



Grapevine

MINISTER SEES LIGHT, FACES HEAT

New South Wales Minister for Education Verity Firth committed in July to replace 55,000 unflued gas heaters in NSW government schools, at an estimated cost of \$170 million, after the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research in Sydney found the heaters emit levels of nitrogen oxide and other gases that cause increased respiratory symptoms, particularly in children with allergies such as asthma. The Minister had previously and repeatedly claimed the heaters were safe if used when doors and windows were open. According to Louise Hall and Sean Nicholls in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, though, Firth was ‘hung out to dry’ the day after her about turn by NSW Premier Kristina Keneally because she made the decision, and announced it, without cabinet approval. In a statement, the NSW Premier made no commitment to replace all unflued heaters, saying only, ‘The NSW government...is currently spending \$15 million to remove unflued gas heaters in schools in the coldest areas.’ As Andrew Clennell and Gemma Jones reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, NSW Treasurer Eric Roozendaal loudly rebuked the Minister for Education in a cabinet budget committee meeting. ‘The Treasurer’s raised voice could be heard through the doors as Ms Firth repeatedly apologised for her mistake,’ they reported. The Minister also apologised to the Premier, who accepted her apology and confirmed her ministerial position was secure.

GROW YOUR OWN VEGGIES – CONDITIONS APPLY

Is it odd that a ‘convenience’ frozen food company wants primary school students to turn their backs on pre-prepared frozen foods in favour of a time-consuming gardening program? The program launched by frozen food giant McCain has come under fire because schools appear to have been forced to sign up for future marketing campaigns as a condition of entry. The McCain School Veggie Patches scheme invites students in participating schools to

collect barcodes from packets of McCain’s frozen vegetables or its convenient ‘Purely Potato’ brand – after all, who wants to wash, peel and cut potatoes? – and redeem them for seeds and gardening tools. According to Nicki Anderson, Marketing Director McCain Foods Australia and New Zealand, the program is ‘a significant commitment to children’s food education.’ ‘We are passionate about educating children about the foods they eat and where they come from,’ Anderson told the Grapevine – whether they come from McCain packets or veggie patches. ‘Involving children in the process of planting, growing and harvesting veggies is a great way to get them excited about eating veggies,’ she added. Could it also be a great pester-power way to get their parents to buy McCain’s frozen vegetables first?

NANNY STATE 1

Students in Colorado have been told they can no longer study real igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rocks and will have to study pictures of rocks instead. At least, that’s what Lenore Skenazy suggests in *Forbes* magazine. According to Skenazy, a one-time *New York Sun* and *NY Daily News* journalist and author of *Free-Range Kids: Giving our children the freedom we had without going nuts with worry*, ‘Michael Warring, president of American Educational Products in Fort Collins, Colorado, had his shipment all ready: a school’s worth of small bags, each one filled with an igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rock. Then the school cancelled its order. Says Warring, “They apparently decided rocks could be harmful to children.” After all, who knows exactly what is in a piece of Mother Nature? There could be a speck of lead! The children will study a poster of rocks instead. And so it goes in the unbrave new world, where nothing is safe enough. It’s a world brought to us by the once sane, now danger-hallucinating Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).’ The rocks-in-their-heads story was quickly picked up by right-leaning media outlets. The key to this little drama, though, is Skenazy’s ‘speck of

lead.’ Yes, the CPSC has investigated rocks – in 2009 – and ruled that ‘rocks and stones... do not exceed the lead content limits specified under section 101(a) of the *Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act* of 2008.’ If American Educational Products lost a sale, it’s not because of the CPSC.

NANNY STATE 2

Still on the nanny state, as London’s right-leaning *Daily Telegraph* reported, ‘Oliver and Gillian Schonrock were warned they could be reported to the local authority (Southwark Council) after letting their eight-year-old daughter and five-year-old son cycle a mile unsupervised to Alleyn’s Junior School...in Dulwich, south London.’ According to principal Mark O’Donnell, quoted in the *Daily Tele*, ‘If a school feels a child in their care is at risk, they have a legal responsibility to notify the local authority.’ London Mayor Boris Johnson eagerly took to the story in his *Daily Tele* blog. ‘They have taken the sword of common sense to the great bloated encephalopathic sacred cow of elf and safety,’ he thundered. Did Johnson mention common sense? Southwark Council received no formal correspondence from Alleyn’s Junior School, and as Catherine McDonald, who is responsible for children’s services at Southwark Council, explained to the *Daily Tele*, ‘We’d give them the same advice as we do to our own schools, that they should develop a school travel plan with parents and children so they can get to school safely.... This would include both cycling and walking.’

THE END OF THE 1950s AS WE KNOW IT

Golly: ‘school tunic’ and ‘house mistress’ are out, and ‘uniform’ and ‘teacher’ are in. At least, they’ll be in a planned new revised version of Enid Blyton’s *The Faraway Tree* series. Mind you, the school for bad pixies is run by Dame Snap in the current edition rather than Dame Slap.

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