



Educating for life

DAVID LOADER SUGGESTS ALL STATE AND TERRITORY GOVERNMENTS SHOULD ADOPT THE 'EDUCATING FOR LIFE' POLICY MOOTED BY THE THEN BRUMBY LABOR GOVERNMENT IN VICTORIA LATE LAST YEAR.

I've been as critical as anyone of many of our educational policies, but the 'Educating for Life: the Year 9 experience' policy proposed recently in Victoria as part of an election promise by the then Brumby Labor government late last year deserves praise.

The idea was for Year 9 students to take a school term out of traditional academic classes to focus on key life skills to enhance their personal growth and social interaction.

Student surveys reveal that Year 9 students are more disengaged from classroom learning than other year levels. Those who've taught Year 9 students know it's a difficult time in students' maturing from adolescence to adulthood.

The Year 9 classroom has often been described as a battlefield of wills, the teachers pursuing their demanding academic goals and students resisting, saying they'd rather be dealing with their own personal and social challenges. On the threshold of adulthood, young people show a great deal more interest in becoming effective adults than they do in studying 'core' subjects such as history, mathematics and science.

Educators have long recognised that the school curriculum needs to make better connections with the intellectual and social needs of this challenging age group, and there are many examples of the success of such programs in Australia. The problem is that not all students have access to them. Educating for Life proposed that all Year 9 students in government schools would, in non-classroom settings, be challenged to develop 'self-reliance, leadership, independence, respect, teamwork and caring for others.' The outcomes would include non-school practical credentials and certificates provided by agencies such as the Country

Fire Authority, the State Emergency Service, Life Saving Victoria and St John Ambulance.

The program was designed to run for a school term, with students still being required to cover the core curriculum, but with a greater focus on experience, covering things like bushfire awareness, first aid, advanced water safety; arts and culture appreciation; self-defence; drug, alcohol and mental health awareness; career counselling and financial literacy; leadership opportunities and public speaking; and volunteering and community service.

The term-long program would have included a government-funded two-week camp that could be in the country for city students and in the city for country students. Both the church and the military have long recognised the importance of a residential component in their learning programs. It is in community, away from the usual support structures such as family, that one learns to be independent and interdependent. Of course, the current curriculum enables schools to do plenty, along similar lines, but what was proposed was more practical, less theoretical and more engaging to students.

A policy that would provide learning experiences relevant to the students' developmental needs actually deserved to be called innovative. A policy that involved partnerships with existing sporting and community groups and included practical credentials deserved to be called innovative. A policy that recognised the need for, and would actually provide, a residential experience of some significance deserved to be called innovative.

Some students have had this residential opportunity in the past, but not all. This program would begin to address this.

To fully address this age group's needs, however, I believe that we have to go even further and offer a residential program for a whole school term. A residential program lasting eight or so weeks requires students to take real responsibility for themselves. Whether in a tent or a community house, whether in the bush or in the city, whether the curriculum focus is cultural or involves active physical pursuits, the setting should encourage students to take responsibility for themselves and others. The goal is to create a largely student-directed community under the care of specially trained adults. The students would be expected to reflect on their experience, with the goal to enhance their personal, intellectual and social growth, and to focus on what it means to be effective learners who can take responsibility for themselves in an ever-changing world.

As educators we recognise that, important as the skills measured by the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy tests are, they're not the only ones of consequence. The Educating for Life policy addresses equally important personal and social skills.

It wasn't enough to return a Labor government, but it's still a brilliant idea. I hope the Baillieu Liberal government in Victoria, as well as other state and federal decision-makers, will see the merit of this policy and adopt it. **T**

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