

Challenges of Leadership for Public Educators

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

First of all, I would like to thank Connie Alves for inviting me to speak to you today. Of course, as school leaders, only each one of you fully understands the particular challenges and opportunities that you face as a Deputy Principals in your own school, supported by your Regional Director and the relevant SED, as well as by those of us in Central Office.

I am passionate about the pre-eminent role that public education should, indeed must, make - not only to the intellectual, social, physical, and ethical growth of every single student, but also to the flourishing of our democratic society. My wife Dr Jackie Manuel and I have always sent our children to public schools. Our elder daughter Sophia commenced her schooling at Narellan Vale Public School led superbly by the then Principal, our now very good friend, Tracey Hayne. Later both Sophia and Amelia attended the excellent Oakhill Drive Public School, Castle Hill, where their first Principal was the splendid David Thummler and later their (Acting) Principal the equally splendid Jan Thurgar. And they both proceeded to the excellent Cherrybrook Technology High School, where Sophie who has just turned 17 is now in Year 12 and Millie who is 13, is in Year 8, led by an exceptional Secondary School Principal, Gary Johnson.

Our Australian society needs to heed what the admirable Canadian author and philosopher, John Ralston Saul, wrote in 2002: “Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of the long-standing essential role universal public education plays in making us a civilized democracy”¹.

What are some of the challenges faced by all of us in Public Education? One of the more obvious challenges for public educators in our Australian democratic society has been the need to increase what economists often glibly call “market share”. Of course, the issues at stake are more fundamental than any such instrumentalist economic rationalism: the strengthening and greater inclusiveness of public education is, as Ralston Saul so rightly asserts, at the very heart of enhancing and safeguarding our “civilised democracy”.

But before addressing that challenge, I believe we need to get a few basics right. There are cohorts of parents who will always send their children to non-government schools: based on religious grounds; perceived advantages of status; and/or on the invalid presumption that the quality of any service or product is always in direct proportion to the cost of its purchase. To expect that public education should be able to wrench away all those who are permanently rusted-on to non-government schooling for these kinds of reasons, is to be disappointed.

But that is not to say that we should not be striving to reverse those swings to private education which are, indeed, reversible.

Furthermore, there are a number of external forces which play a role in the framing of such challenges. Perhaps the issue of funding public education is the most obvious. But I won't go into detail about that today.

¹ Cited in *Charter for Public Education* published by The Charter for Public Education Network British Columbia, Canada, Vancouver, 2003: p. 1.

Except to say that while I do not oppose appropriate funding support for non-government schools, it does make me very angry to see the doling out of many millions of dollars annually to undeniably affluent private schools, while we in public education witness the ways in which so many of our schools have to scrimp and scrounge to provide our students and their teachers with facilities that cannot come within a bull's roar of what such wealthy private schools are able to offer their students and teachers: to say nothing of the salaries that many of them can offer their Principals.

But, acknowledging that there are some external forces over which we have limited control, what can we do as public educators within our own resources to meet the challenge of strengthening and expanding the outreach of public school education? I think that there are some simple, compelling ways that we in public education can effect a turnaround. Whereby parents and their children who have left us may return. So that those with the financial resources that enable them to go elsewhere may remain. And the 'brand loyalty' of those who continue to send their children to us will be rewarded.

When? When parents and students are or become assured of the quality of what we offer in public education.

When it can be confidently expected:

- That our schools and their teachers possess and practise the professional knowledge, understanding, skills and values that they preach: belonging, as we all do, to what the OECD has described as the "knowing and caring" profession.
- That our teachers like working with students, respect them as developing human beings, and have an appropriate sense of humour.
- That our teachers really 'know their stuff': having the appropriate intellectual command of the subject matter content that underpins the curriculum areas within which they teach.
- That the prescribed curriculum is taught in all its rigour and richness.
- That teachers always operate on the principle that learning is an active process; that students must be able to exercise their imagination, their creativity, their exploration; in a word they must be encouraged to 'do' and to generate, and not merely to soak up and to react.
- That students' learning is assessed fairly and accurately according to the Board of Studies regulations and those of the Department.
- That all of our teachers accept professional responsibility for the welcoming, induction, and ongoing mentoring of our beginning teachers into the profession.

- When it can be confidently expected that all of our schools are led by Principals and Deputy Principals:
 - who value the importance of developing excellent relationships between and among students and staff; maintaining relevance, and engendering resilience
 - who move beyond the constraints of the past in addressing the issues of today, while anticipating those of tomorrow
 - who, in their decision-making, are innovative and responsive, authoritative and accountable
 - who harness local decision making, while being highly connected to and supported by regional and central office personnel and structures.

- When it can be confidently expected that the quality and maintenance of our buildings and other *materiel*, the richness of our teaching resources, and the accessibility and interconnectedness of our ICT capacities, bridge the gaps between rhetoric and reality.

- When it can be confidently expected that parents:
 - are treated by Principals, Deputy Principals and teachers as partners
 - are sure that getting a splendid teacher for their son or daughter is not some mere lottery
 - are assured that their children are fully engaged by their teachers in the continuum of learning; safe; happy; challenged; fairly disciplined; properly cared for; not bored out of their brains; and thoroughly prepared for engaging in future education and/or training and employment.

- When Principals, Deputy Principals, other executive staff and classroom teachers are able to enjoy complete confidence that those with political and bureaucratic authority are driven by evidence-based research, scholarship and an authentic understanding of the real world of schools when exercising leadership, and providing support for schools – rather than being driven by the kinds of ignorance and prejudice sometimes emanating from some populist media commentators and some radio jocks keen to elicit knee-jerk reactions to public school bashing.

- When the ‘them and us’ crevasse between what teachers and Principals label as ‘The Department’ on the one hand and themselves on the other, is finally bridged with mutual recognition of professional expertise, accountability, and credibility.

This is hardly rocket science! And there is nothing particularly new about most of it. So much of this is already being both preached and practised within our schools, the Regional Offices, the Central Office of Schools, and our Office of the Director-General.

In late April this year there was a memorial service in the Great Hall in the University of Sydney in honour of Justice Kim Santow who was the Chancellor of the University of Sydney until last year. He died on April the 10th at the age of 67. In an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on the 28th of April (page 11) columnist Paul Sheehan – a source I rarely cite - paid tribute to Justice Santow. In it he quoted from one of the speeches of tribute, that given by one of Australia's intellectuals, Pierre Ryckmans.

Ryckmans said the following: “In Kim’s farewell address to the Supreme Court to sum up what he believed from a lifetime’s experience of the Law, Kim chose to quote from another judge: “‘a legal answer which offends common sense or basic fairness is usually wrong, however cleverly contrived’. I wish those words were carved in letters of gold in all the courtrooms of the land”.

I would like to propose that a variation on those words as follows – “A school policy or practice which offends common sense or basic fairness is usually wrong, however cleverly contrived” would warrant being carved in letters of gold and placed on the desks of all school Principals, Deputy Principals, members of the school executive, and classroom teachers – and, of course, on all the desks in Regional Offices and Head Office.

As public educators committed to helping our students now and for the future, we should cherish and conserve the best of our past, and junk or transform the rest as we engage with the present and prepare for the future! To accomplish this we are going to have to continue to ‘practise what we preach’ with even greater diligence within and across the kinds of knowledge, understanding, skills, talents, and values embodied in the aspirations that we publicly profess as public educators.

All Governments in Australia, Federal State and Territory, have signed up to a set of national goals for Australian schooling in the 21st century. The document is known as the Adelaide Declaration. The Commonwealth, State, and Territory Ministers of Education are currently waiting to be presented with a rewriting of the Adelaide Declaration to ensure that the National Goals remain relevant in 2008 and beyond. I would be surprised, however, if there are many significant changes to the three fundamental goals outlined in the Adelaide Declaration.

Its first goal is that “Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students.” Its second goal focuses on what we now refer to as the KLAs and such skills as those of literacy and numeracy. These two goals are widely acknowledged and regularly emphasised – especially literacy and numeracy.

As to the third goal, it might come as a surprise to some of our radio jocks and certain ranting newspaper columnists who sometime give the impression that schooling is merely about inculcating functional literacy and numeracy, that under the Adelaide Declaration's third goal, teachers are required to develop within their students "the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and to accept responsibility for their own actions" as well as to "be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life". It also focuses on the importance of National Reconciliation with our Indigenous population, as well as developing the knowledge, skills, and values demanded of and within a multi-cultural Australia.

Schooling should be socially just, so that:

- 3.1 students' outcomes from schooling are free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability; and of differences arising from students' socio-economic background or geographic location.
- 3.2 the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students improve and, over time, match those of other students.
- 3.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students.
- 3.4 all students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
- 3.5 all students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally.
- 3.6 all students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training.

There is, in my opinion, far too little recognition in Australia of the third national goal. Particularly of the tremendous contribution that public education makes to this goal. And, without being complacent, I believe that no other school sector comes near to matching that of public school education in achieving this third national goal. Compared with the first two goals, the scope of research, amount of resources, and degree of media attention is minimal.

Educational leaders have as much responsibility for implementing in their schools this third goal as they have for the far more highlighted first two goals.

Therefore, school Principals, Deputy Principals, members of the school executive – and all aspiring to each and every one of these positions – as well as classroom teachers have a responsibility not only to support the intellectual and personal growth of their students, but to help them develop as ethically and morally responsible citizens aware of injustice, misery and, indeed, of evil. And of justice, happiness and, indeed, of goodness.

In a very formal way our responsibilities of leadership in NSW must also implement the Department's *Corporate Plan 2008-2010* which reflects the priorities of the *NSW State Plan*.

Our Department is the lead agency responsible for the following State Plan priorities:

- *S4 Increasing levels of attainment for all students*
- *S5 More students complete Year 12 or recognised vocational training*
- *P4 More people participating in education and training throughout their lives*
- *P7 Better access to training in rural and regional NSW to support local economies*

Within those State Plan priorities, the key areas which Trevor Fletcher, our Deputy Director-General Schools, has identified for particular attention in 2008 are: numeracy; Aboriginal education; school retention; and learning communities.

One of the finest scholars in my field of English Literature and Language was Barbara Hardy. In her seminal work *Towards a Poetics Fiction* she described story telling (in her words, “narrative”, as “a primary act of mind”. So, rather than give you a scholarly treatise on the qualities of leadership within a school, I would like to tell you some stories about a few outstanding school leaders I have either served under or known.

My very first boss made a huge impression on me. One of his most striking qualities was that he disciplined himself, through sheer hard work, to know the Christian and surname of every one of the 800 students in the school. Thus, he could walk up to any kid in the playground and say “how are you going Johnny?” Even more remarkably, he learned the first name of every parent of every student in the school. The subsequent impact upon students and parents, as he effortlessly greeted each by name, was immensely powerful: every individual felt that the Principal knew them personally. He illustrated that saying in the Old Testament somewhere, ‘Yahweh knows me because He knows my name’.

The second striking quality was his commitment to teaching some classes while being a Principal. It was obvious to me that by doing so he was much better informed as to what was going on in the student body; and also retained credibility with the teachers on his staff by continuing to teach.

I learnt, or had confirmed, two powerful lessons in my further development as an educational leader during my three years as Deputy Principal at Marist Brothers High School, Lismore, 1972-74. As some of you may know, I was a member of the Marist Brothers Religious Teaching Order in the Catholic Church from 1960-1975. The Years 11 and 12 students from the Brothers school there mixed with the Years 11 and 12 girls students from St Mary's High School within what was, I believe, Australia's first Catholic co-educational senior high school campus.

The first lesson came in the form of a person. The lesson was that great educational leaders are those who, while conserving the best of the past, enhance and even transform themselves through creatively responding to change experienced in the present. My boss, Brother Kenneth Moreland, had taught me in 1955 and had made a substantial contribution to the 155 cuts of the cane that I had received during First Year (the winner in our class 1A scored over 300 hits). But he also had those qualities of empathy and engagement which captivated us as young students.

Nearly 20 years later the man under whom I served as Deputy Principal from 1972-74, while retaining all his admirable qualities, had grown profoundly as an educator. The cane was never seen. He now adopted and implemented educational ideas that were at the very cutting edge of progressive educational thought.

Like my first boss, he too knew the name of every boy and girl from Year 7 to Year 12. He also taught: in his case Years 11 and 12 Mathematics. His transformation from the cane wielding young teacher of 1955 to the dynamic, wise, empathetic and brilliant school Principal nearly 30 years later constituted for me a most powerfully, lived-out embodiment of the value of life-long learning for teachers. And that leadership can grow and flourish from the humblest of beginnings. His staff and students held him in the highest regard and affection.

The second educational truth that I had confirmed in Lismore was my profound belief in the crucial educational importance of music, art, creativity and imagination - and how powerful these could be in developing students' sense of achievement. Against considerable scepticism at best and opposition at worst, Brother Kenneth convinced the Brothers, nuns, and lay staff to set aside every Wednesday afternoon in Term 2 of the 'old' three term year for all students in Year 11 and Year 12 in order to produce musical dramas. Thus each student was an actor, or a singer, or a writer, or a lighting technician, or a costume designer or a carpenter, or a musician etc. The productions were quite spectacular and became an annual feature of Lismore community life. Indeed I look back upon my own production of *Godspell* as one of the most thrilling experiences of my whole career.

The impact that this shared sense of wonderful musical drama achievement had upon the subsequent academic achievement of the students was fantastic. This was particularly true of those students who, up until Term 2, had been dragging their heels academically.

But now imbued with a tremendous sense of satisfaction and confidence in their ability to produce what they had previously thought was impossible, they approached their academic studies with renewed zest and sense of purpose.

During my eleven years on the staff at the University of New England where I was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, I also worked within the Faculty of Education. There I came under the influence of a remarkable educational leader, Professor Jack Walton. Eccentric? Yes. Scholar? Absolutely - in the field of History. Pinpricker of humbug and master of the effective, albeit humorously delivered put-down, when necessary. Jack had been a Government school Principal in England prior to his coming to Australia.

As mere lad at the outbreak of World War II, Jack had lied about his age to enable him to qualify as a Spitfire pilot in the RAF. On only one occasion - after I had plied him with more than his usual healthy ration of grog at a dinner party at my home - did I ever succeed in getting him to talk about his war experiences. But he would tell me only two stories. They are both worth retelling.

One day when he was flying in heavy cloud over the English coast he was fiddling on his radio and heard a German voice in his earphones. "Where the bloody hell are you Fritz?", roared Jack into his mike, not expecting a reply, of course. To Jack's amazement the unseen German pilot replied to him most civilly in flawless English. Being the gregarious character that he is, Jack started up a conversation during which the German told him he had been brought up in England. They then discovered to their utter astonishment that they had both gone to the same primary school in Lancashire.

"Bugger this" said Jack to his school alumnus. "I can't see much point in trying to find your plane and then kill you". "Couldn't agree more", replied his German nominal adversary. So they decided to head back to their respective countries without entering this extraordinary encounter in their log books.

On the morning after the famous 1000 bomber raid on Cologne Jack was helping to escort damaged Allied bombers back to their bases. Now there was one immutable law on Jack's aerodrome which was located near the English coast. That was that breakfast of bacon and eggs was always served on the dot of 7.30. And if you were late, too bad.

For obvious reasons the bomber bases were located further inland. Because many of the returning bombers had been badly shot up, a number of them requested special permission to land on Jack's aerodrome close to the coast. So Jack was ordered by the RAF air traffic controller to go into a holding pattern high above the aerodrome. It was now 7.30. Jack then heard over the intercom a Lancaster bomber pilot cry out something like "ABC 123 to control, one engine on fire, request permission to land on your airfield". "Permission granted", was the natural reply. By the time that British bomber had landed it was nearly 7.45. Then to his dismay Jack heard something like the following "DEF 456 to control great emergency two engines on fire request permission to land". Which, of course, the bomber pilot received.

It was now nearly 8.0'clock. Jack was not impressed. So our valiant Spitfire pilot now called out in desperation "GHI 678 to control, have got only one engine left, request permission to land immediately".

Thinking it was a Lancaster bomber pilot in the most dire distress of having lost three of his aircraft's four engines, and not the pilot of the single-engined Spitfire, air traffic control ordered Jack to land immediately. Ten minutes later Jack was just settling in to soggy but not completely stone-cold bacon and eggs when he experienced a tap on his shoulder from his commanding officer who barked out at him "Walton you are on lavatory duty for the next month".

But there is one particular story about Jack that illustrates what a wonderful scholar-teacher-educational leader he was. Like a few of us UNE academics, he was passionate about staying in touch with real teachers, with real students and real schools. So he asked the NSW Department of Education district officers if they could arrange for him to teach a regular Modern History class somewhere in the region. So they assigned Jack to Peel High School down in Tamworth. No doubt with a twinkle in his eye, the head of the English-History faculty assigned Jack to History Year 11 class consisting of 5 what used to be called 'difficult' kids - who disliked school and hated History even more. "Let's see you try and tame this lot" might have crossed the mind of the teachers of that school. Jack's initial reaction might have been like that of this parachutist.

But Jack was too smart for all of them. He decided to try to engage their interest in History by exploring their own family histories. One of the kid's grandparents had owned a well known pub just out of Tamworth. So the five of them plus Jack went out there, interviewed the grandparent, looked at all the old photographs and memorabilia in the pub. Kids started experiencing that History might not be so boring and pointless after all.

Then as the students developed their family trees, it turned out that each of the five had at least one ancestor born in England. Jack then contacted the local record offices in each of the English cities nearest to the birthplaces of these respective ancestors. "Wouldn't it be great", said Jack, "if we could all fly to England and look up these records and visit the places where your ancestors lived".

By now the kids were really turned on. So Jack wrote to Qantas to see what chance there was, other than Buckley's, for Qantas to sponsor such a trip. Discovering that Jack was an historian, Qantas said that if Jack could write a short yet comprehensive history of Qantas that could be printed on a plastic A4 card and placed in the little compartment on the back of every seat in every Qantas aircraft, Qantas would fly all of them to and from England for nothing. Which they did. All of them. The trip was a spectacular historical success. And all of these students went on successfully to complete their Higher School Certificate and continued on to further education and training at a university or a TAFE college. What a teacher!

Now, almost certainly, none of us could replicate what Jack did. But the real point of the story is that he used his particular knowledge and skills in addressing a challenging teaching situation in an imaginative, innovative, and daring way. Faced with a familiar issue – the apparent disengagement of teenagers with school, teaching and learning – he drew upon all of his resources to get those kids engaged in learning. He was a real educational leader – well over and above his title of Professor of Education.

By definition we educators must be leaders. The word education comes from two Latin words ‘e’ and ‘ducare’ – which literally means to lead out from. Par excellence, people like yourselves in positions of educational leadership lead their teachers forward; nurturing possibilities into achievements; inspiring their teachers to lead their students on from where they find them towards where their capacities make it possible for them to go.

There is one particular hobby horse of mine that I would like to ride today. It’s the central importance of going beyond what is necessary; of rising way above what are the lowest common denominator features of education towards the horizons of the highest aspirations.

Let me give you a few examples. I oppose the use of the expression, “teachers need to address the needs of students”. Not because this is not true: but (to defer to Aristotle) ‘it is necessary but not sufficient’. We need to address the needs, interests, capacities, talents, and values of our students.

Similarly, in draft documents that come across my desk I re-write expressions like “teachers need pedagogical skills to be effective teachers”. Actually, they need a lot more. They need deep knowledge and understanding of the intellectual substance of what they are teaching. They need to be imaginative and creative in helping their students engage with learning. They need to enjoy working with young people and to be able to empathise with them. They need to embody the very values that we as public educators profess, and other qualities as well. And, of course, they need high quality pedagogical skills.

I have always tried to take a balanced view on educational matters. It is so easy for people to be seduced by the black or white extremism resulting from what the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called “the either/or fallacy” (in his *Either / Or*, published in 1843). Indeed, this fallacy sits alongside those other fallacies that keep recurring in our profession: such as relying upon opinion and prejudice rather than both qualitative and quantitative evidence-based research and scholarship; wheel reinvention and the re-badging of old wisdoms in new glossy glitzy packages masquerading as some form of ‘ground breaking’, ‘international best practice’ ‘paradigm shifting’ innovation; and the fawning adoration of gurus by their uncritical acolytes.

Because of my commitment to a balanced view about things educational, I fear that sometimes the pendulum hanging between those two interdependent and necessary factors of teaching and learning - and its assessment and testing - might swing too much away from teaching and learning. What is necessary, is not always sufficient!

Over 20 years ago, one of my closest friends the late Mike Hayhoe, a colleague of mine when I was the Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Education at the University of East Anglia in the UK, handed me a poem given to him by an elderly teacher in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It is called "The Lesson", based on the famous "Beatitudes" speech in the Gospels.

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him he taught them saying

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are the meek
Blessed are they that mourn
Blessed are the merciful
Blessed are they who thirst for justice
Blessed are all the concerned
Blessed are you when persecuted
Blessed are you when you suffer
Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven
Try to remember what I'm telling you

Then Simon Peter said - Will this count?
And Andrew said - Will we have a test on it?
And James said - When do we have to know it for?
And Phillip said - How many words?
And Bartholemew said - Will I have to stand up in front of the others?
And John said - The other disciples didn't have to learn this
And Matthew said - How many marks do we get for it?
And Judas said - What is it worth?
And the other disciples likewise.

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' lesson plan and inquired of Jesus his terminal objectives in the cognitive domain

And Jesus wept.

To repeat what I said earlier, we must not limit ourselves to what is necessary. Shakespeare captures this essential truth superbly in the great speech in *King Lear*, Act II Scene IV, where Lear haggles with his two wicked daughters, Goneril and Regan. Now homeless, throneless, and desperate, Lear begs that one of them might allow him to live in either of their castles with his full retinue of servants. Then a Dutch auction proceeds with each of the sisters forcing Lear to lower his expectations of the number of servants he would be allowed to bring. Eventually, Goneril asks Lear why would he now need 25 servants. Or even 15 servants. In a magnificent speech commencing with “O reason not the need” Lear rails against the enforced lowering of human aspiration to mere necessity. He opens up with the following lines.

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is as cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady:
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.....
(*King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 4, lines 263-269)

If we wear clothes only to keep warm, then hessian would do. If we ate merely to stay alive, then bread water and a few vegies is all that would be needed. If we need housing just to shelter us from the wind and the rain, then the most simple hovel with a roof over it is all that we would need.

Our human aspirations - with all their material, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, physical and emotional domains – cannot be constrained or constricted or, to quote from another great Shakespearian tragedy *Macbeth* should not be “cabin’d, cribb’d and confined” to and by merely the subsistent necessities of basic survival.

The trouble with being satisfied with students’ “needs” is that this can quickly become being satisfied with merely lowest common denominator expectations. Becoming satisfied with, and becoming accountable for, only basic skills. Nothing more.

Let me give you a recent example of where a focus on a basic necessity has led to an insufficient focus on higher order things. The 2006 PISA results revealed that, by and large, the 'basic' literacy skills of our 15 year old Australian students remain excellent. As indicated recently by Dr Geoff Masters, Director of ACER which oversees PISA in Australia on behalf of the OECD, where Australia has slipped backwards is in the higher order reading skills.

My strong belief is that this is a consequence of the massive emphasis on basic skills and their testing in all Australian States and Territories. Over and over again we highlight value-addedness in the testing of "basic skills". Nothing wrong with testing basic skills. We have to teach and test basic skills - after all we have the "Basic Skills Tests", and ELLA. Basic skills are necessary – but not sufficient.

As one of my great mentors the late Garth Boomer used to cry out “let’s go beyond back to basics and forward to fundamentals”. On an ABC AM program on the 5th of December last year, Dr Geoff Masters articulated the kinds of higher-order skills in which Australia slipped a little backwards this time. If I could expand upon Geoff’s list, these higher-order reading skills include the capacity to identify and distinguish between sophisticated nuances of meaning; wrestling with complex texts; understanding the subtleties of irony, sarcasm, wit, paradox; the ability to situate later 'meanings' within the contexts of earlier 'meanings'; the sophisticated and sometimes deliberately ambiguous, even ambivalent, language deployed in more challenging poetry; distinguishing 'points of view' operating within texts; noting and reflecting on differing, sometimes even competing, 'voices' etc.

Now it is absolutely essential that we maintain our high emphasis on the acquisition and enhancement of the basic literacy skills of our students. We have to teach and test basic skills - after all we have the "Basic Skills Tests", and ELLA – and now the National tests at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. And it is extremely important that these basic skills are assessed accurately. On this matter I want to emphasise that the longitudinal data on basic literacy skills and the interpretation of that data carried out by Dave Wasson and his highly talented EMSAD team is far more convincing and reliable than the recent “we’ll all be roon’d” media splash orchestrated by Dr Andrew Leigh an Economist at the ANU.

Some of you may have seen the article I had published in the Education section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* back in March and the subsequent piece I wrote for the May edition of *Side by Side*, in which I refuted Dr Leigh’s claims; and pointed to the significant improvement in our NSW BST Literacy results over the past decade.

I have been sticking my neck out like this on the battlefields of the so called Literacy Wars for four decades. And it has not always been easy. At times I, as most of us do, have just had to rely on rat cunning – or should I say fox cunning – to get through the latest skirmish.

The individual teacher has always been the single most important single factor in the quality/equity/change story. In my view, the Principal is the next most important individual player. Teachers, members of the school executive, Deputy Principals and Principals with the highest expectations of their students, who empathise with their hopes and fears, who can distinguish between the ephemeral and the lasting, as well as between the achievable and the impossible, can and do make a difference. But those who don’t – they also make a difference!

So, I would like to conclude by focusing upon the idealism, skills and commitment of the best of our public school teaching profession by recounting the story of a remarkable young female teaching Principal in this South West Sydney region.

In December 1889 Rachel Cotton, a 28 year old widow, began her teaching career with the Department with an appointment to Mulgoa Forest Mountain (now Silverdale) near Camden. The school opened in 1872 and closed in 1968*. In April 1893 she applied for her IIC teacher classification - and failed. Understandably very disappointed, in July of that year she wrote to the Chief Inspector asking in what subjects she failed and going on to say:

I thought (from the energy with which I had worked as a Teacher, and from the good results attending that work, as proved by my school being raised from a II provisional to a public, and that without the least increase in the population, also the Inspector's report being better than that gained under any Teacher in this School previous to my appointment, being one of the best gained by any Teacher in the country District of W.H.Johnson Esq, District Inspector) I should have gained a IIC certificate, notwithstanding the fact of my papers not being so good as they might have been, had I devoted more time to my own study, and less to my pupils.

Trusting you will be so very kind as to see to this (to me) important matter, and thanking you for your past kindness in remembering me when this vacancy occurred, and thus giving me an early appointment, which (being a widow) was to me a great blessing.
(Rachel Abigail Cotten, April 1893)

On May 6 1893 she married Arthur Doust, proprietor of the Camden Times.

Towards the end of the year, as she was now not formally qualified to teach in her current school (the 4 years 'apprenticeship' which she had 'failed' now being up), the Department tried to move her. She successfully mounted a protest. In her letter of 24 November 1893 she wrote of the consequences for her pupils if she were not being allowed to continue teaching at the school:

As the class of the school has been raised through me keeping State Children & others in order to keep up the attendance & not being aware of the result [sic] I do hope this fact will be taken into consideration. As from my place there are eight children in attendance, & should I be removed there will only remain upon Roll 19 children which in this scattered locality (Seven out the 19 children walking nearly four miles) the average cannot be more than 16 & perhaps not more than 15 pupils; hence it is simply the regular attendance of my own household that has kept up the school.

* I am indebted to the splendid historical research skills and the corporate memory of the Departmental Librarian, Margaret Swinbourne, who first alerted me to the experiences of Sarah Doust when I was preparing a speech on the history of education in the Camden-Narellan region of south-western Sydney 10 years ago: Margaret also provided me with copies of the Sarah Doust correspondence in the Departmental archives.

Should my removal be inevitable I trust I shall be appointed nearer Camden, as my husband's business is there. Through General depression his business is very dull, hence I am very anxious to keep on my school in order to assist him.

(Rachel Abigail Cotten Doust, 6 24 November, 1893)

In December, 1893, she successfully applied to be re-examined.

Inspector Charles Pitt was in no doubt that this determined young woman deserved to be re-examined.

Mrs Doust is a hardworking, deserving teacher, and worthy of encouragement, she is in charge of a 9th class school, and is unclassified, but wishes to present herself for examination with a view to qualify herself for her present position. I recommend her application be complied with. I may add further for your information, that the Teacher has no less than 9 pupils attending from her own home, so that, were she to be removed, the school would fall to the rank of a II Class Provisional. She is popular, and does her work efficiently and well.

(Inspector Charles Pitt, December 1893)

She was successful.

With a baby due in early 1895, Rachel Doust wrote to the Department as follows:

I have the honour to request you to be so kind as to grant me a month leave of absence, from the school, from above date, on account of illness by way of confinement. Will you kindly excuse me not writing at an earlier date for leave, as I did not expect my illness for another month, but today found it quite impossible to leave my bed.

As I have been teaching here for 5 yrs, & have always given satisfaction to yourself & the parents of my pupils & intend to do so again, as soon as my health will permit it, I do trust the required leave will be granted. Should you see fit to send a teacher in my place for a month or six weeks. I shall be able to tell same where comfortable board & lodging may be obtained.

(Rachel Abigail Cotten Doust, 16 January 1895)

Leave for accouchement was granted for the period 16 January - 15 February 1895, but on 12 February Doust wrote again to Johnson:

In consequence of the breaking of a blood-vessel, I beg to ask that one more month be added to my previous term of absence, the additional leave to terminate on the 11th March, 1895. A doctor's certificate will be forwarded as soon as I am able to procure one.

(Rachel Abigail Cotten Doust, 12 February 1895)

She later applied to resume duty from 1 April, writing to Johnson:

Trusting you will grant my request, when I shall be glad and able to resume my duties as faithfully and assiduously as during my previous five years of service in this school.

However, she did not resume duty as she died of cardiac failure at the age of 34 on 23 March 1895 at Mulgoa Forest, Camden. Arthur Doust reported the death to the Department two days later, writing that:

My poor wife, Mrs R. A. Doust, lately in your employ Public School, Silverdale, expired suddenly last Saturday evening. She would like Mr. [James] Deasey, now in charge, to succeed her.

Just before her death, she mentioned about fees due to her. She was paid to December. Will you kindly forward to me amount due to her.

I must thank your Department for the kind manner in which it always dealt with my dear wife. I am sure you will agree that she always faithfully performed her duties in the school of which she had charge.

I lose one of the noblest women that ever drew breath, and nothing in the world will ever compensate me for my loss
(Arthur Doust, 25 March 1895)

That deeply moving, beautifully written, final sentence of Arthur Doust's letter could have come straight out of a Thomas Hardy novel.

Rachel Doust was a remarkable public school Principal. Years ago I tried, and failed, to get a Departmental teaching or leadership award named in honour of Rachel Doust. I think it might be time for me to have another go. Now of course, the demands on being a Principal or a Deputy Principal, or a member of the school executive, or a classroom teacher – and Rachel Doust was all of these in one - are far more sophisticated, diverse, and comprehensive in scope in NSW public schools in 2008 than what they were in 1889. But some things do not change.

Indeed Rachel Doust embodied so many of the qualities we continue to admire today in our school educational leaders: her talent; her commitment to her students and the local community over and above the call of duty; her courage; her loyalty to and support of colleagues; and her dogged refusal to accept the negative judgment of others. She knew her rights in fighting for a quality education for all her students. She kept on bouncing back – right up until her death.

Let me finish, therefore, by proposing that our 19th Century public school educator, Rachel Doust, shines as a wonderful role model for you 21st Century Deputy Principals in NSW public schools.