

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Challenges of Leadership for Public Educators

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First of all, I would like to thank Joanna French for arranging for me to speak to you today. I hope that what I have to say will have some relevance to you who are Assistant Principals (APs), Deputy Principals or are aspiring to positions of executive leadership. Of course, as school leaders, only each one of you fully understands the particular challenges and opportunities that you face in your own school, supported by Phil Lambert, the SEDs, 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 is now in Year 12 and Millie 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.

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

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.

What lies within our own power as public educators?

But, acknowledging that there are external forces over which we have limited or even no 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, Acting Principals, Deputy Principals and members of the school executive:
 - 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; Acting Principals; Deputy Principals; members of the school executive; and classroom 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, Acting Principals, Deputy Principals, members of the school executive 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 Principals, Acting Principals, Deputy Principals, members of the school executive, and classroom teachers 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.

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 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, Assistant Principals, Deputy Principals, members of the school executive, and classroom teachers.

As public educators, and particularly as leaders, 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 on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*: by December it will have undergone a revision to take account of developments since 1999 when it was produced.

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.

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, Assistant 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, as you know, numeracy; Aboriginal education; school retention; and learning communities.

A couple of years ago a very accomplished and experienced Principal set me a challenge. She asked me if there was only **one** piece of advice I could give to a newly appointed Principal, what would it be?

What I said was something like this. Never forget that in order to have been promoted to a Principal you must first of all have been an excellent teacher. You will never lose that gift. Try to offload and / or delegate as much administrivia as you possibly can, in order to find opportunities to exercise your expertise as a teacher. You can do this in, perhaps, a number of ways.

I said to her that maybe it would be possible for the Principal to teach at least the occasional lesson. She or he could invite early career teachers to watch her teach in order to observe pedagogical excellence in action. The Principal could draw upon all of his knowledge skills and understanding that underpin outstanding pedagogy when she or he leads meetings with staff; engage in professional dialogue with various groupings of teachers; and in the ways in which the Principal relates personally to each member of her staff. After all, leading whole classes, managing group work, and relating personally one to one with each student are central strategies within our craft of teaching.

About five weeks ago I had the pleasure of launching a new book *Learning for Leadership: Building a school of professional practice* published by ACER, co-authored by our colleague Christine Cawsey, Principal of Rooty Hill High School and ACER's Michelle Anderson. Indeed, Christine wrote the vast majority of the book. In the first section, written by Michelle Andersen, quite accurately, Michelle describes the rather gloomy picture of school leaders not wanting to put up their hands to become Principals in a number of Australian States.

But, as I pointed out, NSW is the stand out exception. Some quite remarkable leadership programs have been put in place by the NSW Department of Education and Training and the Leadership Alliance. As the result of the collegial development and successful implementation of the NSW Professional Learning Continuum – of which the Leadership Capability Framework and the Leading and Managing the School Accountability Framework play central roles – we now have a situation in NSW Public Education where educational leaders have been queuing up to become Principals.

I would like to offer just a few quotations from what Christine has written. “Effective school leadership acts strategically in the retention, adoption, adaptation, or creation of teaching and learning programs to address what has to be done. It does not start with structures, finances, resources or structural change, although all these things may be necessary actions to achieve the purpose. It starts with a core, compelling purpose, and a genuine desire by a school community to make a difference in the lives of the young people who attend the school” (page 47).

From the very outset Christine emphasises that “In a school where student learning is the heart of the matter, leadership is for learning and the school’s leaders have to be committed, skilled and persistent in creating a strong learning culture and designing learning that will embed that culture in all areas of the school’s work. ... School leadership for learning is never just about the Principal” (p. 45).

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 leadership qualities of school principals, I would like to tell you some stories about a few outstanding Principals 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 combined 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 20 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, the arts, 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, in the Faculty of Arts, 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 permitted 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. 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 kids' 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 allegedly what were sometimes unfortunately called ‘vegie’ students in those days 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 – during my career there have been Professors of Education who I would not have called educational leaders.

Teachers sometimes express joy about kids who are engaged and complain about kids who are disengaged. But I like to add the word “unengaged” to this little list. All of my years of experience tell me that often the cause is not the student – it is the teacher. The teacher who refuses to make the effort to strive to engage his or her students. Who sit back and complain that this particular curriculum is too hard for these students. Excellent teaching makes a difference; so does poor teaching.

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).

The seemingly interminable so called Literacy Wars have been breeding grounds for the Either / Or fallacy. 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.

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.

To repeat what I said earlier, we must not limit our attention 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 were to wear clothes only to keep us warm, then hessian would do. If we were to eat 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 of their material, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, ethical, physical, emotional and other 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' reading 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” – or, with a few red wines under his belt – “bugger back to basics and forward to xxxxx 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 extensively 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.

Let me also say that the longitudinal data on literacy 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* on Monday 10th March and the subsequent piece I wrote for *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 would like to conclude by focusing upon the idealism, skills and commitment of the best of our public school teachers and leaders by recounting the story of a remarkable young teaching Principal. In December 1889 Rachel Cotten, 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 eventually closed in 1968. In April 1893 Rachel 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 Rachel Cotten married Arthur Doust, proprietor of the *Camden Times*.

Towards the end of the year, as Rachel was now not formally qualified to teach in her current school (the 4 years probationary 'apprenticeship' which she had 'failed' now having expired), 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. 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

Rachel Doust was successful in her re-examination.

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

I have the honor 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 Departmental 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 in 2008 are far more sophisticated, diverse, and comprehensive in scope 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 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; her tenacity; her dogged refusal to accept the negative judgment of others; her courtesy and thoughtfulness; her attention to the pragmatic details involved in being a teaching Principal; and her polite but unwavering assertiveness in standing up for what she believed to be right and just not only for herself but, above all, for her students. Rachel Doust fought for a quality education for all of her students over and beyond what was merely necessary. She kept on keeping on – right up until her death.

Let me finish, therefore, by proposing our 19th Century Principal Rachel Doust as a wonderful, shining role model for you 21st Century public education leaders as you continue to exercise your leadership in our knowing and caring profession.