



Public School System (Proof)

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Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Wednesday 26 September 2007 (Proof).

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE (Parliamentary Secretary) [3.22 p.m.]: I support the motion of the Hon. Amanda Fazio. The fact is that two-thirds of New South Wales students are currently educated in public schools. Many of our public schools are actually experiencing rapid increases in enrolments. Many of the most rapid rises are in the early years and in areas where very successful senior colleges are located. This is despite the array of schooling options available to parents and the constant attempts by Mr Stoner and his conservative colleagues in the Federal Government to downgrade the value of public schools.

Despite the Coalition's continued attacks on public education, the vast majority of parents in New South Wales understand that public education can offer their children a firm foundation for their future development. State schools are great schools for the precise reason that they, and only they, can offer children a firm grounding in basic skills and at the same time provide them with a broad perspective on the world in all its increasing complexity.

The Leader of The Nationals continues to demonstrate a zero commitment to public education. His ideological rantings of the so-called left-wing indoctrination and PC culture demonstrate how little he understands about the great work that is happening across New South Wales. One of the constant refrains of the Leader of The Nationals is the tired line about "black armband" of history. I do not believe that acknowledging the impact of white colonisation of Australia on the Aboriginal owners supports a black armband view. It is a perspective that speaks to the truth and seeks to advance understanding of the impact on Aboriginal people, something of which we hope all our children have some understanding.

As an example, at Darlington Public School, where kindergarten enrolments have recently doubled and many of the children are indigenous, a willingness to teach Australian history from an indigenous perspective is undoubtedly a strength. Given the great difficulties that we face ensuring that indigenous students attend school and achieve good outcomes, it is important that teachers are able to present subjects to indigenous students in ways that are appealing rather than alienating. If schools succeed in doing this by including indigenous perspectives in their teaching of history, they should be applauded, not berated.

Principals and teachers in New South Wales public schools are trained and supported to teach subjects from a diverse range of perspectives in ways that are sensitive to their pupils' varying ages and to the varying expectations of the diverse local communities that they serve. That is the point of public schooling. That is one of its many strengths and is not a weakness. Recent reforms to staffing arrangements in schools help to ensure that schools continue to reflect the needs and expectations of their local communities. It is a fact that since reformed staffing agreements were introduced in 2005, 72 per cent of principal positions have been filled by candidates chosen by a local selection panel that includes community representation. It is Andrew Stoner who is out of touch with the community, not public schools.

It is also completely misinformed to imply that teaching subjects from a range of perspectives is done solely in the interests of so-called "minorities", whether they be Aborigines, recent immigrants, gay parents, or that minority that is actually a majority: women and girls. In fact, teaching subjects from a range of perspectives is of great benefit to all students.

The political founder of public education in New South Wales, the great statesman Henry Parkes, believed that public education would strengthen democracies because it would help people make informed choices. He also believed that a general education would help lift people out of poverty by preparing them for whatever career they chose to pursue in later life. He believed, in other words, that public education would benefit the State because it would help people to think, and to think laterally and critically in whatever situations they found themselves and about whatever choices with which they were confronted. That was true in the late nineteenth century and it is even more critical now in the early twenty-first century.

Mr Stoner may not have noticed that we live in a rapidly changing globalised world and our children will be confronted by a world that is even more complex and less certain than our own, a world in which anyone who thinks that there is only one way of thinking, one way of doing things, will be in for a very rude awakening. If we bring up our children to believe that there is only one view of history, they will struggle to survive, let alone thrive, into the future. As John Raulston Saul commented at the recent Cornerstones Conference:

If ever there was a time for the expansion of a humanist approach towards education filled with questioning, with doubting and thinking, this is the time for it. That is the right preparation for the kind of society our kids are going into.

Mr Stoner might prefer the comfortable certainties of a white picket world, circa 1950, but such certainties are now obsolete and I, for one, am glad that my children's education will not be predicated on them. I am also

proud that my daughter goes to the public school where the very books that the Hon. Amanda Fazio was talking about were developed by a young girl who, in year 2, realised that she needed to have books that reflected her family circumstance.

Another great fallacy is that teaching alternative perspectives is a distraction; that it somehow prevents teachers from focusing on their core business: teaching children basic skills. This fallacy is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how the curriculum works, especially in the early years of schooling. In fact, the teaching of basic skills is integrated throughout the curriculum. Put simply, learning to spell "indigenous" is just as important and useful as learning to spell any other word. Public schools teach a rich and dynamic curriculum at all levels, one that is able to meet the needs and hold the interest of a very diverse range of students.

At the same time, our public schools produce literacy and numeracy outcomes that, despite the scaremongering of the Federal Government, are among the best in the world. Such outcomes are possible only because of the dedication of public school teachers, supported by a State government that is committed to public education. The recent report of the productivity commission on government services confirms that the New South Wales Labor Government has boosted investment in education by significantly more than the national average. In fact we have almost doubled the investment per student. It is this investment that ensures that the public school system will continue to meet the needs of all students in a rapidly changing world. Investment is needed to fund new technologies, to upgrade buildings and facilities, to expand numeracy and literacy programs, to review and develop curriculum, to reduce staff to student ratios and to support professional development of teachers. We also provide targeted programs for struggling students, for gifted children, for disabled students and for disadvantaged school communities.

Instead of denigrating public schools and the people who work in them, the Federal Government should be trying to invest in them. Unlike the State Government, the Howard Government has a record of chronically underfunding public education. If it really cared about the future of public schools, the Howard Government would put its money where its mouth is and be more generous in its funding allocation.

One last great falsehood is constantly perpetuated by conservatives and members on the other side of the House about public schooling: the belief that, if it were not for public school teachers and if it were not for classrooms, parents could protect their children from unorthodox ideas and alternative lifestyles. Well, schools have playgrounds as well as classrooms and children have classmates as well as teachers. It is a truism that you cannot stop children talking, and neither should we want them to stop talking. In public schools at least, children come from all kinds of households, all kinds of families, all kinds of religious backgrounds, with all kinds of more or less openly held political views. This one of the great strengths of public education and one of the ways in which children prepare for the broader world. There are children in public schools whose parents are atheists, environmentalists, Christians, Muslims, unionists, lesbians and even members of the National Party. Children are insatiably curious. Questions arise and teachers must respond to them.

That is part of the reason the school curriculum is conclusive of a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. That is why our public school teachers build on children's experiences, on their everyday encounters with difference, to teach about diversity, tolerance and acceptance. They are helping our children to live with difference—to see it as an opportunity and not a threat. They teach them that we do not all have to be the same in order to live together. It may be too late for Andrew Stoner to learn how to look at and live in the world in new and better ways, but fortunately it is not too late for the next generation. I commend the motion to the House.