

## One shot vaccine for learning?

International test results and media attention continue to confirm that learning in Australian schools, at least as measured by these tests, is declining. While everyone is concerned, politicians, education academics, educational bureaucrats and even schools keep looking for the magic program that will solve the problems and return Australia to its high position internationally.

### The medical model

During the summer break and before the stories about returning to school, newspapers carried a number of stories touching on this theme. The *Epidemic Australia is failing to control* (SMH 5/1/21) by Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg working in the Gonski Institute, laments that the use of scientific health advice in fighting the Covid 19 pandemic is not being duplicated in education. He claims that evidence-based policies would have terminated NAPLAN at the trial stage by accepting the evidence of curriculum narrowing, teaching to tests and declining motivation. He decries the inspiration *for the education reforms (that) are imported from the US and Britain* and that come with little or weak evidence of success. As with the medical model he wants to put his trust in science but claims that *unlike medicine, education operates on the basis of ideology, politics and consensus*. However, the variables in education settings are multiple and not easily controlled to give clear evidence.

### The single shot

Imported and home-grown programs and ideologies have often been touted as solutions to teaching and learning problems. Failed national and local initiatives can be recalled: nationally developed statements and profiles and the key competencies programs of the early nineties, the demise of the NSW Quality Assurance audit program and the failure to fire Quality Teaching initiative. We can recall nationally promoted programs in Asian studies, civics and citizenship and values education which failed to penetrate more than the interested school. Yes, some schools benefitted from these programs and their students are better off for being included, but for most schools their resistance based on the knowledge that time would see them disappear proved correct. Systemic change is always difficult and not possible through a single initiative no matter how good it might seem to be by those implementing it.

So with interest, I read *Game to help NSW students improve marks, behaviour* (SMH 13/1/21). Like any educational initiative, put into the hands of a good teacher and supported by other forms of learning, this initiative can bring about the outcomes claimed. Focussed on primary school students, the game *PAX Good Behaviour Game*, claims from longitudinal studies in the US to *decrease aggression, increase students' test*

scores and their chances of going to university, and make them less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs. The description of methodology involves, competitive group work with prizes.

Incorporated into teaching, this game can achieve a lot, but it is not a one-shot solution to educational standards. Some of the variables I would like to see data on are the socioeconomic differences for how the game is used and forthcoming results, how it is used within the classroom to address the curriculum, how it caters for individual differences and whether boredom with a predominant methodology sets in.

## **Gurus**

On the same theme, *Schools too influenced by “Kardashian” gurus: research* (SMH 17/1/21) reports on research resulting in a light-hearted attempt to highlight the growth of the guru, rock-star researcher and conference circuit speaker by creating an index based on the discrepancy between the social media profile and publications record - a social influence index inspired by Kim Kardashian.

The result listed a number of high scorers amongst well known educationalist raising the question as to whether schools (including education ministers and bureaucrats) are too influenced by gurus whose initiatives may not have the scientific research and implementation evidence to back them up. This may be a very serious matter in Australia where there is pressure to improve. There is also a range of situational and cultural reasons why successful initiatives might work in one country, system or school but not in others. It is these matters that complicate educational success.

## **Multifaceted issue**

As discussed in *Going backwards: 20+ years of a literacy and numeracy focus* <https://www.tcfofnsw.org.au/articles/assessment/literacy-and-numeracy/> the issues are complex and involve: curriculum; funding; conflict (in educational theories, innovations and research), teaching quality, resources and on the job training, teacher training and accreditation; political and bureaucratic decision making; expectations of student performance; socio-economic background and preschool education; testing programs; adopting overseas models; and separating standards and rank.

Addressing our educational problems needs to occur in all these areas together in the same time frame as they impact on each other. Neither by a piecemeal approach, nor a one-shot vaccine will deliver the learning wanted for Australian students.

John Gore

## **Controversial Issues**

There are some items in the school curriculum that teachers find difficult to teach because of their potential controversial nature. Teachers themselves may feel uncomfortable with teaching a particular topic or they may be aware of options held by members of their local community or the wider public which may be an area of sensitivity.

The NSW Department of Education has a *Controversial Issues Policy* and a *Procedure* document to manage such concerns along with related policies on *Religious Education*, *Values in Education*, *Special Education in Ethics*, *a Code of Conduct for Teachers*, *Incident Reporting*, and the use of *Audiovisual material in schools*. The *Controversial Issues Policy* is something, among all the other DET policies, that some teachers may be unaware of.

As a Christian teacher working in a public school, being aware of this policy might make it a little clearer how to teach and act within the framework of your employment. For teachers in Christian schools, some of the DET policy approaches may also be useful in designing your own policies to handle controversial issues that arise through teaching the curriculum.

Harley Mills

## A summary of the DET Controversial Issues In Schools Policy and Procedures

\*\*\*\*\*Teachers are advised to read the whole policy and procedures documents and not to rely only on the edited summary of the main points below. Ed.\*\*\*\*\*

Controversial Issues in Schools Policy

Policy document number: PD-2002-0045 Implementation date: 20/2/1983

Last updated: 26/06/2020

<https://policies.education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/controversial-issues-in-schools>

Controversial Issues in Schools Procedures Policy document number:

PD/2002/0045/01/V4.0.0 Implementation date: 14 June 2007

Last revised: 12 December 2017

<https://policies.education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/controversial-issues-in-schools/controversial-procedures.pdf>

### The general context

Schools provide curriculum-based learning and teaching programs, activities and events to achieve a wide range of learning outcomes that include values, attitudes and ethics.

Schools are required to acknowledge the diverse views held by parents and the community about what is suitable for study at school.

Students and teachers face changing and complex societal situations. Particular topics covered in learning and teaching programs may be impacted on by events outside the school and become controversial in nature. Controversial issues are not static and are impacted by changing attitudes, world events and social values.

### The Policy

1. “The study of controversial issues is acceptable for educational purposes consistent with the delivery of curriculum and provision of school programs and activities.
2. Controversial issues are managed in accordance with the following principles:
  - Schools are neutral places for rational discourse and objective study.
  - Discussion of controversial issues in schools should allow students to explore a range of viewpoints and not advance the interest of any particular group.
  - Material presented to students as part of school programs and school activities should be:
    - age appropriate
    - sensitive to student needs
    - relevant to the curriculum

- relevant to the school’s purpose and goals
  - consistent with the core values outlined in *Values in NSW public schools* policy.
3. Where outlined in the procedures, parents and carers should be informed about the participation of their children in delivery of curriculum, events, excursions, school programs or activities addressing controversial issues.
  4. Attempting to recruit students or staff into non-school approved groups for religious or ideological reasons is not permitted in schools.

### **The Teacher’s Role**

5. maintain objectivity, avoiding distortion of discussion and acknowledge the rights of students, parents and carers to hold different viewpoints.
6. inform the principal of any upcoming activities, curriculum content, school programs, presentations, events or visitors addressing controversial issues.

## **Procedures**

### **What are controversial issues?**

“Controversial issues may be questions, subjects, topics or problems which create a difference of opinion, causing contention and debate within the school or the community

Schools are not places to proselytise, that is, to convert students who are not already members of a particular belief system to become members of that belief system.

Schools should not be used to advance political platforms or for recruiting into partisan groups organised upon restricted party lines.”

### **Management procedures**

A teacher’s personal view should not impact on teaching a subject. Sharing their knowledge or view may be necessary to assist students to form their own views or to answer a query from students relevant to the discussion. In such situations the information given should be balanced and presented as one opinion to be considered critically along with any others. Teachers are required to ensure that all views and evidence are presented impartially in all discussions of controversial issues.

### **Visitors and external providers**

Supervise presentations and activities conducted by visitors and external providers, ensuring that objectivity is maintained and the rights of students to express differing viewpoints are respected. Where possible, view presentations and materials used by visitors and external providers prior to the event.

Religious Education and Ethics providers conducting activities outside the specific activities listed in the [Religious Education policy](#) and [Special Education in Ethics policy](#) are subject to the provisions of this policy and procedures.

### **Distributing material**

All materials to be referenced or distributed to students that include controversial issues are to be reviewed and approved by the principal in advance. Approval for excursions and

the participation or engagement of visitors or external providers to the school is subject to the review of the materials to be used.

### **Media materials**

Media material to be used in school, school programs and activities or on excursions are to be previewed by teachers or the principal prior to the event.

### **Parent information/consent**

Parents and carers need to be advised of the specific details of school activities, programs or events addressing controversial issues and the relevance to the curriculum and school programs and activities.

## **Prayer points**

Pray for:

- Christians involved in education, that they will be a blessing to others.
- All students, especially those entering Kindergarten, high school, university and TAFE. Pray for ex students who are seeking to enter the workforce.
- Adequate number of SRE teachers and that school staff will encourage their work.

### **A Teacher's Prayer (source unknown)**

Lord Jesus, when you lived and worked and talked amongst the people in Palestine they called you Teacher. Help me to realise the greatness of the work which you have given me to do, in your name. Help me always to remember that I work with the most precious material in the world, the mind of the child. Help me to remember that I am making impressions upon that mind which time will never erase. Give me patience with those who are slow to learn and with those who refuse to learn. When I have to exercise discipline help me to do so with firmness and yet with love. Keep me from the sarcastic and biting remark and help me always to encourage and never discourage those who are doing their best. Help me to assist the students, not only to store things in their memories, but also to use their minds, and to think for themselves. Amidst the worries, the irritations and frustrations of my work each day help me to remember that the future of our nation and of the world is in my hands.

AMEN.

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TCFNSW

PO Box 3813 Marsfield NSW 2122

Ph 0490 148 249.

Email: [tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au](mailto:tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au)

Web [www.tcfofnsw.org.au](http://www.tcfofnsw.org.au)