

## WHY IS IT SO?

Many of us will remember Julius Sumner Miller asking us “Why is it so?” in his excellent educational series, produced in Australia by ABC Television from 1963 to 1986.

A recent report telling us that **“almost one in ten trainee teachers cannot do basic maths, spell simple words or punctuate correctly”** is a cause of immense concern - and we should be asking, as Julius Sumner Miller did, “Why is it so?”

### PLEASE READ ON

We know that prior to the 1960s Australian students experienced 'talk and chalk' education, with the teacher at the front of the class and the children sitting at desks facing the board. Reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic (the 3 'R's) were very important, as was learning by rote.

Teachers were told what, when, and how to teach. They were required to provide for every student in exactly the same way, and were not held responsible if many failed to learn. Teachers were expected to teach using the same methods as past generations, and any deviation from traditional practices was discouraged by supervisors or prohibited by myriad education laws and regulations.

During the 1960s and early 1970s there were some ground-breaking 'firsts' developed in Victoria

- The Gould League produced and encouraged the use of resources that could now be regarded as some of the first environmental education programs.
- 'Life. Be in it.' was, and still is, one of best-known health promotion and community-based initiatives in Australian history
- The Modern Teaching Methods Association - MTMA - supported teachers throughout Australia, and developed wide-ranging international networks
- The Mathematics Association of Victoria - MAV - organised and delivered two- day annual conferences regularly involving more than 5,000 teacher attendees.

The period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s were transition years for these organisations and for most government school systems in Australia.

- The Australian Broadcasting Commission - ABC - produced excellent, thought-provoking radio programs and printed resources for schools.
- The Australian Council for Private Education and Training - ACPET - set vocational education standards that were the envy of overseas higher education providers.

The period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s were transition years for these organisations and for most government school systems in Australia.

**In the early 1980s neo-liberal ideas began to influence the devolution of administrative responsibilities to schools, central control of the curriculum, and an emphasis on vocational training.**

**These changes were facilitated by a new form of political control of the administration: ministers for education, premiers and prime ministers and their political advisers determined policy, no longer relying on the advice of educational professionals.**

**New senior executive level in Departments were staffed by politically-approved bureaucrats and administrators.**

The changes fundamentally altered the relationships between students, teachers, parents, principals, and the government.

In particular, changes to the role and composition of school councils affected significantly the nature of school governance.

The 1980s and early 1990s also saw the gradual politicisation of the public service and the senior administration in Victoria, and elsewhere in Australia.

During this time senior bureaucrats from the education sector travelled extensively overseas - particularly to the United States of America - and returned to Australia with new expectations.

Teachers in Victoria were often overwhelmed with new directives, some being ...

- the use of phonics to develop word attack skills is no longer the recommended approach and there should be less emphasis on correct spelling - children should be free to learn at their own rate
- the teaching of handwriting mechanics is no longer required - children should be free to develop their individual writing styles
- teachers are advised to correct a maximum of three mistakes per page, as more corrections may disappoint the child and stifle creativity
- the teaching of multiplication tables is no longer supported, at least not until the grade 5 year
- teachers are discouraged in making predictions when compiling student reports e.g "If Billy had reading time of 10 minutes per night, his English levels would improve."

and even

- schools and their school councils are now encouraged to design their own curriculum.

Statements from bureaucrats regarding education became wordy and evasive. Please consider the official Aims of Primary Education in New South Wales

**"The central aim of education, which, with home and community groups, the school pursues, is to guide individual development in the context of society through recognisable stages of development towards perceptive understanding, mature judgment, responsible self-direction and moral autonomy".**

At the same time the New South Wales Minister for Education, warned that social conditions encouraged confusion of aims and stated: **“We must keep in mind the fact that society is not made by schools: schools reflect society and are effective to the extent that they reinforce the values of society. If society places multiple demands upon schools such that all cannot be met, then the purpose of school loses definition and schools appear to become ineffective”**.

Early in 1982 the New South Wales Director-General of Education complained about **“the forces for diversity”**, and a **“truly motley horde of special interest groups trying to impose their often contradictory programmes on the schools.”**

The Victorian Minister for Education wanted to know what the Education Department and its teachers were trying to do to address **“the diversity of views held in the community”**.

Later a New South Wales Teachers' Federation research officer warned of the danger to the curriculum if, alongside basic subjects like English, mathematics, science, history, geography art, and music, were added all the new “studies” – peace studies, women's studies, computer education, media studies, career education, living skills, politics, environmental studies, legal studies, technics, Aboriginal studies, consumer education, multicultural studies and the rest.

In 1991 the South Australian Associate Director-General of Education described the development of the curriculum over the previous thirty years as a case of **“systemic schizophrenia in which official curriculum statements and actual curriculum practice in schools have become progressively more incongruent.”**

In 2014 Victoria began to promote itself on car number plates as 'The Education State' and boasted that it has **“always maintained a commitment to delivering world-class education from early years at school through to university, TAFE and Registered Training Organisations (RTO).”**

Press releases have told readers **“We've always been a step ahead of the rest when it comes to equipping our students with a bright future”** and that Victoria has **“a world-class education system that sets students up for success ... and gives our state's students the skills, knowledge and attributes they need to thrive in life. “**

A report in the Herald Sun on 14 March 2022 - "Would-be teachers fail 'basics'" indicates that we are now experiencing the results of the lack of informed oversight and bureaucratic accountability over the last 40 years

The students who attended our primary schools in the 1990s and early 2000s, and who trusted their teachers and schools with their education are now wanting to enter the workforce, but realising that their schooling was seriously lacking.

**Dr Kevin Donnelly, Senior Fellow at the Australian Catholic University, wrote in the heraldsun of 1st. February 2022 that "one of the perennial problems faced by classroom teachers over the past 30 - 40 years has been the anxiety and stress caused by too much red tape and too much bureaucratic interference."**

He continues **"The first thing is for governments to cut back on bureaucratic interference and give schools and school leaders greater control and flexibility. Having a centralised, inflexible bargaining system, for example, stops schools from being innovative in how they manage teacher employment and conditions."**

To those who would dismiss these words please heed this recent warning - **Australia has been ranked 39 out of 41 high and middle-income countries in achieving quality education, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).**

Issued by the UNICEF Office of Research this is the first report to assess the status of children in 41 high-income countries of the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It ranks countries based on their performance and details the challenges and opportunities that advanced economies face in achieving global commitments to children.

The CEO of UNICEF Australia commented : **"Most Australians would expect Australia to place in the top end of a ranking amongst EU/ OECD countries. When it comes to child well-being indicators however, Australia places in the middle of the league table, 21st out of 41 EU/OECD countries. This seemingly average ranking hides some stark and troubling findings for children in Australia."**

“UNICEF Australia is particularly concerned about the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities, and children from single parent households – children who are at risk of being left behind.”

“Australia’s ranking of 39th out of 41 EU/OECD countries in terms of quality education raises serious red flags for children’s learning and development, which can severely impact their chances in life. **A deeper dive into the data reveals that 71.7 per cent of 15-year-olds in Australia are achieving baseline competency in reading, mathematics and science (2015)** and 80 per cent of children are participating in organised learning one year before the start of compulsory schooling (2013/14). We know that education is a great equaliser in society so it follows that poor quality education produces sharp inequality.”

For those who would try to dismiss the UNICEF findings as just a simple slip up, they should seriously consider the findings of the OECD Program For International Student Assessment - PISA.

More than 600,000 students in 79 countries and economies took part in last year’s PISA, including more than 14,000 Australian students in 740 schools. **Australia’s results show a long-term decline in reading, maths and science skills for Australian students.**

PISA doesn’t test rote learning but how well 15-year-old students can problem solve and apply their knowledge and skills to real world situations.

### **The results show**

- Australian students were three years behind Singapore in maths and three months behind in reading.
- The Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang economic region (the participating regions of China) were three and a half years ahead of Australia in maths in 2018. Hong Kong performed at the same level as Australia in reading in 2000, but outperformed Australia in 2018.
- Hong Kong performed at the same level as Australia in reading in 2000. But between 2001 and 2006, it used a series of deliberate reforms to go up from 17th to second place in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

This was not a case of improvement through government control, because Hong Kong provides a high level of school autonomy similar to Australia

Singapore invested heavily in recruiting bright people to teaching. The selection process was tough, but their key to success is encouraging many young people to apply. It also introduced elite "master teacher" positions - who became the teaching leaders in their subjects, helping set directions and connect schools to the best research.

Hong Kong, Singapore and other high performing nations did not stumble into PISA success by chance. They did it by design.

Australia can do it too - it must do many things better; much, much better, more systematically and with more intensity. Our Federal Education Minister recently called on state and territory education ministers to **“back the entire National School Reform Agreement, include phonics as part of teacher training, and also to de-clutter their curriculums and get back to basics.”**

Transforming Australia's school education systems is not only mission possible; it's a moral obligation for a country that calls itself an education nation

Australia's education system has latterly evolved in a piecemeal fashion, with frequent fragmented education reforms adding new layers to the work of schools without removing any unnecessary functions.

In the Herald Sun on 9th. March 2022 Julie Cross reported on the SYSTEM'S BIG FAIL and stated **“billions can't stop our fall in world rankings.”** She noted that **“billions of extra dollars have gone into schools in the past decade but Australia's performance in the global education rankings continues to slide.”**

Julie went on to quote Michael Buckland, Chief Executive of the McKell Institute

**“Australia's fall in educational rankings, underfunded public schools and the long running down of investment in TAFE are short-sighted policy decisions that hurt us all” and that “reform was necessary.”**

Who must be held as largely responsible for these short-sighted policy decisions? This award must be to the largely unknown bureaucracy that has been, and is, hidden behind our government departments.

Australia has long been infected by what world renowned Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg, currently professor of education at the Gonski Institute of Education in Sydney, coined as GERM - Global Education Reform Movement.

**One manifestation of GERM is a bloated bureaucracy to police compliance with regulations, collect and record information and monitor performance.**

Public school systems in Australia have seen an enormous increase in bureaucracy since the turn of the century. *So-called school reforms beginning in the 1990s promised less bureaucratic control but instead have intensified bureaucracy at all levels of public education systems.*

Bureaucratisation has increased throughout the system – at central and regional offices, schools and for teachers. *From 2002 to 2019, the increase in administrative staff at the system and school levels was far greater than the increase in teachers and students.*

Administrative and clerical staff increased by 90.2% in primary schools and 82.6% in secondary schools. *The increase in primary schools was 3 1/2 times the increase in teachers (25.3%) and the increase in secondary schools nearly seven times the increase in teachers (12.4%).*

*Administrative staff now comprise 27% of school staff in primary schools compared to 20% in 2002. Administrative staff in secondary schools increased from 17% to 25% of all staff.*

**The increase in central and regional office staff of 56% was three times that for all teachers (19%) and four times that of students (14%).**

*The number of executive (management) staff increased by 70% to 2019. This was over ten times the increase in students and teachers over the period which increased by only 6.4% and 6.5% respectively. Total non-school staff increased by 23.5%, nearly four times that of students and teachers.*

Increased government accountability requirements and regulations have driven the huge increase in administrative staff in central and regional offices and in schools as well as placing increased administrative workloads on principals and teachers.



**The promise of more school autonomy and less bureaucratic control has turned into a monster of more bureaucracy at both the central and school levels.**

Public schools are subject to widespread accountability measures covering financial management, student well-being, behaviour management and safety, teacher appraisal, compliance training, school review processes, curriculum standards, student progress based on standardised test results, workplace health and safety, and auditing. This required increased monitoring and administration by managers and staff in central and regional offices.

**State and Federal education departments are focused primarily on administrative and compliance roles rather than curriculum, teaching and learning support.** Very few branches of state departments of education are directly involved in supporting teaching and learning.

The vast majority are devoted to administration of finance, policing compliance to regulations, performance monitoring, human resource management and other corporate functions.

Of course, public schools must be accountable, but the huge growth of bureaucracy has been at the expense of more direct support for teaching and learning in schools.

Data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 show that principals and teachers are working longer hours on administration. Australian teachers spend the 3rd highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD.

The bureaucratisation of public education has clearly failed. The large achievement gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged students have increased or remain virtually unchanged.

**The accountability regime imposed on schools has led to a significant misallocation of resources.** The increased bureaucracy has soaked half the small increase in funding for public schools since 2002 and diverted much needed funding from directly supporting teaching and learning.

**The percentage increase in expenditure on administrative and clerical staff and other non-teaching staff in schools was over four times that on teachers – 47% compared to 11%.**

Increasing bureaucratisation is not the way to improve school performance and student outcomes. Australian governments at all levels must eradicate GERM and focus on providing the necessary high quality resources for public schools to reduce the large gaps in achievement.

To revisit Dr Kevin Donnelly “Another strategy is to simplify what is an overcrowded curriculum where too much teacher time and energy is spent trying to deal with everything from stranger danger and cyber bullying to sexting and resilience and wellness.

By reducing and simplifying what has to be taught, teachers will have more time and energy to focus on teaching essential knowledge, understanding and skills.

New-age fads such as open classrooms, inquiry-based learning, and teachers as ‘guides on the side’ and ‘facilitators’ should be dumped.”

**WHY IS IT SO? Please do not blame the students who attended our primary schools in the 1990s and early 2000s for their lack of basic knowledge and understanding.**

**WHY IS IT SO? Please do not blame the teachers of this era who were hamstrung in practising their craft by a vast range of bureaucratic directives.**

**Australian educational offerings can, must and will change for the better - but we must not allow our students, our teachers, and our communities to be distracted by the hidden agendas of bureaucratic self-interest.**

For further reading I highly recommend “Public Schools in Australia from the late 1970s to the late 1980s: the Seeds of Change”

Dr Alan Barcan, The University of Newcastle

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.454.5394&rep=rep1&type=pdf>