

Forum Launch

The Hon Julia Gillard MP, Minister for Education. Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Social Inclusion and Deputy Prime Minister

Thank you Clive [Haggar] for your kind introduction.

It's a great pleasure to be able to open the 2009 Annual National Forum.

As you all know, the Government has been pursuing hard reform in education since coming to office two years ago.

This reform is essentially about developing the nation's human capital to safeguard Australia's future.

It's about equity and the quality of education.

It's also about our determination not to tolerate underachievement, especially among students from disadvantaged communities and backgrounds.

We are driven by the genuine belief that every child deserves a world-class education, regardless of what school they go to or where they live.

The theme for this forum—*The Education Revolution: two years on*—gives me a chance to talk to you this morning and take stock of what we've achieved so far and outline where we are heading to next.

Just for a moment, turn the clock back two years. Try to remember what the education landscape looked like when I was first sworn in and the Rudd Government came to office.

In early childhood education, Australia was last in the OECD rankings.

In schooling, international testing showed Australian children were slipping behind our competitors.

Across the nation, disparate curricula and regulatory structures were a barrier for students and teachers moving from one state or territory to another.

Transparency in school reporting was either a taboo subject or a subject given a bad name by the divisive approach of our predecessors.

Merit-based pay for teachers was also a divisive debate because of the approach taken by our predecessors.

Being qualified did not guarantee our young people university entry because of government caps on the number of places. Public investment in our universities had declined.

Children and young people from remote and disadvantaged communities were being left behind at every level of education

Delivering real change

When we came to government, against this backdrop, we made it clear to the Australian people that education was absolutely central to everything this Government would do. Our election policies of course included a guaranteed year of high-quality pre-school for every child, a Digital Education Revolution, our Trade Training Centres in Schools; and we are delivering on each of those promises.

But I am pleased to say, during this two years we have developed a more comprehensive reform agenda and we are delivering reforms few people could have imagined just two short years ago.

So what are the transformative changes being delivered?

We've almost doubled our investment in school education.

Next June, you will be able to read Australia's new national curriculum in the four core subjects of English, history, maths and science with teaching of that new national curriculum to start in 2011, while the rest of the national curriculum continues to be developed.

Every State and Territory has signed up to deliver a year of high-quality pre-school education for every child.

We have put in place the largest school modernisation program this nation has ever seen.

We have agreed, with the States and Territories, on a plan to halve the gap in literacy, numeracy and Year 12 achievement between our Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Early next year, parents, teachers and the whole community will for the first time be able to access information on Australian schools which shows achievement in national testing, Year 12 attainment, attendance and numbers of staff. In due course it will also include information about school income and resourcing.

Parents, teachers, every member of the community will be able to access rich, accurate contextual information which allows them to compare the performance of schools serving similar student populations.

As data becomes more accessible, teachers will be able to use it as a diagnostic tool to inform and validate the teaching decisions they make.

We are also going to get a greater insight into how our schools are performing. We will have access to a comprehensive, accurate and balanced picture of how different schools in different communities perform.

The debate about transparency remains passionate. I understand that.

Last week I talked the reforms through here in Parliament House with more than 160 school principals from around the country.

Let me be very clear about our transparency agenda. The Government will not be creating simplistic league tables, ranking and grading schools. We will be providing information through a national website. Every school will have its own profile with a range of information about that school.

Importantly, it will enable governments and educators to look at comparable schools and their results, understand different patterns of disadvantage, and share best practice and innovation. It will also allow extra resources and new reforms to be dedicated to those schools where they will make the most difference.

As a nation, we have never had the opportunity before to compare statistically similar schools and to ascertain what factors make a real difference to the way they perform for the children within them.

I understand this new era of transparency is going to lead to some uncomfortable moments. It's going to lead to uncomfortable moments for all of us. It will lead to greater exposure for some schools, some principals and I expect some Education Ministers. But that discomfort in my view will be well worth it because it will mean that we have an even stronger focus on what we can do to lift the quality of school education for every child in every school.

As we progress through this debate, some of the uncertainties will become the focus of public discussion and we are seeing a bit of that today.

I am committed to working with schools and school systems, through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to make sure that principals and school communities are ready for this change.

I said last week that I am ready to examine ways in which we can enhance the information that we provide and the student assessments that we use.

But nobody should interpret this willingness to collaborate as a weakening of our resolve to deliver new era of transparency. The fact that we can always develop even better measures doesn't mean that our current methods of testing are somehow invalid.

National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests are the result of a rigorous development process that includes examination of the test questions by literacy and numeracy curriculum experts from around the country. In addition, an expert panel of eminent educational measurement advisors check the tests for measurement validity.

Equally, the fact that we cannot measure everything does not mean that literacy and numeracy performance somehow do not matter. Of course they do.

I am completely convinced that transparency is fundamental to delivering on the high expectations that we have of every child in every community. It will not be the sole cause of positive change but it is necessary to ensure positive change.

As part of this new framework of accountability and investment we have created in those two short years, transparency is a vital piece and indeed at the heart of what we are seeking to do.

We are ready to combine our new investments and the expertise and dedication of so many parents and professional educators to enable us, as a community, to focus on the things that matter the most to the quality schooling:

- we want to focus on the schools and the students that need the most support;
- we want to focus on the teaching and leadership strategies that have the greatest positive impact; and
- we want to focus on how we can work together most effectively to lift achievement and expectation for every student in every community.

That is the focus that will help us all to deliver real, lasting change.

And we are ready with resources to make a difference.

Investing in schools—National Partnerships

We are ready, through our Smarter Schools National Partnership to deliver more than \$2.5 billion to focus on lifting achievement.

And at the heart of our collaboration is a relentless focus on the quality of teaching.

Teacher quality

We know that teacher quality is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and achievement.

As Professor John Hattie says, “It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation.”

The National Partnership on Quality Teaching will strengthen teaching across Australia, whether that’s in a small remote school in the Kimberley or in a large urban school in Sydney.

It targets critical points in the teacher lifecycle to attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and leaders in our schools and classrooms around the country.

Attracting quality teachers—Teach for Australia

As part of this initiative we have developed Teach for Australia.

Teach for Australia will enable us to recruit high-achieving graduates who may otherwise not have considered a career in teaching and place them in schools where they can make the most difference.

They will sign up for a unique, intensive two-year teaching placement while they complete their Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching at Melbourne University.

In the first cohort, some 45 high-performing graduates will start their training at Melbourne University later this month ahead of joining Victorian schools in 2010 for their practice teaching.

Secondary schools and colleges in four Victorian regions will host these graduates for the next two years.

Selected experienced teachers from the participating schools are also receiving training at Melbourne University this month to help them mentor the graduates.

Graduates will also be supported by educational advisors from Melbourne University, working collaboratively with in-school mentors to assess and support them to develop their professional practice and subject areas.

Other jurisdictions are interested in joining the partnership for its second year.

Improving the basics and tackling disadvantage

Teacher quality is at the heart of our Smarter Schools National Partnerships for disadvantaged school communities and for literacy and numeracy.

Both provide resources to schools so that they can put into place practical action, informed by evidence of best practice, to lift achievement.

Under our literacy and numeracy National Partnership, more than 400 schools across the nation are already piloting new approaches to teaching and learning, including developing principals as literacy leaders and implementing whole school improvement plans.

Through our National Partnership for disadvantaged school communities, schools around the country are developing new collaborations with their local communities, offering extended services learning opportunities, hiring expert teachers and deploying expert skills.

In New South Wales, Highly Accomplished Teachers are already being placed in schools where they can make the greatest difference and rewarded with enhanced salaries that allow them to earn close to six figures without having to leave the classroom.

The Teacher Quality National Partnership also provides for professional development and support initiatives that empower principals to lead and manage their schools more effectively.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

We are focusing for the first time in a systematic way on school leadership. We understand that principals are pivotal in leading the education reform agenda in their school.

That's why Education Ministers have agreed to establish a new Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership to promote excellence and national leadership in the professional development of school leaders and teachers.

The Institute will help to develop new professional standards and work together with teachers' organisations and school systems to offer and promote excellence in professional development.

It will draw on the \$50 million investment in developing school leadership skills around the nation.

Conclusion

You can see how much change has been delivered over the last two years.

But I am under no illusions about the enormity of the reform task.

Long-term reform is difficult work. It's hard to get right.

It's also hard to convince people of its worth because it involves uncertainty, disruption and upfront investment.

But we are uniquely positioned to build on the new consensus about our collective priorities for education, and equip this and future generations with the skills that they need to thrive in complex, competitive world.

Delivering the Education Revolution depends on the commitment and the collaboration of teachers, parents, students and many other partners. It depends on your willingness to take the new resources and the new accountability and shape it into the techniques and the organisations that can deliver world class education outcomes in every Australian community.

We value your knowledge and want to hear your voice in the education debate on an ongoing basis.

I wish you well in your meeting and look forward to talking with you again.

Thank you.