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Premier Bracks opens ACER Dubai office

Victorian Premier Steve Bracks officially opened ACER's new Dubai branch office during his recent visit to the Middle East. The new office is situated in Dubai's Knowledge Village and is ACER's first overseas office. Noel Campbell, Ambassador of Australia to the UAE and Qatar also officiated at the opening, which took place on March 10.

Speaking at the opening Mr Bracks said "ACER is recognised for the comprehensive services it provides to the education community both within Australia and internationally."

Mr Bracks added that the Dubai office would help to establish ACER as a leading provider of educational research and assessment services in the Middle East region.

The opening of the Dubai office follows a resolution by the ACER board of directors to develop its services in the Middle East with the development of an international testing instrument suitable for the region.

ACER has been working with the UAE Ministry of Education and Youth to develop a national assessment program for government schools and was encouraged by the Ministry to open a branch office in the UAE.

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A major new project for the Dubai office involves the development and administration of the Global Achieve Tests. The program consists of pencil and paper tests for students in Classes 3 to 12 in English, Mathematics and Science. The tests are designed to measure a student's performance in the generic skills that underpin the teaching of these core subjects across the globe. Global Achieve provides schools, students and parents with a comprehensive assessment of student performance in a range of subjects.

The Dubai office will also be involved in contracted research in education in the Gulf States, conducting training programs and workshops for education professionals and marketing of a wide range of ACER products and services.

ACER appointed Mr Alan Egbert to the position of office Manager, ACER Dubai in February.

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New research effort needed to improve Indigenous educational outcomes

ACER recently called for the establishment of a new and rigorous national research agenda into ways of improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. The call coincided with the release of a review of Indigenous education research and policy, which argues that, despite good intentions and considerable funding in recent years, educational outcomes for Indigenous students remain well behind those of non-Indigenous students.

The review- *The Case for Change: a review of contemporary research on Indigenous educational outcomes* -by ACER researchers Suzanne Mellor and Matthew Corrigan, argues that Indigenous education policy in Australia continues to be too loosely based on research findings, contributing to a slow improvement in outcomes for Indigenous students.

"Our review of the research shows that, while there have been some improvements over the past decade, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes remains unacceptably large," said ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters. "We should not be satisfied with recent levels of improvement."

The review concludes that research in Indigenous education tends to have been based on analyses of Indigenous students' test results with little consideration of school or social contexts, or on small case studies of learning problems faced by specific groups of Indigenous students.

Research aimed at improving outcomes for Indigenous students also has tended to be isolated from broader considerations of the impact of teacher quality, teacher professional development and students' levels of readiness for formal education, and has been inadequately informed by advances in developmental psychology, paediatrics, sociology and public and community health. The authors argue that much of the literature overemphasises the uniqueness of the Indigenous experience of education and underemphasises the many factors that impact on the learning of *all* students.

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"Our review suggests that too much emphasis has been placed on the belief that learning is different for Indigenous students," Professor Masters said. "Indigenous education programs should focus more on what the research tells us about the foundations of good teaching and learning generally."

[*The Case for Change*](#) calls for changes in both the kinds of questions addressed and the methods currently used in Indigenous education research.

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Alternatives to school suspensions

ACER's Research Director of Early Childhood Education, Alison Elliott recently contributed the following opinion article to Brisbane's Courier Mail newspaper regarding trends for suspending students from school. Professor Elliott's piece was published following the release of Queensland figures on school suspensions.

While the Queensland figures on school suspensions come as a shock they are part of a world wide trend to suspend students from school. Policies of "zero tolerance" are more common and with them come higher levels of suspensions and expulsions.

In the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand schools are suspending students, mainly boys, in record numbers. In the US there are disturbing ethnicity-related patterns of suspensions with African-American males more likely to be suspended than students from other groups. The extent to which indigenous and other minority students are represented in Australian suspension statistics is not clear. If our trends are following those in the UK and US then we've got a very serious problem.

There are several reasons for school suspensions and some ways we can reduce them. But there are no quick fixes.

Many students exhibit conduct that is unacceptable in school or any public place. Family stress, lack of parental support, and absence of appropriate mentors contribute to bad behaviour. Some students are disturbed, some have mental illnesses. Many are bored with school and are marking time until they can leave.

Increased suspensions are the result of trends to make schools safer places for everyone.

Duty of care means that schools must ensure that everyone has a safe environment for work and learning. The safety of students, teachers and others cannot be put at risk. But in the longer term a safe school won't result from suspensions, threats or more rules.

Creating and maintaining a safe school environment requires the active, thoughtful and cooperative involvement of the whole school community. The reasons for unacceptable behaviour leading to suspensions are complex.

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Are boys becoming more violent, ruder and less law abiding? Perhaps. But juvenile offence statistics don't reflect this. Rather, I suggest we look more closely within our schools at ways we approach teaching, especially for less academically minded students.

Removing troubling students certainly makes teachers' jobs less stressful. It reduces classroom disruptions, increases learning opportunities and creates safer environments.

But there are big problems with suspensions. Suspending troubled students compounds existing problems and results in new ones. Students can end up home alone, or more worryingly wandering shopping malls and riding trains. They are rarely provided with an alternative education. Few education authorities have options for students not allowed at school.

Unsupervised children and teenagers, already prone to trouble, are likely to engage in more inappropriate behaviour- fights, drugs, theft. Suspended students are the least likely to have the personal or family capacity to help themselves out of their difficulties. They need school and adult support.

The key to reducing suspensions is changing behaviour- schools' and students'. Schools that encourage responsible citizenship and an active community are on track to creating thoughtful and engaged civic- minded students with a sense of justice and equity who accept responsibility for protecting their rights and the rights of others.

And changing school climates is a long term process. At the chalkface it involves engaging all students in learning and making classrooms interesting, dynamic and relevant. Today's student lives in a fast paced, information rich world. Making choices and decisions in part and parcel of this.

The best starting point for capturing students' imagination and interest and keeping them on task and in school is making classrooms more responsive to their needs.

Research indicates that classroom environment and teaching quality make a difference.

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Teacher competence and confidence is the key to improving student outcomes. Classrooms need to be in tune with youngsters' needs. They need to engage students in learning that is action oriented. Not book and desk bound.

For some students, community and vocationally oriented programs will help. Many troubled students have poor literacy skills. They need small group tutoring and mentoring- starting in the early years. Building stronger, smaller, community-minded schools with shared and clear values and expectations will go far in improving outcomes for all students.

Teaching has become more difficult on all fronts. Teachers plead for help in better managing today's complex classrooms and in dealing with behaviour problems. Yet they get little professional development. Strengthening teacher skills to make classrooms dynamic, collaborative and team focused will be a good starting point. Working with troubled students requires special skills that most teachers don't have.

The article was originally published in the Courier Mail, 27 February 2004.

by Professor Alison Elliott

Research Director, Early Childhood Education

The Australian Council for Educational Research

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ACER UPDATE

Literacy in the Middle Primary Years

The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria has invited ACER to conduct the next phase of the longitudinal Literacy Advance Research Project, which will track the literacy development of the original cohort of Year 1 students (1998) into Year 7. An additional component of this phase involves an exploration of effective practices for literacy development in Years 3 and 4.

ACER to manage national PISA 2006

ACER was advised recently of its successful bid to manage Australia's participation in the 2006 OECD PISA survey. This project will run in parallel with ACER's management of international PISA. The national project will collect, analyse and report on the performances of Australian 15-year-olds in PISA 2006. The primary focus of this study will be on students' scientific literacy levels. ACER also managed the PISA national data collection and analysis in 2000 and 2003.

Indigenous education web site

A new section on the ACER web site dedicated to Indigenous education is now up and running. The site includes ACER research into Indigenous education, publications and reports from external organisations as well as useful links. New pages on the Education of Boys and Brain Research and Learning will be established in the near future. See [Indigenous Education](#).

New catalogues released

During February ACER Press released five new catalogues listing resources in education, educational assessment, psychology, human resources and parent education. These catalogues are [available for download here](#).

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Celebrating 10 years in Camberwell

ACER recently celebrated 10 years in the Prospect Hill Road Camberwell offices. Staff moved in to the new office space in March 1994, from the premises in Hawthorn where ACER had been based since 1963. ACER now has two offices in Camberwell (Prospect Hill Road and Camberwell Road), Sydney and Dubai.

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