

**Submission
No 197**

INQUIRY INTO TEACHER SHORTAGES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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My name is Peter Stewart and I taught in NSW schools for 37 years culminating as Principal at Wilcannia Central School.

By way of background to the contribution I would like to make to the Inquiry I include some reflections on situations I encountered through my career and methods I think would improve student outcomes because focusing on the student is, in my view, core to developing high quality teachers, developing a high quality education system and ensuring that schools are good examples of high quality work environments for both existing teachers and people who might decide to embark on teaching in the future.

I had been thinking for some time that I should document some thoughts about my experiences and observations, particularly at Wilcannia Central School (CS). In recent times I have seen a number of TV shows that highlight programs for youth who have had difficulties in their schooling, like that of, Karla Grant's *Living Black*, brutality by authorities associated with Black Lives Matter and footage of treatment of kids in detention centres and prisons. The real tipping point came when I watched *Incarceration Nation* on SBS. I wasn't shocked as I knew the information was going to be grim, but I am enraged to think that still happens in Australia today. I understand that some of the issues are complex but some are reasonably easy to rectify. However, through this document I'd like to put a different perspective on the issue from an Education point of view. To do this, I need to go through a substantial amount of background information particularly in terms of learning styles, school structures and curriculum requirements.

I have a number of fundamental beliefs – including that:

- all students want to learn.
- students are happiest and want to engage more in learning when they can make choices and decisions about their own learning.
- basic structures in schools have not changed for 50 or 60 years.
- the “lock step” progression model of students progressing through school is outmoded and needs a major overhaul.
- teachers. School management teams and Department of Education officials all achieved with the current school structure during their time at school so they have a belief that schools should continue to be structured the same way. This then means that a significant number of students have to either struggle to conform to this outmoded system or miss out completely.
- only a small percentage of parents attend P&C meetings and these are the parents who also succeeded at school, with the same structures, so have the same belief that the current structure is the only way schools can or should be structured so often don't support change.
- there is a need for a variety of structures in schools rather than a “one size fits all” model. During the pandemic some students will have been doing well with the remote learning system as do students in School of the Air or completing subjects through distance learning.
- there are a number of different learning styles. The current structure doesn't fit all learning styles. In particular I want to highlight kinesthetic learners who need to be up, moving around,

being physical and hands on with learning, in contrast to a teacher's needs in the classroom, and who are therefore disadvantaged in a normal classroom environment. A significant proportion of Indigenous students are kinesthetic learners.

- Students learn at varying rates, students will, over time, move between various learning styles, for example teenage girls learn faster than boys at the same age.
- schools ignore the fact that the HSC can be completed over a 5 year period. If this was highlighted more some students might choose this option thus upsetting the normal structure.
- there is little or no opportunity for students to complete an HSC part-time, day or night. It's not available for mature age students, those from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, those who were expelled at an early age and want to return or those who need an HSC to progress their current or changing work needs.
- school teachers, school management, the hierarchy of the Department of Education and others like police and prison staff have real difficulties at times dealing with some types of Primary Behaviour so escalate an issue encouraging the person to respond with Secondary Behaviours which then becomes the issue with which authorities engage. It is very easy to escalate to the next level. I illustrate this with a very simple example from when I was Deputy Principal (DP) at Murwillumbah High School. A year 11 student wore thongs to school and was subsequently put on detention. She refused to go to detention so the school policy was to suspend her because she refused to go to detention. The whole focus was on the Secondary Behaviour rather than the Primary Behaviour of wearing thongs. The real skill is to identify, and work with the person to overcome, the Primary Behaviour issue.
- successive Federal and State governments happily accept that in any measurement of educational outcomes health, housing, incarceration etc will find the Aboriginal groups at the bottom of any league table ... it is easier to explain this to their constituents than any other group being at the bottom.
- that maybe the Australian Justice System should be renamed The Australian Injustice System.

I will now illustrate some of the structural issues using examples from my teaching career:

At Gundagai High School a structure was implemented where students chose/selected term long subjects. There were some compulsory elements but choice within all subject areas. We also introduced a "bicyclic timetable" whereby the timetable cycled through 7 days (eg if Tuesday was day 1 then Wednesday was day 2 and so on with The following Monday being day 5 etc) Lessons cycled with a class being period 1 today, it would be period 2 tomorrow and so on. The process was based on students having short term learning goals.

When I was Head Teacher (HT) at Nimbin Central School I calculated that only 55% of a student's time at school in a week was used completing compulsory requirements of the curriculum. What happens in the other 45%?

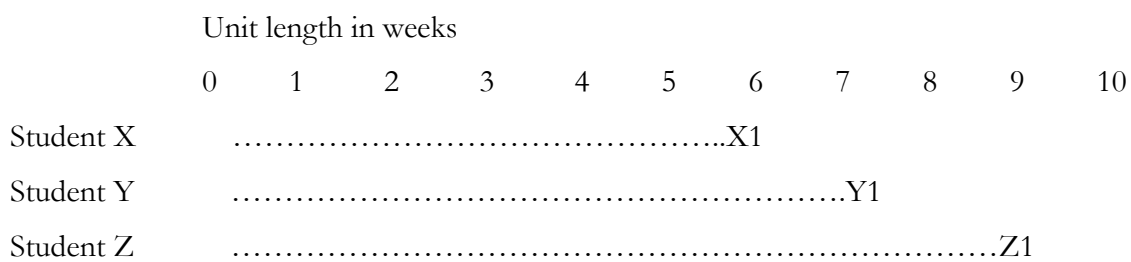
I implemented a system where students in years 9 & 10 could choose a traditional structured program with timetable, subjects, classrooms and regular teachers. About 25% selected this traditional format. About 75% of students selected a system of no timetable, no regular teacher, no time limits in specialist rooms etc. Students selected a home desk. Students received units of work from all their subject teachers. Students knew they had units of work to complete and they

decided how to utilise their time and when they would access various learning spaces. They could access various teachers when they needed to. They could access the Art, Ceramics, Technics rooms etc when they wanted. The emphasis was on Self Directed Learning and more importantly, students were making choices and taking responsibility for their own learning. A couple of parents indicated that the relationship with their child at home significantly improved because of this structure.

Self Directed learning occurs where students make choices about when and how they will complete given units of work. They can see what the whole unit entails and see what product is required. This is different to where the teacher controls the speed of the learning and doesn't necessarily indicate what the end outcome of the unit will be.

Self Directed Learning is like someone driving a car along a 3 lane road approaching a set of traffic lights with a truck stopped in the middle lane. Most people move to either of the other 2 lanes. They don't want to be held up by the slow truck and they want to see what is ahead of them. Students receive the unit of work outlining all that has to be completed by the end of the unit and adapt their time to complete that work rather than being held, at someone else's pace

Some of the issues with a "lock step" progression system can be illustrated with this graph.



If a teacher plans a unit to take 5 weeks (ie 8 units a year) then:

Student X might complete the unit in 4 weeks

Student Y completes the unit in the allocated 5 weeks

Student Z might need at least 6 or more weeks

A number of problems occur:

-if student X completes the unit in less time what do they do for the rest of the time? Revise? Go on to the next unit? Muckup? Annoy other students?? If this pattern continues for the whole year then student X effectively wastes 8 weeks a year, if there are eight equal length units each year.

-unfortunately, student Z falls behind and continues at an escalating rate of falling behind as the teacher has to keep going to the next unit after the 5 weeks, which is particularly problematic for affected students when the next unit builds on concepts learned in the previous unit.

At this point I'd like to mention school assemblies. After an assembly at Murwillumbah, as DP, I'd spend 3 or 4 days dealing discipline issues stemming from the assembly. At Nimbin CS, and

then at Lightning Ridge CS as DP I eliminated Secondary assemblies. I found Lightning Ridge CS to be a violent and noisy school. There was an assembly at the beginning of each day, which created its own issues, but afterwards those students who elected to miss the assembly would enter the school in dribs and drabs, walk to class disturbing other classes on the way. They would be sent back to the office for a late note, disturbing other classes on the way. They would give the office staff heaps of lip and return to class, disturbing other classes (for the third time) on their way. The school didn't settle down until after recess. I cancelled Secondary Assemblies. There was a significant reduction in disruption.

At Lightning Ridge CS (about 35% Aboriginal enrolment) I realised that there were about 7 or 8 Aboriginal students who were constantly in trouble up to year 7. History showed that they had been in all sorts of trouble since kindergarten. They had been stood outside classrooms (where quite often they escalated their behaviour) they were sent to an Assistant Principal (AP) to stand outside their room. Early on, by strategies of standing outside rooms they were showcased as a behaviour problem to everyone else who saw them. These students were kinesthetic learners and weren't catered for in the normal classroom. There were about 50 students split equally into 2 classes in year 7. I negotiated with the year 7 teachers to have 40+ students in 1 class and the 7 or 8 kinesthetic students in the other with an allocated teacher. Although the larger class was significantly above normal size, the teachers of the larger class indicated that there was much less noise and disruption and student learning outcomes improved. The kinesthetic group were taught by one of the Head Teachers and made significant progress in their learning through a much more "hands on" approach.

Before arriving as Principal of Wilcannia CS (about 95% Aboriginal enrolment) I was aware of the stereotyping of the school – loudness, violence, dysfunction, destruction of school property, regular visits to the school by the District Superintendent from Broken Hill (200kms away) to resolve student, teacher, parent and community member issues. Wilcannia CS certainly had a very poor reputation. Staff turn over was very high. Almost all teachers did their 2 years and then moved to the school of their choice. I was aware that the company responsible for repairing damage in the school spent substantial amounts of time at the school repairing and/or replacing school infrastructure.

When I arrived all the above was true.

- At the beginning of each day there was a line up of parents and community members waiting for their turn to come into my office and yell at me, abuse me and threaten me.
- It was dangerous walking along corridors for fear of being hit by a flying object like a chair coming from a classroom.
- In the previous 12 months there had been 4 students expelled
- In the previous 12 months there had been 55 student suspensions.
- Teachers were experiencing numerous break-ins to their houses or units.
- The work ethic for students was low and the learning environment wasn't conducive for students or staff.

- There were 3 or 4 teachers who deliberately pressed the students' buttons to incite students to lose control and become abusive, violent and destructive. These teachers would sit back, watch and enjoy the mayhem.
- The end of year assembly was a disaster. Students were running around on the hall roof creating a huge noise, they were riding bikes in and out of the hall, up and down the aisles. I spent days resolving these issues and fielding complaints from parents and community members.
- Above the normal allocated staffing formula there was an additional full time teacher behaviour with between 25 and 30 students on her case load. Probably there should have been one further full time allocation.
- Teachers were sent to Wilcannia CS straight after they concluded their training. Wilcannia is isolated. Mum isn't living just around the corner or 5-10 minutes away in the next suburb, so the appointment could be very daunting – 2 years in isolation!!

All this had to change! I couldn't sit back, watch and work in this environment.

I initiated a number of strategies including:

- I turned the principal's desk away so it faced and was up against the wall, so it wasn't a symbol of power or standing as a barrier between myself and the student, parent or community member I was discussing issues with. I quite often sat next to the person I was talking with so that we were both facing the same direction. After copping abuse and they had finished yelling, I would talk with them in terms of "You have a major issue which I am happy to help you resolve but I can't help you with your problem if you continue abusing me"! Soon the abuse stopped and we could sit and work together on issues.
- I negotiated a deal with students whereby if they were feeling threatened by other students or by teachers and they felt anger building towards breaking out: they could excuse themselves and come to and sit in my office and calm themselves. They knew when they were starting to reach the point where they were about to explode and retaliate. This stopped the situation from escalating.
- Instead of just accepting the appointment of new staff I was able to have input into suitable teachers who would not only fit in but could withstand the isolation.
- I eliminated assemblies. Some students had been waiting up town in the morning trying to avoid the assembly. Some got with other older community people and created infringements around town. No assemblies meant students would walk into school into their classes, sit down and get on quietly with their learning. No disruptions for other classes or office staff.
- Instead of the end of year assembly we had a "Day of Celebration" on the banks of the Darling River with students painting, singing, playing guitars, playing games and cooking Johnny Cakes, emu or kangaroo. Intermingled with these activities during the day teachers presented achievement certificates to their students. Students, parents, community members and teachers all celebrated and for 3 days after I was bombarded with congratulatory remarks.
- Initially I eliminated all bells but gave in with 3 bells a day at the beginning of each session. This reduced the noise level.

- I eliminated all English and Maths classes
- I created vertically grouped (years 3 -8) literacy and numeracy classes based on student ability so each class had students around about the same stage - age wasn't a factor eg a year 5 student was in the same group as some year 8 students. Groups varied from Literacy and numeracy.
- Each day started with Literacy followed by Numeracy or vice versa. Due to "lock step" progression students are promoted to the next level even if they haven't achieved, understood or grasped the previous level of work. In Maths as an example a student in year 8 might have to get into algebra and understand such things as $a(a+b)$ when they haven't grasped simple multiplication. Many students become frustrated which manifests in student behaviour issues, causing a further workload for teachers.

Teachers require more support and training in dealing with behaviour issues.

- The most significant strategy was to create a vertically grouped (Years 3-8) kinesthetic class. The students in this group had previously been in trouble for their behaviour and very poor attendance. The teacher who volunteered to take this class adapted to the way these students learnt and created meaningful programs. This group spent a great deal of their time out of the school "on country" learning their subject matter with a more hands on approach. The end result was improved attendance, a more positive attitude and improved learning outcomes with no discipline/behaviour issues. Importantly the other students and teachers could get on with their work without constant interruption.
- I managed to get the 3 or 4 teachers creating student disturbances transferred to other schools.

The outcome from all this change included:

- the establishment of a good, quiet, safe, productive and harmonious learning environment.
- the School Counsellor who visited from Broken Hill and was allocated 1 day a fortnight, came to me and asked me what I did and how I did it because he used to travel to the school but would always stop at the rest area about 10 kms from town to build up courage to face the nightmare ahead. Now he looked forward to working with the school, students and parents and wanted to spend more days in the fortnight at Wilcannia CS.
- the boss of the company who did repairs etc, very rarely had to visit as the degree of vandalism and destruction had been eliminated.
- The Police commented on what was happening in school because they had noticed a significant reduction in petty crime in the community.
- The District Superintendent had not been called to the school to sort out issues between students, parents, community or staff when previously visits, for these issues were every other day.
- The allocation of a behaviour teacher over and above the normal staffing entitlement was eliminated as there was no longer any student on her case load.

- In the last 12 months I was there I didn't have any reason to suspend any student
- The long line of abusive people outside my office of a morning disappeared.
- Students sitting the Basic Skills Test, as it was in those days, from year 3 to year 5 were the most improved in the whole of Western Region.
- Break-ins to teacher's houses and units were eliminated.
- Teachers wanted to stay at Wilcannia CS. Instead of the usual application after their 2 year stint (In those days teachers were entitled to transfer to a school of their choice after completing 2 years) in 2008 only 1 teacher eligible for transfer applied. The one who did so had already spent a number of years as the preschool teacher but wanted to move to be closer to his extremely ill mother.
- The ex District Superintendent from Bourke was helping to implement a special Literacy Program from the Federal Government at Wilcannia. He was shocked when he came into the school as he had the same stereotypical thoughts about what he was walking into as I had 4 years before. He found that the level of learning and the harmonious school learning environment at Wilcannia CS to be completely different to what he was expecting.

Although the background information would seem a little long I nevertheless needed to discuss where I am coming from.

I suspect that the great majority of student behaviour issues within schools stem from kinesthetic learners whose issues escalate because schools aren't equipped to work positively with these students. I suspect that eventually these same issues extend to the wider community where these kinesthetic learners come into contact with the police which eventually leads to jail time. I suspect, also, that the archaic "one size fits all" school structure contributes to this outcome.

If schools were to have a number of different structures accommodating different learning styles then the escalation of behaviour issues would decline and hopefully minimise incarceration rates in the long run.

Although I haven't discussed curriculum here at any length I believe the curriculum structure moving towards the HSC needs a major overhaul. There needs to be multiple exit points for learners once they reach the age of 15, just as there should be multiple entry points for learners to return to complete their school education. It should be widely advertised that the HSC can be completed over a 5 year period. HSC subjects should probably be half year subjects and the exam/evaluation period should occur at 6 month intervals. Finally, on HSC curriculum, I think that it should be divided into about 8 different areas to reflect the current needs of our modern community. Areas such as Food and Agriculture, Business and Personal Financial Management, Creative Arts, Building/Construction to name a couple. Subjects like English, Maths and Science would be important but would be embedded in the building of pre- and corequisites. Students would accumulate half year subjects through a series of prerequisite and corequisite subjects.

There needs to be an in depth analysis of the reasons teachers leave the profession after a short period of time and strategies need to be designed that support teachers to show teaching is still a viable long term career.

The divide between that which happens in the classroom and the administration from District offices upwards through Regional, Head Office and Minister is huge. Unfortunately there is little trust in the Administration. There is a real need for the bureaucracy to focus more on student outcomes, student needs and student welfare.

Further schools only operate about 40 hours out of 168 in a week. With changing and varied work patterns of parents and also the increasing number of students with part time work, maybe it is time to expand opening hours for schools. This would as an example open up the possibility of students who want to be employed in part time work on Friday being able to do so by completing more classes on each of the other days. This maybe beneficial for parents balancing child minding and work commitments. The world is changing and schools need to become more flexible and this change could be the beginning of the Education System adjusting to the rapidly changing world. Of course this would need to be negotiated with the various teacher organisations. Teachers would have the same hours and responsibilities as they do now but gain more flexibility in their employment.

Obviously, greater remuneration for teachers is needed to reflect the increasing difficulty of teaching environments, increased workloads and, more generally, to reflect the contribution that teachers make to our communities.

Finally, there is a need to develop a meaningful birth to kindergarten program which will obviously include preschool and be an important and significant part of the Public Education system.

In effect improving these things would increase the diversity of people interested in pursuing a teaching career. It would attract people who might want a mid to late career change. Also it would reduce the stress levels of existing teachers and their workloads which should lead to the retention of more teachers.

I hope some of this is useful.

Peter Stewart