skills of the government school workforce to enhance the ever- important teaching-learning relationship.**
- Our starting position on this is we already have a highly skilled education workforce in the government school system: teachers do a very good job and there are many excellent teaching/learning practices and cultures in place.
- Our task is to find the best ways to mobilise our knowledge of effective teaching and learning relations and to be more aware of the central role of principals and willing accountability can play in that.

Continuously Improving Schools

- Our third main priority is **continuously improving schools** to better meet students' diverse learning needs, while maintaining a strong framework of accountability to the community, the key to that being a new, **differential model of school review**
- Again, this recognises the fact that one size does not fit all.
- Schools will be reviewed according to their particular stage of development and performance, and the system will better target assistance to the schools who are not yet delivering an excellent education to all their students.

Conclusion

- The challenges, directions and detailed strategies for Victoria's government school system which I released today set the agenda for the future of schools education in Victoria.
- To have a national agenda on education which seriously takes up the challenges faced in education systems across Australia would be welcomed by us all.

- Or to quote a previous Commonwealth Education Minister, we need to aspire to be

....a nation which is well educated and therefore clever: a nation which cultured, and therefore humane: and a nation which is rich because of the knowledge, skills and values of its citizens. This cannot come about (he said) without a national effort to harness the co-operation, goodwill and expertise of the Commonwealth, States and territories (working together).

- I commend those sentiments to you all.