



Education revolution?

Annie Facchinetti looks at the education reforms and assigns an above average score

"Revolution!" – the federal government's catch-cry in education through 2009. As the year progressed we encountered the Digital Education Revolution (DER), and the Building the Education Revolution (BER) incorporating the National School Pride Program (NSP) and Primary Schools for the 21st Century (P21), all under the umbrella of the government's broader Education Revolution. Then there were Becoming Asia Literate grants, National Smarter Schools Partnerships including the Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership (TQNP) and of course, the formation of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to oversee our new national curriculum.

It makes you wonder if the government is using all these acronyms to divert us from starting a revolution of our own.

There has certainly been unprecedented investment in the education sector over the last 12 months, something that many believe is long overdue. The changes have not, however, come without criticism. Have schools really been the big winners or is it just one long publicity stunt from a new government eager to differentiate itself from its predecessors?

A good vehicle through which to examine this question is the Building the Education Revolution program. The BER was introduced as part of the government's National Building – Economic Stimulus Plan. As the global financial crisis pushed us towards recession, the idea was that by funding schools to upgrade their facilities, we would be improving education while creating much-needed jobs in the construction and maintenance industries. On paper, it looked like a simple yet brilliant initiative.

And for many schools it has proved to be just that. A survey by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) found 85% of the 305 respondents strongly supported the BER. Comments registered on the survey were similarly positive, indicating that the grants were enabling schools to complete projects that might otherwise take 10 or even 20 years relying on current levels of funding or fund-raising. The speed with which the grants have been allocated has meant that building started quickly in many schools, spreading a sense of excitement through the whole community.

The speed has, however, also been a major cause of difficulty. Recipients of the first round of grants were required to have building completed by 20th December 2009, while Round 2 projects were to be finished by 1st February 2010. This left little time for consultation with stakeholders, and tight timelines to find appropriate tradespeople and finalise plans. Among those who were dissatisfied with the BER in the APPA's survey, most cited issues associated with the deadlines as the cause. But many respondents who were

satisfied with the program also lamented the speed with which they were required to organise a response.

There was also some dissension over the narrow scope of the BER funding. This was particularly evident with the Primary Schools for the 21st Century (P21) scheme. P21 prioritises the facilities that schools should have, ranking libraries as the most important, followed by multi-purpose halls, or for smaller schools, covered outdoor areas. There could be some truth in Shadow Education Minister Chris Pyne's comment that the BER should be renamed 'the Julia Gillard Memorial School Halls Program'.

While many schools welcomed the extra investment in infrastructure, the prescriptive approach of P21 means some schools are now building facilities that they don't want or need. A report about the Yulga Jinna Remote Community School, for example, shows that they have received \$250,000 to build a hall, while their teachers are living in sub-standard accommodation. The school would have

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preferred to put these funds into building teacher housing to attract and retain quality teachers, but P21 does not allow principals to identify their own priorities. Other schools have had similar experiences, and in response, Education Minister Julia Gillard announced some concessions in the form of re-phasing funding from 2010–11 to 2011–12 to "ensure continued value for money and allow flexibility in the delivery of individual P21 projects".

The fact remains, however, that we have not seen such a massive investment in schools for decades. The BER might not have been the publicity winner that the government hoped for, but there are certainly a lot of happy principals, teachers and most important of all, students as a result.

The Digital Education Revolution (DER) received similarly mixed reviews. In principle, the program has a noble aim – to prepare children for life in a digital world by providing technology-rich learning environments. In practice, politicians, media, educators and parents all seemed to have different expectations of what this means. Under the National Secondary School Computer Fund (no acronym, but just known as the Fund), many expected every student from years 9 to 12 to be provided with his or her own computer not only for use at school, but to be available to take home to help with homework.

While Julia Gillard suggested it was up to individual schools to decide the exact nature of the technology being purchased, international education consultant Bruce Dixon indicated that unless students were able to take laptops home with them, the DER would have little impact on students' technology skills, since access time at school was usually more limited than at home.

A key criticism made by the media was that while the Fund provided money to buy computers, little thought had been put into the costs involved to install and connect them. As a result, there were reports that computers were sitting in boxes in school corridors for weeks on end. Provision for infrastructure to support additional computers was eventually made, but only in time for the second round of funding. Schools that received money from the Fund in the first round of the programme – those most in need of computers to bring them up to at least a one to two student/computer ratio – weren't initially provided with infrastructure costs.

Yet despite these reservations, nearly 2,700 secondary schools have been allocated funds to buy almost 290,000 new computers. This has had a flow-on effect to the economy – in Victoria, for example, the state government hired 200 specialist computer technicians to support the new technology. As with the BER, the DER has given schools resources that they may not have been able to afford for many years.

The other main component of the DER, the Fibre Connections to Schools initiative, also came under fire from many quarters. Allegations that it may take up to eight years to connect all schools to the National Broadband Network (NBN) left many disgruntled that they would have computers, but be unable to use them effectively. Others expressed concern that by the time connections were available, the computers received from the Fund would need replacing.

In recognition of the problems, the government delayed further roll-out of high speed broadband to schools while it conducted a review of regulatory arrangements, and sought to establish a new company to build and operate the NBN. It is not expected that the Fibre Connections to Schools initiative will resume until after February 2010, when an NBN implementation study is due for release – which has left many unhappy at the slow speed of the high speed broadband programme.

While the Education Revolution attracted most of the attention, work quietly continued on developing a national curriculum. In many ways it's astounding that for the hundred plus years since Federation, the states and territories have been working independently to develop and administer their own curricula and learning standards. An attempt to institute a national curriculum several years ago never got off the ground, but this time around things are getting serious.

One of the major differences compared



with the previous attempt has been the level of consultation. Rather than trying to amalgamate the best of existing approaches, the National Curriculum Board took on the mammoth task of starting from scratch. This did not mean, however, that they ignored the experience and wisdom available to them. Schools, parents and other key stakeholders had the opportunity to provide feedback at various stages throughout the process. After the draft documents were sent out for consideration, for example, the APPA wrote a lengthy response expressing concern that the proposed curriculum showed a lack of understanding of the nature of teaching in primary schools. The Curriculum Design Paper was revised in November 2009 and

acknowledges much more accurately the way subjects like science and history are taught at primary level.

Care has also been taken to ensure that the notional times allocated to each subject per week are treated as just that – guidelines that allow for flexibility in delivery. In fact the revised Curriculum Design Paper explicitly states, “The advice has no purpose other than to act as a criterion for the development of national curriculum documents. Schools and school authorities will be able to take more or less time than the design time considered below when implementing the curriculum.” This will come as a relief to those in the primary sector, for whom a prescribed target of half an hour a week of

history and an hour for science is diametrically opposed to inquiry learning pedagogy.

There are still many challenges ahead for the national curriculum. Not least of these is the lack of qualified teachers in areas such as maths, science and history. At present, it is common for secondary teachers to be asked to teach a subject for which they are not qualified. To successfully implement the national curriculum, the government will need to find ways to make teaching attractive to graduates in disciplines such as science, maths and history, and ensure that there is an adequate supply of quality teachers across the board.

One avenue it hopes to use to achieve this is introducing merit-based pay for teachers. It’s no secret that educators believe that, given the responsibility they have for shaping our children’s future, they should be paid at a higher rate. But with over 400,000 full- and part-time teachers nationwide, raising pay levels for everyone equates to a major burden on taxpayers and the independent school system. Paying for performance offers a way out of this problem which ostensibly keeps everyone happy – teachers are eligible for higher wages, schools can retain the best teachers without too much of a budget increase and the government attracts kudos for solving the problem.

But choosing the best teachers is a bit like choosing which of your children you love the most. So much of what teachers do is immeasurable in any tangible way. What can be measured doesn’t necessarily reflect sound teaching practice.

A trial to be conducted in 25 Victorian public schools during 2010 will use a range of measures, including test results, to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Up to \$7,000 in bonus payments will be paid to teachers who achieve good results on their “scorecard”. Opponents of merit-based pay are quick to point out the likely pitfalls of such a scheme. They claim that linking pay to test results will encourage teachers to “teach to the test” rather than to focus on individual learning needs and on providing a broad and balanced curriculum. Anecdotal evidence suggests that teaching to the test is a common practice in the US in states where rewards are linked to test scores.

Another fear associated with performance pay is that it will destroy collegial practices. Competition for a limited bonus pool may make teachers less inclined to share ideas and resources. It may also make competent teachers unwilling to take on less capable students if they are to be judged on results rather than improvement. For a child who struggles, a small step forward might be the product of a great deal of planning, persistence and patience from a teacher. That same small step may not even register on a standard test, yet in many ways it’s more momentous than an easier gain for a bright child. It would be a shame to head down a path where we don’t value achievement in all its forms.

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Many of the same arguments can be applied to the contentious *My School* website. The website includes student attendance levels, an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage and guidelines to help interpret the information. But there is a heavy emphasis on comparative data.

The federal government maintains it is committed to transparency in education, to “allow users to compare one school’s results with schools around the nation that serve similar student populations.”

“In order to continuously improve our school system, we need to use information about student progress and results to help us assess the effectiveness of different teaching practices and educational strategies,” according to Ms Gillard.

Few would disagree with this view. The controversy lies in how this transparency will be achieved and maintained over time. For now, parents and the media seem to like what they have seen of *My School*, but the AEU is not impressed.

At the 2010 AEU Annual Federal Conference in January, delegates voted unanimously to direct members not to open boxes containing NAPLAN test kits when they arrive in May. The action is designed to force the government into negotiations that aim to put safeguards in place to prevent published data from being turned into league tables, which, “damage the provision of education by narrowing the curriculum and deepening inequality in schooling.”

The Education Minister quickly launched a counter attack, insisting that threats will not deter her from her mission of transparency for education.

Ms Gillard would not rule out the possibility of sanctions and penalties such as docked pay being imposed upon teachers who refuse to administer NAPLAN tests, and it seems she has the law on her side. Under the Federal Government’s Fair Work Australia policy, industrial action can only be taken within the context of a bargaining period. That means that teachers in Victoria, the ACT and the Northern Territory, who are covered by federal law, may be subject to the sanctions, while unions in other states could also be penalised.

The AEU plans to reconvene in April to review the government’s response to its concerns and make a final decision on the NAPLAN boycott.

It was certainly a busy year for education in 2009, but has it been the start of a revolution we had to have, or has it all been a clever way to distract us from what is truly important? On the one hand, it would be unwise to look a gift horse in the mouth while schools are receiving more generous funding than they’ve seen for many years. On the other hand, the pushing through of programmes and policies that undermine and possibly undervalue our profession may fuel a growing rebellion.

With the trialling of the national curriculum, performance pay, and *My School* now online, 2010 is shaping up to be a pivotal year in determining the direction of education in Australia.

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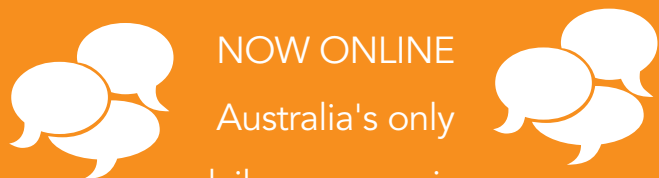
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