Workplace bullying

A national online survey of staff bullying in Australian schools – believed to be the first of its kind – by Dr Dan Riley from the University of New England and Professor Deirdre Duncan from the Australian Catholic University suggests that more than 90 per cent of teachers have been bullied by colleagues, principals or parents. The survey of more than 800 teachers in government, Catholic and independent schools found that:

- Workplace bullying affected 91 per cent of teachers’ mental or physical health.
- Unmanageable workloads affected 90 per cent.
- Exclusion from decision making affected 90 per cent.
- Assignment or removal of responsibilities without consultation affected 87 per cent.
- Attacks on personal property affected 20 per cent.
- Physical abuse or threats of violence affected 20 per cent.

A staggering 95 per cent of survey respondents reported that they were not told when their work was unsatisfactory while 83 per cent reported that their concerns about unfair treatment, bullying or harassment had been dismissed.

According to the survey, bullying behaviour is most commonly conducted by members of the executive other than the principal, colleagues, principals and parents in that order of frequency.

Commenting on results from a pilot study, Dr Riley told The UNE Experience that while many of the incidents were ‘infrequent’ and of ‘lower levels of seriousness’ the effect on teachers’ health was real. ‘It’s a bit frightening; we didn’t actually expect to find what we did,’ he said.

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and Minister for Social Inclusion, Julia Gillard, says a national school curriculum for students from Years 1 to 12 will be up and running by 2010. Work on a national school curriculum for History, Maths, English and Science, which would involve consultation with the states and territories, began before the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) met in late December.

‘The Rudd Labor Government will ensure there is agreement by Commonwealth, state and territory Ministers to a national curriculum in the identified priority areas of Maths, the Sciences, English and History by 2010,’ Gillard said before the COAG meeting. ‘It is the Rudd government’s firm view that this major exercise of national reform must be done on a collaborative and cooperative basis.’

The mechanism, according to Gillard, will be a National Curriculum Board that will be required to publish drafts of its work for comment and consultation.

The focus on History, Maths, English and Science resembles the national curriculum in the identified priority areas of Maths, the Sciences, English and History by 2010,’ Gillard said before the COAG meeting. ‘It is the Rudd government’s firm view that this major exercise of national reform must be done on a collaborative and cooperative basis.’

The obvious question, well, obvious to teachers of Drama, say, or Geography, Information and Communication Technology or Health and Physical Education, is which are core and which non-core subjects?

Talk of a national curriculum goes back at least to the 1989 Hobart Declaration and 1999 Adelaide Declaration of Schooling, which led to work on eight key learning areas, national statements and profiles, and national literacy and numeracy achievements benchmarking. A 2006 Australian Council for Educational Research investigation, led by Professor Geoff Masters, recommended all states implement a common Australian Certificate of Education for the final years of secondary school.
RIP OBE

Western Australia’s controversial Outcomes Based Education (OBE) curriculum has been dumped, replaced by a Kindergarten to Year 10 syllabus. According to a statement from the WA Minister for Education and Training, Mark McGowan, the reintroduction of the Kindergarten to Year 10 syllabus at the beginning of the 2008 school year marked the end of content-free and woolly objectives in education. ‘We want to assure parents that students are being provided with the highest standard of course content possible,’ he said. ‘The fad of the 1990s to dispense with syllabus caused considerable anxiety among teachers, many of whom were left without any clear guidance about what to teach or how to assess students.

‘While the new syllabuses won’t be mandated, those who want the comfort of the syllabus and the range of resources that back it up will be pleased to know they will have them at hand.’

McGowan said the syllabuses were developed after extensive consultations with teachers, administrators and academics. ‘In fact, more than 6,000 teachers and administrators, including practising early childhood, middle childhood and early adolescence teachers, were consulted as part of its development,’ he said.

President of NSW Board of Studies, Professor Gordon Stanley, who chaired a national panel of academics which reviewed and endorsed the K-10 syllabuses, said they placed WA schools in an excellent position for the introduction of greater consistency in national curriculum. ‘These syllabuses have set a benchmark for other states, providing teachers with the flexibility and direction they need to give students the best learning experiences,’ Professor Stanley said.

LINKS: http://k10syllabus.curriculum.wa.edu.au/project_home_view

Charity starts at school

National charity the Smith Family has switched after 85 years from providing emergency relief and welfare to focus specifically on helping disadvantaged children realise their potential through education through its Learning for Life program.

According to chief executive Elaine Henry, the Smith Family began winding back the provision of emergency relief and welfare eight years ago after realising traditional welfare handouts were a bandaid response to the symptoms of disadvantage but did little to address the causes of disadvantage. In some cases, she said, the same disadvantaged families were being helped from generation to generation through the disadvantage trap.

The Smith Family, which began operating its range of Learning for Life programs in 1988, has since provided support for more than 40,000 children. The Learning for Life suite of interconnecting programs provides financial support through financial scholarships to assist with education expenses such as uniforms, books and excursions. The suite also provides access to a network of support programs including personal support, which aims to improve students’ cognitive and academic skills through mentoring, tutoring and coaching; personal development which aims to develop students’ informal learning and socialisation, offering opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities such as sports and the arts; and literacy skills development, which aims to build comprehension as well as financial and technological literacy.

In brief

Make mouthguards mandatory

The Australian Dental Association (ADA) has called on schools to make mouthguards mandatory for students involved in a contact sport. According to calculations in a report by the United States National Youth Sports Foundation for the Prevention of Athletic Injury, the lifetime cost of sports-related dental injuries like a knocked out tooth are between US$10,000 and $15,000 per tooth. A 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics report on children’s injuries found that children aged five to 14 years who reported being injured were most commonly playing non-organised or organised sports. The ADA recommends students use a custom-made mouthguard that specifically fits an individual’s mouth rather than an over-the-counter or ‘boil and bite’ mouthguard. Standards Australia recommends the use of a ‘properly constructed and fitted mouthguard.’

Medicine could be a lottery

The University of Sydney may scrap entry interviews for Medicine and introduce an admissions process that involves a ballot because of concerns that the current system may not identify the best candidates. The current system takes into account a student’s academic results, interview performance and results from the Graduate Australian Medical School Admissions Test (GAMSAT) developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research. University of Sydney Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Professor Bruce Robinson, has commissioned a review of the admissions process, which is due to report back next month. Professor Robinson told ABC News, ‘It’s very unlikely that we’d end up going solely to a ballot system. It’s only one of several selection processes that are being identified around the world as being used by medical schools. It’s used in the Netherlands.’