

SPEECH

(Check against delivery)

**The Hon Peter Garrett AM, MP
Minister for School Education**

**Australian Primary Principals' Association
National Conference**

“Experience the blend”

Adelaide Convention Centre, SA

2.05 pm Friday 24 June 2011

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet today—the Kurna people—and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I also extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are present.

President Norm Hart, guests and presenters.

Good afternoon.

It's great to be back in Adelaide and have this opportunity to talk to so many of Australia's educators.

I commend the work of my colleague Mark Butler who has just launched the 'KidsMatter Primary Expansion', which I know will be welcomed.

We recognise the importance of supporting this pioneering program.

I can see from the conference program that you've had a thorough exploration of the topical issues and matters affecting your work.

And as the conference draws to a close today, I trust you all feel it has been a productive and fruitful gathering.

It would be interesting to compare this conference program with a program from a decade ago or even two decades ago.

There would be some issues that are familiar but many that are radically different.

I wonder how a phrase like 'cyber bullying' would resonate with your predecessors.

The two parts of this phrase are useful as a metaphor for describing the challenge of modern education.

In some ways school education remains one of the most familiar of human experiences.

But the context in which it occurs and the manner in which it is delivered reflects its contemporary circumstances.

So the idea of 'bullying' would be familiar to teachers and students of the past but many of us would not have recognised the prefix 'cyber' even ten years ago.

This is a useful metaphor.

What principals and schools do is provide a very familiar environment for students and families.

Parents know about uniforms and school subjects and learning the basics. They know that recess and lunchtime will occur, that there will be homework and assessments, that some teachers and principals will be better or worse than others, that children will become friends and enemies, that there are bullies, and draughty classrooms and school sport and so on.

This is broadly what they experienced at school.

What you and I experienced at school.

But within the constants of schooling there are all the changes that modernity imposes.

The people in this room create a familiar, safe, structured environment for young people and then use it to develop capacities that prepare students for the 21st century world of employment and study. Quite a paradox.

I recognise that both of these aspects of education need to be supported by government policy.

This government is the first Australian government to identify school reform as crucial to the long term prosperity of the nation.

This means doing what we have always done better and getting on with the new things that need to be done.

Our reforms have created enormous debate in schools, in the community and in the media.

As you all know everyone went to school so there are 22 million education experts in Australia. Everyone has an opinion – expert or amateur - on how schools should work.

This is a good thing – policy areas that the community engages in are the most important and most exciting policy areas – but debate can be challenging.

Especially for you who work in the field and have to implement, defend and sometimes oppose as you see necessary. Your contributions are valuable even when I don't agree with them.

Especially when I don't agree with them.

But today I would like to take these few moments to outline some of the thinking that sits behind the Government's education policy reforms.

While I recognise that lists of government spending can be seen as a somewhat predictable parts of a politician's speech, I also feel that the level of investment and activity is worth talking about.

We are talking very big numbers.

Australian Government investment in education has just about doubled in the last 4 years – to nearly \$65 billion.

Not increased by 10% or 25 % but almost doubled.

And I can't think of a better place to invest Government funding than in school education. It was long overdue.

Every school in Australia – over 9500 - have benefitted.

It is reform that reaches into every aspect of education from preschool to post school.

It is deliberate and carefully designed policy.

Our intention was to make the infrastructure better. The libraries and class rooms, the playgrounds and halls.

Just as a starting point.

We also believe that every student in a country of 22 million people should have access to the same curriculum. The same knowledge that a community considers is every student's birthright whether they live in remote Northern Territory or the suburbs of Adelaide.

Every teacher should have the right to quality preparation and access to standards that guide their practice and map their career.

We believe that while every student's education is about their own progress across key individual milestones, parents and the community also wish to know whether this progress is reasonable for students of that age or stage.

And whether the expectations and achievements of their child's school are similar to the expectations and achievements of other schools.

We understand that a student's personal circumstances still have too large an effect on their school progress and their life chances. That poverty, race, geography or disability should not inhibit potential.

And that therefore some students need more help.

And as I said earlier, we know that while some things in school haven't changed, one thing in particular has.

For our students to study further, to get work and just to function in the 21st century, they must have access to technology.

Schools have to prepare people for study and for work and for life. And be flexible enough to integrate work and study options for our older students.

As I'm sure you have by now realised I am describing the first tranche of the Government's school policy reforms.

- The BER
- The Australian Curriculum
- The establishment of ACARA and AITSL
- MySchool and MySchool 2.0
- The National Teacher Standards
- The National Program Standards for Pre Service Teacher Education
- The Digital Education Revolution and computers in schools policies
- The Trade Training Centres
- The National Partnerships in Literacy and Numeracy, Teacher Quality and Low SES.

It's quite a list, and a list of which the Government is rightly proud.

Whatever critics of the Government may say – you in this room realise better than anyone the frenzy of activity and reform that has occurred in the last few years.

And you have been integral in its delivery.

I would now like to briefly mention the next set of policy reforms initiated by the Government.

Some of which I will likely discuss with my Education Minister colleagues in the future.

But before I do that I would quickly like to respond to your press release of earlier today in relation to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

As you know the Australian Government is leading this initiative through ACARA. However the implementation process is the responsibility of the state and territory governments and the education sectors.

The timeline - of substantial implementation by the end of 2013 - was decided by Ministers to allow states and territories leeway to implement according to their own needs and priorities.

Therefore I expect that there will be differences across the country over the next 2 years in terms of what is happening where.

This is reasonable and to be expected.

However I also note your concerns and acknowledge that you, as the peak body representing the nation's primary schools, should be listened to.

I will take up this issue with Education Ministers when we meet - where I expect policies such as National Professional Standards for Teachers will be discussed.

The Standard is a content standard and sets out what principals are expected to know, understand and do to achieve excellence in their work.

The Standard is represented as an integrated model. The model recognises that all good leaders share common qualities and capabilities, which are expressed as leadership requirements.

The Standard provides a framework for professional learning and a basis to inform strategies for attracting, preparing and developing principals for leading 21st century schools

I understand your organisation has been closely involved in its development. It is a powerful document and one that I am pleased to have seen developed and delivered.

Another initiative that directly concerns you is the Empowering Local Schools commitment.

I had the pleasure of talking with a range of principals earlier this year in a National Conversation held in Canberra. We discussed this very issue.

Some principals at that forum and in this room have almost complete autonomy while others work in more centralised systems.

The general consensus at that gathering was that it is something of a contradiction in terms to mandate autonomy.

Some Principals argued that it was important, particularly in relation to our most disadvantaged students, that some central leverage and overarching responsibility was important.

It is also the case that principals and school communities know their schools intimately and are best placed to find local solutions to local problems. As one principal said to me very clearly in a recent conversation – if I am going to be held publicly responsible for my school performance, I want to be able to make the decisions that can affect that performance.

Fair enough.

Our thinking on this reflects the range of views and the research and recognises there is something of an empowerment continuum.

The three key areas are in relation to governance, financial autonomy and staffing responsibility. Different schools and systems across Australia will be involved in the Empowering Local Schools initiative in different ways as suits them and their system or jurisdiction.

There is considerable investment to support the policy – \$69.1 million – and the first thousand schools will begin implementing different levels of increased empowerment from next year.

The key point to remember is there is a continuum of options available.

What we are offering is a flexible approach which schools can pick up as needed and at their own pace.

All the research indicates that the quality of the teacher in the classroom has the greatest effect on improving student outcomes.

We believe that quality teachers should be recognised and rewarded.

I think there is general agreement about that proposition.

However I also understand that there will be a range of views about how that should occur.

What we can agree on is that teachers have been taken for granted for a long time, while the demands placed on them have been increasing.

It's well overdue that we recognise our exceptional teachers and reward them for their valuable work.

Recognising there are many ways we can reward teachers, and as many views about how we could go about it, we have nevertheless made a significant investment - \$425 million over the next 4 years- which will be very valuable for the sector.

We believe that each teacher in the country has an entitlement to ongoing career guidance, support and advice. This is the guts of the Teacher Performance Management System. AITSL will deliver a best practice process that links to and is informed by the National Teacher Standards.

And while student assessment results must be part of any process that identifies teacher quality, they will not be the only measure of successful teaching. That would be unfair and unreasonable.

I understand the commitment of the profession to a credible and transparent process and your strong conviction that teaching is collaborative and that this strength should not be undermined.

I understand and acknowledge your views.

But I also remain convinced that it is absolutely appropriate and long overdue that the best teachers are recognised and rewarded.

My department and AITSL will be in close discussion with your organisation as this policy is developed and rolled out.

The last major program I should mention is our More Support for Students with Disabilities initiative, where I was pleased that we could commit new spending of \$200 million in the last Budget to this much needed area.

Especially in terms of that essential principle of ensuring our prosperity provides opportunities for all.

The initiative will deliver new services, equipment and support for the more than 164,000 students with disabilities currently attending Australian schools.

In particular, there will be services such as speech and occupational therapy delivered at school by health and student welfare professionals, as well as access to special equipment in classrooms.

And I emphasise, all schools are eligible.

The independent Review of Funding for Schooling is also considering arrangements to support students with disability.

As you know, the Funding Review panel will report later this year.

It's no secret that our current funding system is complex and opaque.

We want a system that is transparent, fair, sustainable and effective at delivering great educational results for all students in all schools.

The panel led by Mr David Gonski has already released an Emerging Issues Paper, with input from a nationwide listening tour last year. The review panel has also commissioned a number of pieces of expert research to inform their deliberations.

They will release that research later this year along with another issues paper, and I encourage you all to take the opportunity to comment on this material when it becomes available.

The panel will then publish their recommendations at the end of this year.

It's important you understand we will continue to consult before we make any decisions on the panel's recommendations.

Nevertheless, we have made some firm commitments to provide reassurance as to our intentions:

1. No school will lose a single dollar per student as a result of this review.
2. Current funding arrangements for non-government schools have been extended to the end of 2013, and the end of 2014 for capital funding.
3. The panel has been asked to provide advice on appropriate transitional assistance to help schools move easily and fairly to any new funding arrangements.

Overall, Australia's school children deserve a substantive, constructive and mature debate on future funding arrangements.

I emphasise we see no point in an unproductive and divisive 'public versus private' debate.

What we do have is the opportunity to overhaul the ways schools have been funded for the first time since 1973.

I encourage all here to keep an open mind on these issues—as I will—and to examine the Gonski review on its merits, when they hand down their recommendations.

Conclusion

I will conclude firstly by thanking you for your patience today. There is a lot happening in school education.

More than ever before.

The Melbourne Declaration states that

“the role of the principal of a school in the twenty first century is one of the most exciting and significant undertaken by any person in our society. Principals help to create the future.”

The long term prosperity of the nation, our productivity, and the civil society which underpins it is predicated on school education and the work you do.

More importantly, in your care are thousands of young people whose personal happiness and long term success you encourage and nurture.

So again thank you.

ENDS