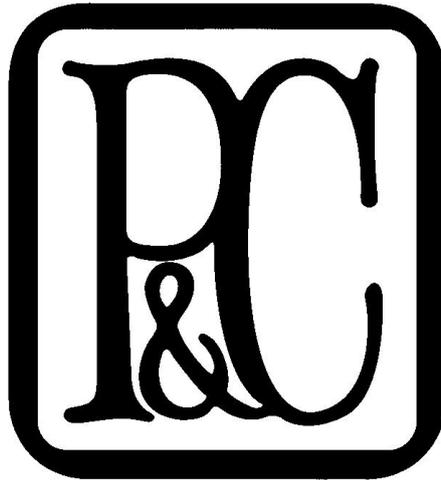


Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales

Locked Bag 40, GRANVILLE NSW 2142

Telephone: 1300 885 982. Fax: 1800 655 866

Website: www.pandc.org.au



Submission to the Inquiry into teaching and learning – maximising Australia's investments in schools

OCTOBER 2012

Approved by: Lyall Wilkinson

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- all students have the capacity to learn
- the Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular
- schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students in Public Education.

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is pleased for this opportunity to submit our comments to the Inquiry into teaching and learning – maximising Australia's investment in schools. It is noted that discussions regarding teaching standards, teaching qualifications and education as experienced by the student are being hosted not just federally but also with great rigour in New South Wales by the sitting Government's Great Teaching Inspired Learning discussion paper. As well, education is being touted as the means to keep Australia globally competitive, as witnessed in the Asian Century white paper released by the Federal Government.

The esteem placed on teaching as a profession is welcomed however, the ability for education as currently delivered in Australia to realise the lofty ambitions of society, agencies and the government may be unlikely.

As the largest peak parent Organisation in Australia with 2000 affiliated school communities representing 760,000 enrolled students P&C Federation is often discussing the practice of teaching and learning in New South Wales. With the ALP Government continuously persuading education through national curriculum development and teaching universal teaching standards it is a changing world in educational communities. From the perspective of our Organisation politics has been a priority more times than not over the needs of the child, the learner. The continual federal and state government reforms are not always consistent, complimentary or even at times welcome to the school, particularly the classroom to which our children attend. It is no understatement that each and every week brings another policy decision, another reform and another compromise when talking specifically about education. To demonstrate this point, P&C Federation sites the inequitable

funding loss public education has experienced at the decision of the O'Farrell Government's cabinet, couple this with the silence from the Federal Government in relation to the Gonski Report and one wonders where the priority of policy makers lie? As an Organisation it is becoming more difficult to remain optimistic that Australia's public education system as the largest provider of teaching and learning in the country as well as in NSW can continue to foster the needs of the student against political interference. Therefore the response to the Inquiry addresses the terms with the current political and funding situation in mind.

The effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools;

As parents and first educators to our children there is no challenge to the notion that every child has individual and unique learning needs. Whilst it is important to maintain standards of success for the classroom as a whole it is also considered important to realise the ability of the individual. The classroom practice is required to speak to the learner, without the correct medium, there cannot possibly be a message conveyed. P&C Federation strongly advocates for the need for teachers to be articulate and able to be audibly comprehended, often the parent experiences comments from the child regarding an inability to "understand" what the teacher is saying. This can be due in the obvious instance to expression however, it also should be expanded to the greater issue of engagement. As parents we know that where a child is not engaged in the learning than the comprehension becomes less likely. Children must have every opportunity to be stimulated to the study matter and this must be delivered in a diversity of ways to allow for a more enriched learning experience. Children as modern digital citizens can no longer be expected to be satisfied with the "chalk and talk" practices of old. Classrooms are now expected to be broad in terms of learning with few taboos, if any to be noted when critically analysing study content. As parents we feel that students need a balanced approach to their study, a mix of technology and teaching styles will only inspire the student to familiarise themselves with their preferred way of learning and it will also better enable the engagement that is critical to the success of the learner. P&C Federation cite the federally funded Digital Education Revolution (DER) program as a policy that sought, and indeed accomplished greater diversity of classroom practices for the child. The DER did however highlight the absence for teachers to be flexible in their delivery without a dedicated amount of training and development as well as access to support for technology. The aging teaching population may be well able to learn a new way of teaching but the more important question is are they willing?

Our Organisation cites the need for the child's own experiences to be introduced to the classroom teaching practices. It is our advocacy that the child brings a large range of skills and attributes to their learning and that recognising, sharing and allowing the child to relate their learning to their home, their family and hence their identity will see the child flourish. Often a child is expected to conform to the expectations of "good results", this may be by way of continual testing, rote lessons and teacher assessment however the child's academic learning should enhance the lessons already learnt. Education should be built around the child, not the other way around and classroom delivery should suit the child's needs not the teacher's professional development or the schools expected outcomes.

Often the curriculum is overcrowded which restricts the natural learning process. Where an issue or topic is of great interest to students they are often not able to explore the topic beyond what is the requirement to meet the curriculum requirements. The limitations on discovery are subversive to encouraging the child to be a natural learner. The strict timetabling of education reinforces the notion that learning is for a purpose, an outcome and not necessarily for personal growth and development. Our Organisation asserts that until there is more flexibility in delivering content rich information and then allowing students to drive some of their education by way of conversation, analysis and time for consideration then the ability to fully realise the potential of our children as learners can never be fully met.

The structure and governance of school administration – local and central – and its impact on teaching and learning

Teachers and Executive teachers are not trained to be Managers. It is an increasing concern of P&C Federation that the focus of the role of the teacher is removed from the learning experience of the child by way of site governance and management. The Empowering Local Schools (ELS) model as available by application from the federal government has raised concern regarding the time and expertise required for submission. Further there is anecdotal evidence that the concept of internal rather than central management of schools sites is divisive in Staff rooms and in P&C meetings. It is fair to say that a common element in relation to the successful application to be an ELS site is the guarantee to purchase business expertise. This notion seems prudent however teaching Staff who are offered the opportunity to be more involved in school administration by devolution also must be acknowledged to carry the liabilities that couple this claim. Who is responsible for the sub-standard school buildings, the WH&S responsibilities and the employment relation issues? The business “buy in” model will only support the total needs of the school and it can only be assumed that the real and actual time to address these matters will be made up of teachers, educators by discipline. Certainly in New South Wales the concerns over structure and governance of school administration have been of state interest with campaigns raising issue with the burden of administration falling on teachers as an added responsibility without necessarily suitable training and development or most significantly without the professional acumen or inclination for the tasks. P&C Federation asks the questions, what does a graduate teacher assume they are signing up for and how real is this once they are in employment?

It must also be pointed out that a central model of delivery for the responsibility of structure and governance in educational facilities is not without its flaws. It is often suggested that the decision makers are too far removed from the “coal face” to fully appreciate the difficulties faced when the latest dictate is issued. Effective communication from a central office has always been an obstacle. A central system needs not just the ability to offer instruction or guidelines but rather the ability to demonstrate the rationale behind the topic. The ability to positively inspire the teaching staff in school communities with an explanation how the change or introduction of a new policy or procedure enhances the learning environment of the child as well as the professional growth and development of the teacher.

With any delivery system as big as education there must be balance between the responsibilities. The educator must be recognised in their primary position as the conduit for the child's learning. P&C Federation fails to see how an individual child's experience will be enhanced in the classroom due to a teacher having responsibility for making financial decisions relating to the school site. The focus must return to the child and how best to support them in the academic pursuits.

Influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive quality education.

P&C Federation, as a representative voice for parents always advocates the importance of the family and the child's relevant networks to the child's ultimate successful and harmonious educational experience. Aside from the role families have as first and primary educators of the child the family also brings their own interests and aspirations to the child's development.

The role of the family is not to sit aside from the school but rather, the family is critical to the child embracing a well-developed sense of purpose with their education. The connection between the home and the school cannot be underestimated. The child's learning is better realised with the sincere support and engagement of the family to the school, a child's success depends on the school and the home, for the child to flourish the partners must realise and respect that they are equally dependant.

For a teacher to develop an academic response in a child it is pertinent that the child's experiences are valued. No educator or administrator could disregard the contexts, cultural, social, emotional or physical that a child views the world from. The ability for a teacher to enhance the skills the child brings to the school and the classroom is built on the opportunity for the child to recognise their environment and find certainty between their formal education and their home experiences.

Parents and families have an authentic role to undertake when participating in the education of their child. As advocates for a formal and recognised voice we clearly state that no parent should be passive in such a significant cause. Often it is a notional partnership with parents "invited" to attend the school for celebrations or reporting events, worse yet there are anecdotal experiences where parents are only in attendance at school when there is a crisis. P&C Federation rejects these examples as good relationships and suggests that parents should be familiar with the school structure and the teaching staff; parents should be included in policy making and be persuasive to the management plan of each school. Community priorities are prescriptive and the families residing in the geographical area are best situated to describe the ways in which the learning priorities will support the real student construct, this is opposed to the supposed "typical" student needs commonly illustrated by policy makers via data accumulated from testing and measurement tasks such as NAPLAN.

P&C Federation feels that for a child to be successful irrespective of any external factor that the family influence and support is essential. Our affiliate P&C associations often explore means to better communicate the role of the parent in the educational experience and the role of the parent in the school. Australia's continual aspirational societies have witnessed a continued and consistent

representation at P&C events. These Organisations have been operating in New South Wales for more than 100 years and we identify them as a successful medium for the school community to host policy discussions, disseminate information, consult on governance and support the agreed school priorities. Where a parent is isolated and not overly familiar or comfortable with the authority of the school staff the parent organisation is a welcoming structure. We suggest that a school community without a recognised parent organisation is an example of a school where engagement is clearly misunderstood or simply neglected. The first step to families being supportive is to ensure that each child and parent hears the one constant message wherever they attend school, you always welcome.

Adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment.

P&C Federation suggest that there can be no greater asset in a school than an engaged, intelligent considered teacher. A teacher who has the ability to teach to the nuances of the classroom with a goal of inspiring and enhancing the eager mind is the optimal starting point for considering the tools required for imparting education to young people.

Beyond the teacher themselves, P&C Federation suggests that ongoing, well-funded and timely professional development opportunities must be provided. Teachers should have access to a range of mentors with differing expertise to allow them the flexibility in discovering their best teaching models. As well teachers should be encouraged and supported in developing and delivering a range of styles. Teacher training and teacher reluctance to learn to utilise different and emerging technologies are considered as main factors in the creating, let alone maintaining an optimal learning environment.

Teachers need to feel valued in their profession and should have every opportunity to realise continued growth. Raising the professional esteem of teachers could not be subversive to intentions to improve the quality of education and educational delivery in Australia. Time and funding is a commitment that is required from government to permit the teacher to capitalise on professional training and development without compromise. Continuously in New South Wales there is discourse regarding teacher quality and training. Training and development is typically a bargaining tool in industrial relations negotiations or a catch cry for a topical media issues, P&C Federation feel that regular services and events should be offered to and for teachers of a high standard. The teacher should never bypass the option to be a learner and revisit the experiences of the student. Completion of training and development should be recognised by way of professional opportunities to demonstrate and practice the knowledge gained.

Teachers also need to be exposed to alternative options to help support them to create optimal learning environments. So much of the educational settings are built on past practices and have not necessarily been revised in terms of the contemporary society. To enable a teacher to broaden the possible limitations of the mind which is likely built on by their experiences P&C Federation suggest having serious dialogues regarding the “knowns”. For example why do most schools operate between

8am and 3pm? Why can't students undertake remote educational experiences irrespective of residing in a metropolis? Who says the teaching method of chalk and talk isn't redundant to the digital native learner of today? Why must the teacher be in front of the class, why can the teacher not be situated internationally? As parents we always aspire to provide our children with the essentials required to be successful and accomplished citizens of the world. In reaching higher than we ever thought to, it is our sincere belief that the optimal learning environment is one where the child as a learner is engaged and motivated to learn, analyse and share their experiences, this measure is much more authentic and sincere than any test result and is a much better reflection of quality teaching and an optimal learning environment.

P&C Federation advocates for our children in public education and believes that the inquiry into teaching and learning – maximising Australia's investment in schools is a conversation that is long overdue. The competing tensions of political persuasion versus the right of the child to learn are distracting from the most important point raised by the Senate that is, the right for a child to receive a quality education. Public education has long serviced the most marginalised members of communities and it is a foundation of which P&C Federation is proud to represent and make advocacy on behalf of the parents of children enrolled in public education in New South Wales.

P&C Federation acknowledges the work of the Standing Committee and hopes the submissions made in this document are of assistance with discussions around this subject and welcome any further dialogue this may evoke.