Submission from the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People on

*Quality Matters: Revitalising Teaching: critical times, critical choices*

Report of the Review of Teacher Education New South Wales

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1. The Commission for Children and Young People

1.01. The Commission for Children and Young People was established by the Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998. The Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

(a) the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children are the paramount considerations
(b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account
(c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children: s10.

1.02 Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

1.03 It is one of the principal functions of the Commission to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies and practices and services affecting children: s11(d).

2. This submission

2.01 The Commission is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on Quality Matters, the report of the review of teaching in New South Wales.

2.02 The Commission makes no claim to specialist expertise in the area of teacher education but the Commissioner and her staff hear the views of many school students throughout New South Wales. The Commission also benefits from input from members of its Young Peoples Reference Group.

2.03 The Commission generally supports the recommendations in Quality Matters and congratulates Dr Ramsey and the Department of Education and Training on the quality of the Report and its recommendations.

2.04 The main thrust of the Commission’s submission is that there is need for a reappraisal of the role of students in schools and of the inter-relationship between students and teachers. Children and young people should be given every opportunity to participate in decision-making. It is only fair that students should have a say in
decisions that affect them and involving them in decision-making processes is likely to make them feel valued and part of the school community.

3. Children and the education process

3.01 Children and young people are the consumers of school education – they are required by law to spend six or more hours a day, five days a week, nine months a year in compulsory education. In addition they are expected to do homework and participate in other school-related activities.

3.02 The experiences that children and young people have of school exert an important influence on many aspects of their lives. Not only do they gain knowledge but they also have the opportunity to establish relationships with a broad range of peers, to develop interests and personal values, to take on leadership roles. School provides a broad range of opportunities for children in addition to curriculum-based learning opportunities.

3.03 For many children, school is their first direct contact with an agency of government and a place where they are exposed to a range of ideas and values. They are likely to have daily contact with people from different cultures and people with different values and perceptions of the world than members of their own family and community.

3.04 The Commission as part of its work on the Inquiry into the Needs of Children Who Have No-one To Turn To has spoken to a number of children and young people from all parts of New South Wales. While educationists see schools as primarily in terms of teaching and educational achievement, the perceptions that children and young people have of their school are more influenced by their feeling of connectedness with the school. Children are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to the school if they feel they are welcome at school, that their teachers know, like and respect them, that they are treated fairly and any special efforts are appreciated.

3.05 School can be a constricting or expanding experience for students. Considering the importance of school education, it is surprising that there is so little Australian research on students’ perceptions of school and their assessment of good and bad features of the time they spend at school. This may reflect the fact that education is compulsory and that students have only limited ability to influence what, where and how they are taught.

3.06 If schools are to achieve success in their function of educating children and young people they must be enjoyable, stimulating and challenging places. They must succeed in inculcating in students an understanding of the benefits of education and a lively interest in the subjects being taught.

3.07 The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has recently released a General Commentary on the Aims of Education which contains a useful formulation of the objectives of education:
‘The overall objective of education is to maximise the child’s ability and opportunity to participate fully in a free society. It should be emphasized that the type of teaching that is focused primarily on accumulation of knowledge, prompting competition and leading to an excessive burden of work on children, may seriously hamper the harmonious development of the child to the fullest potential of his or her abilities and talents. Education should be child-friendly, inspiring and motivating the individual child. Schools should foster a humane atmosphere and allow children to develop according to their evolving capacities’: CRC/GC/2001/1 17 April 2001.

3.08 One of the challenges of teaching in the 21st century will be to engage the interest of all students. Bored students are not learning anything of value and are likely to disrupt the learning of other students. Teachers and the education system need to be flexible enough to use a variety of methods and subject material to engage the interest of different students.

4. Engaging students

4.01 There are special skills involved in making a subject interesting to young learners and involving them in discovering new knowledge and skills. The ‘chalk and talk’ method of teaching was never particularly effective. Active learning methods which encourage physical and intellectual involvement of students are more effective and more likely to keep children and young people engaged. Group activities allow students to share ideas and knowledge and help them to develop skills of working co-operatively. Inflexible classroom layout and over-rigid discipline discourages shared learning and active involvement in the learning process.

4.02 Quality Matters makes the perceptive comment in the section Engaging students (page 79) that ‘When students find the pedagogy engaging and the curriculum relevant they behave and learn’. One way to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and the teaching is engaging is to get feedback from students and to encourage participation of student in curriculum development, choice of subjects offered and manner in which subjects are taught.

4.03 The Commission believes that there should be greater opportunities for student participation at every level of education: planning, policy-making, goal setting, curriculum content, school choice and subject options, staff selection, teaching methods and use of new technologies, school rules and discipline procedures.

4.04 Teaching involves a series of interactions between teachers and students. Both have much to contribute to these interactions. Section 6(1)(a) Education Act 1990 (NSW) states the first object of school education as being to ‘assist each child to achieve his or her educational potential’ and other objects highlight the encouragement of innovation and diversity and the provision of an education that promotes family and community values. All students are part of a family and community outside the school and their life experiences may be very different than those of their teachers. Today the notion that education is the transmission of a fixed body of knowledge is outmoded. Schools must be sufficiently flexible be able to cater for the variety of needs, interests and career goals of different students.
4.05 Some difficulties in engaging students are unavoidable and schools need the resources to assist students who come to school with high support learning needs through no fault of their own or that of their teachers.

4.06 The aim should be to avoid having students who fail to engage with learning as a direct result of inappropriate curriculum or weak pedagogy.

4.06 Old fashioned teaching methods envisage teaching as a unidirectional process whereby teachers impart knowledge and students are expected to absorb that knowledge. *Quality Matters* does little to question this uni-directional model of teaching and contains very little reference to the contribution that students can make to curriculum content, subject choices and the teaching process nor does it explore in any depth different learning styles and cultural factors in teaching and learning.

4.07 If teaching is to be effective and if schools are to be places where knowledge is shared there is a need for a major attitudinal shift on the part of teachers and educationists. Teacher training provides opportunities to being about a cultural change so that education is seen as a partnership between teachers, students and parents.

5. Behaviour management

5.01 The Commission endorses the comment in *Quality Matters* that approaches to behaviour management should focus on the core issue of human relationships. If a teacher is liked and respected by students, behaviour problems are less likely to occur. Children and young people accept rules and limits provided they have some say in framing the rules and provided they feel that the rules are applied fairly.

6. Teaching quality and standards for teachers

6.01 The Commission agrees with the point made in *Quality Matters* that the debate around teaching standards sometimes fails to make the connection between teacher quality and student learning and that teachers who connect with and enthuse their students make a substantial difference to the quality and extent of student learning. Interpersonal skills are very important and students learn better from teachers who they like and respect. If students are bored and unstimulated in class they are more likely to have a poor attendance record and/or to drop out of school.

6.02 Setting of standards should be seen as a process of continuous and incremental improvement rather than defining a minimum acceptable level of competency. All teachers, from the beginning teachers to the most experienced members of the profession, have the capacity to improve their effectiveness and develop new skills.

6.03 The Commission supports the recommendations that an *Institute of Teachers* be established to set and enforce professional standards and that there be an *Australian Graduate School of Teaching* to encourage research and professional
specialisation. But creating new bodies and enhancing the prestige of teachers will not itself improve the quality of teaching in schools.

6.04 A new paradigm of teaching is needed; one which includes school students as active participants in the education process. The establishment of new policy-making bodies as proposed by Quality Matters provides a unique opportunity to involve students in planning and policy-making. There should be built into these new bodies structures and processes which will ensure student involvement in the development and monitoring of teaching standards, the identification of priority areas for research and specialisation and criteria for the recruitment and selection of teachers.

6.05 Recommendation 1: that student participation be built into the formal structures and processes of the Institute of Teachers, Australian Graduate School of Teaching, the Joint Committee on Teacher Supply or any equivalent body established in response to the recommendations in Quality Matters.

6.06 The Commission has considered the arguments against compulsory accreditation of teachers but, on balance, believes that compulsory rather than voluntary accreditation will ensure higher standards. Compulsory accreditation is the most effective way of ensuring basic minimum standards. Other professions such as law and medicine have compulsory registration requirements. These professions build into their annual renewal procedures a requirement that the practitioner has undertaken continuing professional education courses in the previous twelve months.

6.07 The concern that compulsory accreditation requirements would deter people with advanced skills in specialist areas (e.g. music or sports) from entering teaching could be met by specialist accreditation or an instructor’s certificate which would allow the person to teach only in his or her area of specialty. People with specialist skills do not necessarily have teaching skills and should be required as part of their specialist accreditation to develop such skills.

6.08 Recommendation 2: that a system of compulsory accreditation of teachers be introduced albeit a system which provides for specialist accreditation for teachers who limit their teaching to subjects in which they have a specialist expertise.

6.09 One of the problems facing teachers today is that the government and the community expect them to undertake a wide range of tasks that are not part of traditional teaching. Classroom teachers are expected to fulfil a variety of roles over and above their classroom teaching responsibilities. Many of these activities are sensitive and time consuming for teachers. At a time of rapid change in community expectations and standards it is difficult for teachers to carry out these various social functions in addition to their teaching responsibilities. One of the most important questions facing education today is whether class sizes should be reduced to give teachers more time to devote to these social responsibilities or whether specialist assistance should be provided in schools.
6.10 In other countries there are pilot schemes by which social workers are attached to schools in the areas of greatest need so that teachers can get on with their core task of teaching. A pilot program in New Zealand has been expanded and there are now 67 social workers attached to 165 primary schools in 29 priority areas: *Youth Law Review 46 p20 Dec 2000*. The social workers are independent of government child protection agencies and can assist students, teachers and families with child protection, health and behaviour management issues. They can also assist students with family or school problems affecting their ability to learn. Their training and role differs from that of school counsellors.

6.11 Additional resources and support will free teachers to concentrate on teaching. Teachers also need support to deal with sensitive issues such as sex education, alcohol and drug education and non-sectarian religious studies.

6.12 Recommendation 3: that more resources, support systems and training be provided to assist teachers with the ancillary functions they are increasingly expected to take on.

7. Use of technology

7.01 As *Quality Matters* points out, modern technological advances give teachers a much broader range of options. A student who has access to a computer and the skills necessary to download information from the internet can tap into an immense range of information and ideas. It allows students in the same class to work simultaneously on different topics. It assists self-learning and enables students to develop valuable computer skills in addition to giving them fingertip access to a huge body of knowledge.

7.02 The focus of teaching has moved over the last few decades from teachers imparting knowledge to passive students towards teachers guiding students in collecting information, assessing, analysing and ordering the information and presenting it in a balanced and persuasive form.

7.03 *Quality Matters* refers to comments made in submissions to the effect that many students have more advanced technology skills than their teachers: *Student and teacher knowledge* (p74). Consideration might be given to opportunities being provided for skilled students to pass their knowledge on to teachers and their fellow students.

7.04 In a rapidly changing society teachers need to keep in touch with technological change. While this can be achieved to some extent by continuing education opportunities for teachers there remains a need for teachers to learn directly from students what information and skills they want to acquire and what they perceive to be the most effective means of acquiring such information and skills.

7.05 *Quality Matters* makes the point that it is not enough for teachers to be computer literate. They must also have the skills to adapt the new technology as a teaching aid at classroom level. Getting major points across with Powerpoint and other specialist technology is more effective and less time
consuming that writing them up on a blackboard. The new technology can break up the monotony of traditional teaching by exposing students to a variety of different teaching tools and information sources.

7.06 Recommendation 4: that upskilling of teachers in the use of new technology be a priority in teacher training and continuing teacher education and that shared learning opportunities be encouraged where both teachers and skilled students participate.

8. Appraising teachers and teaching skills

8.01 Few schools systematically seek out student feedback on individual teachers, their teaching style and skills. While appraisal of teachers has to be handled sensitively, it can bring real benefits to teachers in alerting them to aspects of their teaching that can be changed or improved. There is a need for enhanced, and possibly formalised, student-teacher feedback loops as an aid to teacher performance and development. Feedback will assist teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to organise further education accordingly. It will also benefit students who will feel they have some control over teaching methods and the quality of teaching they receive. Students in compulsory education have no option but to suffer in silence the ministrations of a teacher who lacks communication skills and fails to arouse their interest. This state of learned helplessness is not beneficial to teacher or students.

8.02 Recommendation 5: that appraisal of teacher performance by students become standard practice in schools and that teacher training include components on the importance of getting regular feedback from students and using this information as a basis for identifying and remedying areas of weakness.

9. Bullying of students

9.01 Recently there has been much media publicity about bullying in schools. There is now considerable research on this issue both in Australia and overseas. Kids Helpline reports that bullying is the third most common cause of concern raised by children under 15 and that indigenous children and children from a non-English speaking background are the most vulnerable. The Commonwealth government is currently developing a national plan to address bullying and this will highlight effective policies, strategies and practice.

9.02 In the course of the Commission’s consultations with children as part of its Inquiry into the Best Means Of Assisting Children Who Have No-One To Turn To a number of children expressed the view that teachers are failing to intervene to stop bullying. Dr Ken Rigby, a leading researcher in this area, has commented that

9.03 Recommendation 6: that teachers, as part of their teacher training and as part of their induction on taking up a school appointment, receive information and training on policies, strategies and practices which can reduce bullying and protect the most vulnerable students.

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