



The year of the argy-bargy

STEVE HOLDEN LOOKS BACK ON 2009, THE YEAR OF ARGY-BARGY ABOUT LEAGUE TABLES, BEEFS OVER BUILDING WORKS AND CONCERN FOR INDIAN STUDENTS AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION.

The year began with the Commonwealth government's announcement of its \$42 billion stimulus package that earmarked \$14.7 billion for its Building the Education Revolution (BER) fund to build or upgrade buildings in Australia's 9,540 schools.

That \$14.7 billion package jumped \$1.5 billion to \$16.2 billion after almost 100 per cent of primary schools put their hands up for funding in the BER Primary Schools for the 21st Century program.

As Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education Julia Gillard explained in August, 'When we budgeted for this plan, we budgeted on the basis that 90 per cent of primary schools would take up our offer.... As it's turned out...almost 100 per cent of primary schools have taken the opportunity.'

The Commonwealth government had also budgeted \$1 billion to build about 500 science laboratories and language centres through the BER Science and Language Centres for 21st Century Secondary Schools program, and 537 were approved in the first round of applications, before the Commonwealth government cancelled a planned second round in late August, revising down the \$1 billion secondary schools fund to \$821.8 million.

Beaconsfield Upper Primary School in Melbourne's outer south-east managed to get approval from the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for the full-size gymnasium it wanted after school council president Gavin McGill spoke out on the issue on ABC TV's *State-line* Victoria in June. Nearby Langwarrin Primary School council president Damien Pepper subsequently persuaded Julia Gillard to ask the Victorian department, as she explained in October, to 'look at the issue

again, because it seemed to me there were clearly problems with what was being suggested.' Langwarrin Primary wanted to use its \$3 million from the BER fund to build a public-use centre, with a canteen and arts space, but was told it could use the money only to replace existing buildings. 'We talk through the government's reform agenda... and occasionally we get someone at one of those forums who says, "I have got this real problem," and we go through exactly the same process that we have been through here,' Gillard explained.

The argy-bargy on the decision by Commonwealth, state and territory Education Ministers to ensure 'that schools provide clear performance reporting to parents, carers and to their local communities' in the form of nationally-consistent information about school results began to hot up towards year's end. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd admitted he was expecting some argy-bargy when he spoke about national league tables at the National Press Club, back in August last year. By June this year, it was obvious that we were coming to the pointy end when the New South Wales opposition, with cross-bench support, managed to win a parliamentary vote to prevent newspapers from publishing league tables in NSW.

In September, meanwhile, Queensland's *Courier Mail* happily published school-by-school results for the 2009 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, better known as NAPLAN.

The NAPLAN state-by-state test results released in September suggested student achievement is holding steady in most states and territories in terms of the national minimum standard in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy.

The NAPLAN results show little change in the percentage of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students at or above the national minimum standard from 2008 to 2009, except for students in Queensland and the Northern Territory, where results suggested some improvement.

The Commonwealth of Australia was found liable for the death of Nathan Francis, a 13-year-old Year 9 student at Melbourne's Scotch College, who died after being issued with a satay beef food pouch containing peanuts or peanut protein at a cadet camp in March 2007, according to a judgement by Federal Court of Australia Justice Tony North in June. Justice North found the Commonwealth liable as the employer of members of the Australian Army Cadets, but concluded 'that there is need for a wider enquiry into the deficiencies which led to Nathan's death.' 'It is my strong recommendation that the (Victorian) Coroner conduct an enquiry into this matter,' Justice North added. 'The finding that the Commonwealth is liable...does not mean that no other person or body was responsible for Nathan's death,' Justice North concluded. 'The circumstances presented to the court raise a question whether Scotch College through its teachers and staff bear some responsibility for these events.' In fining the Commonwealth \$210,100, Justice North also observed that the requirement to penalise the Commonwealth when the Commonwealth was the wrongdoer was irrational. 'Its absurdity is reflected in the terms of the order which must be made, namely, that the Commonwealth pay a pecuniary penalty, which penalty is to be paid to the Commonwealth,' he concluded.

Australia's reputation as an international education provider took a nosedive after reports in May of attacks against Indian students that led to protests in Melbourne and Sydney, followed in July by allegations of exploitation of international students in Wendy Carlisle's 'Holy cash cows' *Four Corners* report. The sector's reputation nosedived further when Sterling College in Sydney went into voluntary administration

in July, affecting about 600 international students and 35 teachers, following a NSW government finding in May that the college had breached a number of regulations.

That was followed by the deregistration of Sydney's Aerospace Aviation, a pilot training school, by the NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) in August to prevent it teaching overseas trainee pilots because of a critical breach of standards. Several students alleged in Carlisle's report that they had paid thousands of dollars in tuition fees to Aerospace Aviation, but were left without qualifications. Aerospace Aviation is appealing the VETAB decision.

Visiting Australia in August, Indian External Affairs Minister Somanahalli Mallaiiah Krishna said he was satisfied that Indian students were safe in Australia.

International students and information technology (IT) graduates who paid for an IT course conducted by Zanak Technologies, a Melbourne-based IT service and consultancy, were misled, deceived and exploited, the Federal Court found in October. The court found Zanak and its principals, Darley Stephen and Vanitha Darley, both Indian nationals residing in Australia, had engaged in misleading and deceptive and unconscionable conduct toward the students and graduates.

According to a survey of 1,130 Indian students and graduates from around the world by overseas recruiter IDP Education, published in October, 26 per cent of international students rank Australia as the safest destination for study. Great Britain and Canada ranked equal second with 20 per cent. New Zealand ranked third with 13 per cent, with the United States ranked fourth with five per cent.

Good news for Australian universities came in the form of the results of the 2009 *Times Higher Education* Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings, published in October. The highest ranked, Australian National University, is still in the top 20, placing 17th, down from 16th last year. Six Australian universities ranked

in the top 50, with eight in the top 100, one more than in 2008, but 22 Australian universities ranked in the top 400, up from 21 in 2008.

The *Rewarding Quality Teaching* report of consultancy firm Gerard Daniels, commissioned by the Commonwealth government of previous Prime Minister John Howard in 2007, was completed in March, but only released in August. The report cautiously concluded that some form of performance-based pay or incentive might be a good idea. 'Incentives paid directly to (high-performing) teachers or additional budgets for hard-to-fill schools earmarked for senior teacher roles are the most effective ways of attracting our best teachers,' the report concluded. 'Any model of pay needs to be carefully crafted so that high-performing teachers are found in hard-to-fill schools; and the model does not create barriers or disincentives for these teachers.'

The report cautiously rejected the idea of tying the performance-based pay of teachers to their students' performance as measured by students' test scores. 'Such schemes build on the idea that growth in student performance is a strong indicator of teaching quality, and that it is the indicator for which it is worth paying,' but, according to the report, 'it makes no sense to pay for students' average performance – because the quality of teaching explains only 30 percent of the variance in students' test scores.'

The report concluded that employers should 'embrace differential remuneration for teachers who are assessed as high performers,' and that a successful scheme would depend on the quality of the teacher assessment process, and on similar teaching standards across jurisdictions.

Julia Gillard said, in a statement, '*Rewarding Quality Teaching*...will form the basis of the reform of teacher remuneration arrangements in each state and territory,' but stopped short of committing the Commonwealth government to act on its recommendations, observing merely that it 'will inform the development and implementation of new teacher pay arrangements.'

In brief

Teaching excellence award winners

Winners in the 2009 Australian Awards for Teaching Excellence were announced in October. They were: Tracey Anthony from Aranmore Catholic College, Perth, in the teacher category; Melissa Gould-Drakeley, Macarthur Anglican School, NSW, teacher leadership; Jane Dobson, Claremont College, Hobart, beginning teacher; Andrew Syme, Scotch College, Perth, principal; Lisa Brock, Australian Technical College Spencer Gulf, SA, support staff; and Adrian Camm, Mooroopna Secondary College, Victoria, information and communication technology. Majella Catholic Primary School, Perth, won the school award.

New SACE may hit languages

The new South Australian Certificate of Education gives senior students more flexibility in subject choice, and lower enrolments in languages that will no longer be compulsory are expected alongside increased demand for vocational education and training subjects. Officials from both the Australian Education Union and the Independent Education Union say the changes may affect teachers who specialise in subjects in which reduced enrolments are expected.

Captions captured

The Accessible Education Database, a new online database launched by not-for-profit Media Access Australia in October, now provides a comprehensive database for teachers looking for captioned educational DVDs to help them meet the needs of students with learning difficulties, as well as English-as-a-second-language students and students who are deaf or hearing impaired.

LINKS:

www.mediaaccess.org.au/education