

Question on notice.

"In relation to your comments in your submission about the full integration system that does not always work, I am interested to know – because there is a lot of discussion about children in mainstream schools or selective schools or being home-schooled – your view in relation to the ideal model that would work. I know that is if we had a big pot of money."

Preamble

I will present several ideas, as it is vital to understand that we have a completely different culture at the NSW DET now, even from only a decade ago, let alone twenty years ago when they began to dismantle the notion of segregation for children with disabilities. It is not possible to simply return to the old model, even if people wanted to.

We now have a culture where the DET is becoming increasingly hierarchical and certain people are drawn to higher positions with a desire to wield power. Also, we have the situation where the supportive consultants who were based at a regional office (most of whom had expertise in specific curriculum areas) were all reabsorbed into regular schools as they lost their jobs. There was an immediate vacuum of knowledge that sucked in policies that, either rightly or wrongly, forced a massive change of direction for the DET. We can't go back and we now have a situation where Principals wield so much power that it is open to abuse. "Every Student, Every School" and "Local Schools, Local Decisions" are two examples of this leadership void being filled. Add to this mix, the loss of the highly experienced and knowable baby-boomer teachers who are retiring and being replaced with younger teachers who struggle to handwrite legibly, lack the understanding of the foundations of grammar and who also lack the inclination to improve their areas of weakness. We have a culture where mediocrity is becoming the new level of excellence.

This sounds overly melodramatic, however we only need to look at our NAPLAN results and our place in global education rankings to see that we are in dire straights! When comparing the "Basic Skills Test" of ten years ago to the recent "NAPLAN Test," even a layman would see a dramatic and noticeable *dumbing down* of the reading texts and the quality of questions for year three students. If our regular students are failing to excel, then what about our vulnerable students with disabilities? They have little to hope for.

My Brief Answer

I must pragmatically note that my personal opinion is irrelevant in the question posed as Australian law trumps my personal and professional opinions. *Each student has the right to be schooled in a regular school.* There is no debate to be had.

However, I will note that I believe that students (and their legal guardians) have the right to the choice of school. If I had my way I would amend the law to say that **CHOICE** is the important matter. We now have a terrible situation where supports and choices have been dismantled and now there is little to choose from! It seems to be either a poorly equipped regular school, or a distant and unknown special class or school, or out of desperation being home-schooled by stressed parents. **Where there was once choice and little chance to exercise it we now have the ability to exercise choice with little to choose from.**

If a child wishes to be home-schooled then that is the best option for him/her. If a student wishes to be placed in a special class then that is the best option for him/her. I find that parents are natural educators and advocates for their own children and schools must support their decisions.

What we must do differently is to equip and enable parents to make decisions. We need to take away the power from 'schools' and instead give it to the 'clients' who attend the schools. This is opening a large can of worms so instead of giving parents the power to walk away, we need to instead ensure that parents don't want to walk away! They need to know that the local school is the best school! That can only happen if each and every NSW public school *is* the best school! That is only done by ensuring that each teacher is of the highest caliber and that each principal knows what is going on in every classroom at all times (and is accountable for them).

In the meantime we need to acknowledge that the reason why many parents home-school: it is because their children are being discriminated against. We must support these students by providing assistance (a special one-off grant, to be spent over five years, until the improvement measures have taken root in the public school system). At the end of the five years students can either continue to be home-schooled at a personal expense (like it is now) or they can reenter the school system that has proven itself able to provide an excellent education for all students.

A Complex Solution with Many Small Answers

Acknowledging the truth of John Hattie (arguably the world's expert on education) when he says that "[it] has become a cliché that masks the fact that the greatest source of variance in our system relates to teachers – they can vary in many ways. Not all teachers are effective, not all teachers are experts, and not all teachers have powerful effects on students," is the first step to fixing the problems in NSW public schools.

He says that we need to stop measuring teachers, and instead begin to evaluate them properly and thoroughly.

I propose that we "evaluate" teachers and their effectiveness in many different ways.

a) PRE-GRADUATION – forming 'good habits' early.

Ensure that we model teacher training on how medical practitioners are trained. Teaching is really a "people business." We need to ensure that pre-graduates spend hundreds of hours in classrooms to ensure that they are able to teach before they are given the independence to do so. These model classroom teachers must be externally endorsed by NESAs (as well as their past students and parents) as being excellent, passionate and effective teachers.

I noted this suggestion in my tabled document, that there should be a six-month internship at a SSP or within a special class (such as Autism Class or Emotionally Disturbed Class or Multi-categorical Class) and then an additional six-month internship in a mainstream class, which has several students with diagnosed disabilities.

b) ONGOING ASSESSMENT – ensuring that teachers stay effective, passionate and improve their levels of expertise.

Accountability needs to be transparent and ongoing. The vast majority of teachers have the desire to improve however they lack opportunities to witness best practice and receive constructive feedback.

Using a school with eleven classes in this example: Each school would have a new position created, a “Model Teacher” who provides strict programming guidance and teacher improvement programmes. This teacher needs to spend (a rotated) one day a week in each classroom so that the feedback is constant and genuine. The model may look like this:

Term One:

Focus on Years 5 and 6 classes and the EAL/D Programme.

Term Two:

Focus on the Infants classes of the school.

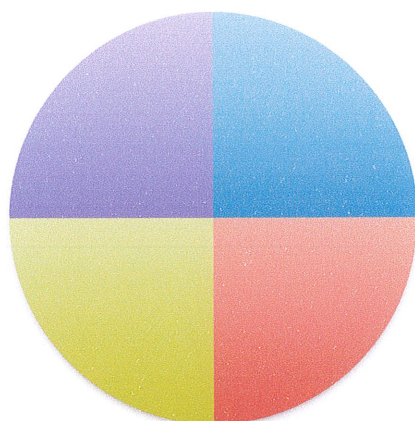
Term Three:

Focus on Years 3 and 4 classes and the Learning and Support Programme

Term Four:

Focus on the transition to high school programme, the transition to kindergarten programme, ensure that programmes for the next calendar year are in place and ensure that teachers who needed additional support are receiving special attention so that the following year they have met all minimum standards and are ready to see further growth.

School Improvement



■ Years 5/6 and EAL/D

■ Infants Classes

■ Years 3 and 4 and LaST

■ Future planning, transitions and teacher improvement

c) PRINCIPAL AUDIT and ASSISTANCE – ensuring that the principal is not distracted from his/her core business.

Ensure that each principal is audited on the present level of teacher standards at the school. Also, audit the present way in which money is being allocated for programmes that meet the needs of students with disabilities.

It must be noted that principals have had their workload increase exponentially in the past five years alone (due to the two policies that are mentioned above). To support principals in getting back into the classrooms to ensure that students are excelling, they need a new general school manager who can take care of finances, school maintenance, low-level community and staffing concerns, employment of casual teachers, allocation of RFF for staff, WHS matters et cetera.

d) NESA ANNUAL AUDIT – external audit to ensure objective compliance and transparency. Self-management of teacher quality rarely results in improvements being made. EPAC's most recent report shows that staff performance management primarily focuses on child-protection matters and not teacher quality and effectiveness. Is every single teacher in NSW as good as EPAC thinks?

NESA will come into each school annually to observe teaching in every single classroom and also to administer a mandatory test on teacher responsibilities. There would be strict procedures for teachers who fail to meet minimum standards.

e) SILOING OF ACTIVITIES – schools need to drop the programmes that distract students and teachers from their core areas of learning.

How is it that sixty years ago a student could leave school at the age of thirteen and have a long and fulfilling life and career? How is it that now 10% of Year 7 students are BELOW minimum standard of Band 5? When you look at the standards, Band 5 is hardly the line in the sand that you would want to strive for. ACARA says (from their website) that Band 5 students (who have been schooled for nearly eight years by the time of the test) can:

Year 7

At the minimum standard, Year 7 students generally structure a story to include a beginning and a complication, although the conclusion may be weak or simple, or a persuasive essay that has an indefinable introduction, body and conclusion, **although the introduction and/or the conclusion may be weak or simple** (emphasis mine – they admit that minimum standards are weak and simple).

Students typically include sufficient information for the story or essay to be easily understood by the reader and there is usually development and elaboration of ideas which all relate coherently to a central storyline or the position taken on a topic. They use a small range of simple persuasive devices with **some success and use some topic specific vocabulary** (emphasis mine – they admit that minimum standards are only PARTLY successful).

Some precision is evident in the vocabulary use **although words are not all used successfully**. Students **correctly structure most simple and compound sentences** and some complex sentences and correctly **punctuate some sentences with both capital letters and full stops**. They may demonstrate correct use of some other punctuation, for example quotation marks for direct speech or commas for phrasing (emphasis mine – they admit that minimum standards are only using capital letters and full-stops some of the time! These skills are supposed to be taught in kindergarten and yet seven years later students are unable to use capital letters and full stops all of the time).

Students **correctly spell most simple and common words**. (Emphasis mine – they admit that the minimum standard is poor spelling of simple and common words).

We should NOT be striving for mediocrity as the minimum standard! How about we raise the bar just one more band? **If we were to say that Band 6 is the new minimum standard, then 28.6% of 2016 year seven students are actually failing to write. That is over A QUARTER OF OUR STUDENTS are failing to write properly, after nearly eight years of school.**

This is a crisis. We must stop what we are currently doing and CHANGE it, as we are failing our students!

f) LOOK BACKWARDS TO SEE A BRIGHTER FUTURE – bring back designated craft teachers (and the craft curriculum) to build creativity and problem solving abilities in our students.

My personal observation on this is rather counter-intuitive. NSW primary schools each used to have a designated "Craft" teacher who taught a plethora of skills that set students up for success

in all other KLAs. We now have students who simply can't analyse or problem solve the most basic of problems. Once students had to work out many practical issues using wood, wool, needles, thread, patterns and design. This built up the ability to think ahead, follow steps and also develop the ability to think creatively to manage projects that were off-track or needing to be fixed. These skills were then applicable in Literacy and Numeracy and students were able to solve problems in many creative ways. I now teach many bright students who simply have no mental plasticity and creativity when solving problems.

g) OPEN HEARTS AND MINDS TO SEE BEYOND OURSELVES – for 'regular' teachers and students to value people with disabilities, they need to know that there is a big world out there that we need to embrace and accept.

NSW Public schools need to mandate the teaching of a foreign language from Kindergarten to Year Eleven. Currently we are a generation behind the rest of the world on this issue. Research shows that learning a foreign language before the age of seven builds extra connections in the brain. This will help students to improve in all KLAs!

The NSW government must decide the core language and then schools must begin to teach it. While the choice will be fraught with angst from many lobby groups, I simply want us to begin this important measure. Let's choose the Chinese language of Mandarin as an example. Students will learn to appreciate Chinese culture and also be open to opportunities that may present themselves many years later when they travel or build business opportunities with China. *As students learn about others, they begin to appreciate and accept other people and other cultures as a natural thing to do!*

I have advocated in my own school for nearly ten years to teach a foreign language to all students from K-6. Parents love the idea and students do too. It is the teachers and principal who are against it! The real reason is that the DET will not invest in teacher training (which will take years for each teacher to reach a minimum standard of excellence). They say that it is an investment they are unwilling to make. I agree that to begin it will be a massive investment, however after fifteen years when it becomes ingrained in the culture and curriculum, we will have a whole new generation who will be natural speakers and when they enter the workforce, the investment will return over and over again. The Productivity Commission would likely have many positive knock-on effects, which would make the argument for mandatory foreign language lessons even more attractive.

Summary

The solution for this crisis, which has manifested first through our most vulnerable students, is in reality a sickness that runs through each and every facet of the NSW public school system. For us to lift the education standards so that we are providing an education of excellence for our most vulnerable students, we must ensure that we 'chip away' at the problem from every foreseeable angle. When you sum up all the changes, both large and small, you see that in essence the entire system needs to be reshaped. While a seemingly daunting and bloody fight, we must remember that our most vulnerable students are worthy of our devotion and dedication and we must endure until they receive what they deserve – a world class education that is free from prejudice and limiting boundaries.