On the whole, public school teachers do a good job

Readers continue to debate the factors shaping the quality of school education in South Australia.

We're among best

THE recent debate on education in The Advertiser led by Alan Reid and David Pisoni has highlighted an issue that troubles many teachers.

I side with Alan Reid, who argued that on balance our education system is doing an excellent job, although there is always room for improvement.

The world has changed dramatically in the past 20 years and so have schools.

After retiring last year as a principal, after 40 years in public education, I can say the vast majority of teachers work extremely hard to ensure children/young people see the value of education and learn how to succeed.

This is not an easy job when some young people don't want to learn. Yet many of our public and private schools are as good as you would get anywhere in the world.

Three things stand out about our system in Australia. First, our schools have a warm, co-operative culture which young people enjoy and which encourages learning for all abilities and interests.

Second, public schools that have students wanting to go to university (about 40 per cent of the population) enjoy excellent achievement scores and success at university (retention rates).

Third, vocational education is again very strong in schools, with the help of federal and state government funding.

My last school offered plumbing, electrical, hospitality and fashion design among its courses.

If critics want to look at countries that do have high education scores as rated by the OECD and other groups, they could look at Finland and the Scandinavian countries, Singapore, Canada, Korea and Japan, or international schools around the globe.

They would see that teachers are better paid, have more preparation time, have to do more professional development, have to have a master's degree in Finland and Canada for promotion, and governments spend higher amounts of their GDP on education than we do.

PETER LEVERENZ (retired principal), Coromandel Valley.

Both parties to blame

DAVID Pisoni's article on the education system under our current Labor Government raised many a true point (The Advertiser, 29/6/12).

However, there were two important things he left out. First, the decline in SA has been going on for much longer than just the past 10 years, through both Labor and Liberal governments.

Second, he seemed to totally leave out any suggestions as to what should be done about it.

B. SCHROEDER, Warradale.

Good reasons for drift

INEVI T A BLY, any suggestion that independent schools are more attractive to parents than public schools attracts predictable responses. The article by Katrina Stokes is no exception (“Parents opting out of public schools”, The Advertiser, 29/6/12).

As a former headmaster of three state high schools and one independent high school, I believe that I have a somewhat balanced view of this seemingly eternal problematic situation.

The argument by the chief executive of the Association of Independent Schools of SA, Garry LeDuff, that the “main reasons
behind the surge were more schools and competitive fees” is in part fatuous. For instance, Trinity College Gawler, now the largest school in Australia, began 27 years ago, and the other schools he mentions have also had a well-established history of low fees.

Liberals education spokesman David Pisoni’s expected statement that independent schools’ popularity is based on the government’s “poor education system” lacks credibility.

Education Minister Grace Portolesi’s statement that parents have the right to choose is accurate, but this has been the case since SA state schools began in 1873.

In my opinion, there are cogent reasons for increased enrolments in independent schools. As these schools have the right to choose their own staff (and often the finance to support these choices), they attract teachers not only with very good qualifications but also those who wish to associate with particular schools.

A further and substantial reason for independent schools gaining popularity is the overlap of home and school culture, ensuring parental support which strengthens essential elements of a good school, such as student discipline, backing of teachers and involvement in school activities.

As I am well aware from my experience as a headmaster and superintendent of high schools, there are some excellent state schools, and these will continue to attract strong enrolments.

(Dr) TONY SHINKFIELD, Adelaide.

Key to fair society
I HAVE watched the exodus of parents from the public school system with regret and concern over the past decades.

Universal quality public education is crucial for a fair and thriving society. We can reverse the trend of the growing inequity in Australia’s education system by properly funding and valuing public schools, which we know take the majority of disadvantaged children.

According to Gonski panel member Ken Boston, there is a staggering difference of 9 1/2 years of schooling between the top 20 per cent and bottom 20 per cent of students by Year 9.

This is an alarming sign that we are failing our most disadvantaged students, including children from low-income families, indigenous communities and rural and regional areas.

We know Australia is falling behind when the $5 billion investment a year recommended by the Gonski Review would still leave us below the OECD average of public funding of schools as a percentage of GDP.

We cannot afford any more delay on this matter and the Greens are calling on the Government to work with us so we can see legislation to implement the Gonski reforms introduced and passed this year.

PENNY WRIGHT, Greens spokeswoman on education, Canberra.
Holding pens

REGARDING “Parents opting out of public schools” (The Advertiser, 29/6/12), there are clear reasons for this trend. Among these are that too many public schools have ceased to function as centres of knowledge and learning and have become corrals or holding pens, to contain young people until such time as they have attained an age to either gain employment or access Centrelink support.

At the school my children attend, the lunch wrappings are abandoned and blown into gutters and eventually waterways, causing environmental damage.

OHSW directives and policies are ignored in the interests of parsimony, causing fire exits to remain locked, resulting in serious overcrowding of facilities during school productions and performances.

Teachers are consistently tardy in arriving at classrooms for lessons, ensuring that the class is unable to complete all of the lesson material within the allocated time, or students who require assistance with the material are neglected.

Teachers are overly keen to hand out suspensions for relatively minor misdemeanours, in order to save time/money associated with other options such as family conference or psychological and behavioural counselling.

There was a time when teachers would email or deliver via siblings or friends class material missed due to legitimate absence of a student such as illness, particularly for SACE students. Sadly that consideration has passed away.

A brief tour of a local public high school will confirm that they are places of disorder and neglect. Unlike the health system, the discrepancies between public and private within the education system are a yawning chasm.

NAME AND ADDRESS SUPPLIED.
The marriage has fallen apart before. Now, less than four years after a shaky reconciliation, the problems that had previously plagued this convenient political union have returned. Given job losses and the huge impact on regional Victoria of budget cuts forcing the closure of TAFE courses, it is hardly surprising that talk has turned to the stability of the coalition between the state Liberal and National parties. Angry memories of government neglect of rural issues when the parties last governed — under the premiership of Jeff Kennett from 1992 to 1999 — are being revived.

Then, voters in regional centres such as Ballarat and Bendigo were credited with helping to overthrow the government. Are the latest funding cuts perhaps the first sign of another relationship breakdown?

Monash University politics lecturer Zareh Ghazarian describes the relationship between the Coalition parties as akin to a “marriage of convenience”.

He says the two parties are not ready to walk away from each other over the TAFE issue, but it will exacerbate tensions beneath the surface. “Being in government will amplify these problems because they actually have the opportunity to influence public policy,” he says. “In opposition the marriage is easier because they’re united against Labor. But in government this is where the tensions really come out.”

He says it is unlikely any independent candidates, who often have strong voices in regional electorates, will unseat any government MPs by campaigning against TAFE cuts alone.

But it will be a “moral” victory for independents if they force incumbent MPs to take a stand against further funding cuts to the TAFE sector.

Dr Ghazarian says the government will have to offer “sweeteners” to voters in regional Victoria to combat the perception it is too focused on Melbourne, in the way the Kennett government was. “The Kennett government was seen as Melbourne-centric and didn’t give a stuff about the bush.”

He believes the parties may need counselling if the government cannot improve its image in regional Victoria. “At this stage maybe it’s a case of sitting down and looking each other in the eyes and talking about what they want from this marriage.”

So far, Coalition MPs have maintained a united front. The majority of MPs who have TAFE campuses in their regional electorates support the funding cuts that have led to the sector’s widespread job losses.

The Age asked 12 MPs from regional Victoria whether they supported the government policy. Ten MPs responded, saying they backed changes to TAFE funding.

This united front comes after the government announced earlier this year that, to help balance its budget, it would slash TAFE funding by an amount the Victorian TAFE Association estimates to be almost $300 million.

South West Institute of TAFE chief executive Joe Piper says people in regional Victoria were angry about the funding changes and felt “undervalued”. He believes MPs have failed to appreciate how valuable TAFE institutes are in regional Victoria.

Mr Piper says politicians must take more time to consider how the TAFE funding cuts will affect their electorates. In regional Victoria, many TAFE institutes are often the only providers of post-secondary education within comfortable driving distance.

“I think it’s time that local MPs on both sides of the House took time to fully understand the value that local TAFE institutes play in their region and took that into consideration in the future,” he says.

The institute, based in South-West Coast MP Denis Naphine’s electorate, is set to cut 43 jobs. It will lose $7.2 million next year. But Mr Naphine, who supports the cuts, says the government is increasing subsidies for all apprenticeships to offset decreases for other courses. He believes TAFE institutes will have to review the courses because of the cuts.

“This may result in change in offerings, although it will not necessarily result in closures of campuses,” he says.

But on Melbourne’s urban fringe a dual-sector TAFE and university campus will be the first to face the axe. Swinburne University vice-chancellor Linda Kristjanson has revealed the university’s Lilydale campus will close next year after the government cut $35 million from its budget.

Local Liberal MP Christine Fyffe argues it was the university’s decision alone to close the campus. “Swinburne should not try to
shift the blame for the closure of the campus on to the state government’s changes to TAFE funding — the decision to close the campus is solely Swinburne’s. The state government did not make the decision to close the campus,” she says.

She insists she is not concerned about the political ramifications of the closure.

“I don’t worry about me, I worry about the young people who live in my electorate,”

Ms Fyffe says the community is devastated by the closure of the campus, which attracts students from rural areas such as Healesville and Warburton.

She says the job losses will also hurt local businesses around the campus.

The impact of the funding cuts on surrounding communities has worried many TAFE executives.

Sunraysia Institute of TAFE chief executive Win Scott says she was acutely aware of how job cuts at her institute would affect the community. The institute will lose $6.5 million and has made 26 positions redundant.

Ms Scott says the institute helped its sacked workers to find other jobs so that their income would not be lost to community. She believes it is too early to assess what effect the decreased funding will have on enrolments. Some TAFE institutes had experienced an increase in their mid-year enrolments before the government began to strip back funding on July 1. But from next year TAFE executives will be preparing for a drop in enrolments.

Nationals MP Peter Walsh, whose Swan Hill seat includes a Sunraysia Institute campus, says a massive increase in “lifestyle” courses had caused a $400 million blowout in the sector.

“The Coalition government is investing an extra $1 billion over the next four years into refocusing the training system into areas that lead to meaningful jobs for Victorians and support the state economy,” he says.

However, the promise of increased subsidies for apprenticeships has failed to dampen the anger in regional communities.

La Trobe University politics lecturer Ardel Shamsullah believes recent “vociferous” protests against TAFE funding cuts highlight the frustration in regional Victoria.

“It’s not just a teachers’ protest. It’s very much a community protest from what I can see,” he said.

Dr Shamsullah, who is based in Bendigo, says the TAFE cuts could force Nationals MPs to “reconsider their total embrace” of the Coalition government.

“I’m sure it’s already caused tension,” he says. “The impression I’m getting is the Baillieu government is gritting its teeth and going in hard on this issue. There’s enough time before the next election to hope the anger and angst will die down.”

He believes the government’s TAFE policy could be a major hurdle to building on its single-seat majority. The Coalition would struggle to win seats in Ballarat and Bendigo, where Labor holds slender margins ranging from about 1 to 4 per cent in four electorates.

The University of Ballarat’s TAFE institute has sustained heavy losses and will reportedly lose $20 million.

The Bendigo TAFE is set to lose up to $9 million and will make about 100 jobs redundant.

Victorian TAFE Association’s education policy consultant, Nita Schultz, says TAFE course closures and job losses are keenly felt in regional Victoria. “TAFE are a major employer in these regions,” she says. “When the TAFE decides it can no longer run the hospitality program, it’s not buying local meat, vegetables and fruit.”

Ms Schultz says tensions also emerged between TAFE managers and local MPs. “We have heard from CEOs in the vast majority of regional institutes about the level of frustration they’re having in communicating issues with government representatives.”

A spokesman for Deputy Premier and National Party leader Peter Ryan says the TAFE funding changes were necessary to ensure the system was sustainable.

“The Coalition’s changes provide increased subsidies for all apprenticeships and many courses in skill shortage as well as to courses which will contribute to economic growth in Victoria,” she says.

Advance TAFE, which has a campus and some centres in Mr Ryan’s electorate, will lose $5 million and cut 32 jobs. The TAFE’s chief executive, Peter Heilbuth, says there will be more job cuts. The institute will phase out 36 courses.

In the country, people remain worried that the course cuts and job losses will have an irreversible and damaging effect on their communities. But South West TAFE’s Joe Piper says it’s time to move past the anger and work on providing the best courses with the funding available. “We’ve got to make the most of this. We can’t get blood out of a stone, so what is it that’s going to get the best deal for regional Victoria?”

He believes politicians must pay closer attention to the specific needs of regional Victoria where TAFE institutes are crucial to keeping skilled and educated people in the community.

According to Mr Piper, institutes are keenly aware of the outside factors that affect the communities in which they operate — and the government should be too. “The price of milk out of the farm gates is low at the moment so everyone is doing it hard. Our institute is not immune from that.”

Benjamin Preiss is higher education reporter, b.preiss@theage.com.au

Angry memories of government neglect of rural issues are being revived.
BUSH POLITICS

Coalition MPs hold seats in 12 key regional areas affected by TAFE cuts.

1. DENIS NAPTHINE South West Coast
   South West TAFE, Warrnambool and Hamilton
   “This may result in change in offerings, although it will not necessarily result in closure of campuses.”

2. HUGH DELAHUNTY Lowan
   University of Ballarat TAFE, Horsham
   “I do support the government’s position on TAFE funding. Funding will go to better support courses that provide a higher level training such as apprenticeships and traineeships.”

3. PETER CRISP Mildura
   Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Mildura
   Did not respond

4. PETER WALSH Swan Hill
   Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Swan Hill
   “Victoria’s training system experienced a $400 million cost blow out this year, largely due to the massive increase in lifestyle type courses.”

5. PETER WELLER Rodney
   Bendigo TAFE, Echuca
   “Training providers in my electorate may have to review their offerings but I do not anticipate any campus closure.”

6. JEANETTE POWELL Shepparton
   Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Shepparton
   “The government’s changes provide increased subsidies for all apprenticeships, many courses in areas of skill shortage and courses that contribute to Victoria’s economic growth.”

7. BILL SYKES Benalla
   Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Benalla
   “There’s going to be some restructuring going on. Each TAFE will manage that themselves.”

8. 11. BILL TILLEY
     Benambra
     Wodonga TAFE
     Did not respond

9. TIM BULL Gippsland East
    Advance TAFE, Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance
    “I remain very confident that vocational training is now on a sustainable footing and will continue to have a strong presence in the region.”

10. PETER RYAN Gippsland South
    Advance TAFE, Sale; GippsTAFE, Leongatha
    “We expect training providers will review their offering in light of these changes and, in some cases, focus their provision on... high-value courses.”

11. RUSSELL NORTHE Morwell
    GippsTAFE, Morwell
    “I think the majority of people recognised that change was required in what is an unsustainable system.”

12. GARY BLACKWOOD Narracan
    GippsTAFE, Warragul
    “This will not necessarily result in campus closures.”
Black Hill lookout eyesore

BEING a proud Ballarat resident I have taken visitors to the city up to the Black Hill lookout only to drive away apologising.

-Not a nice place

BLACK Hill lookout is a disgrace. It has the potential to be a major highlight for the city. The Readers’ Champ is a great idea, there is a similar idea in the Darwin paper and the council generally acts when issues are raised. It might finally spur the council into some action.

-AFL in Ballarat

THIS is a sad and sorry state we live in, maybe if we catch the people doing this they should be made to clean it up, unpaid voluntary and then they may think twice about doing this again.

-Carol

THE entire Black Hill reserve is in serious need of some vision. This area could become such a great natural park land with a bit of long-term planning. I often look at the area and think how great it would be if they cleared out all the noxious weeds, pine trees included, and regenerated the entire area with native vegetation. Create new walking and bike tracks and incorporate a history walk with the old workings in the area.

-Matt

THE view from Black Hill is pretty ordinary compared to years ago – too many trees have been allowed to grow.

-Billy Butterfly

City to suffer from TAFE cuts

JUST remember – these cuts don’t affect just the uni. The flow on will impact on all of us. Less jobs, less training, less demand for local businesses. These budget cuts are against the whole Ballarat community.

-Cuts affect all

DID hairdressing get cut? Can the union explain how the increase in fitness students will be employed? Can anyone explain how the $6,000,000 the university will take in extra revenue from higher ed students for student amenity fees is not a burden on the community?

-MKL

Pensioner left stranded by theft

I HOPE they catch the culprits Bruce and make them pay for your upset. Too many out there who don’t know good from bad.

-Enough

I DON’T know where the rims are but I’m sure the rubber is on the road at the front of our house. Until harsh penalties are brought in for hoons there will always be a market for stolen tyres.

-Black market

NOTE: Web Words are lifted from comments posted on stories on thecourier.com.au. The comments are moderated and priority is given to those that are issue specific and/or contribute to public debate. Offensive, malicious, personal or other comments deemed inappropriate by the editor will not be published.
Bellingen book launch

Whackademia, the recently released critique of Australian universities by Bellingen based academic Dr Richard Hil will be launched in Bellingen on Wednesday, July 11.

Despite the shiny rhetoric of excellence, quality, innovation and creativity, universities face criticism over declining standards, decreased funding, compromised assessment, overburdened academics and never ending reviews and restructures.

In a scathing insider expose, Dr Richard Hil lifts the lid on a higher education system that is corporatized beyond recognition, steeped in bureaucracy and dominated by marketing and PR imperatives rather than intellectual pursuit.

Fearless, ferocious and often funny, Whackademia exposes a world that stands in stark contrast to the slogans and mottos joyously promoted by our universities.

Whackademia will be launched at at Alternatives Bookshop, 105 Hyde St at 5.30pm on July 11. If you would like to attend call in at the shop or ring John or Lyn on 66552249
Students to benefit from Youth Allowance changes

More than 315,000 students who receive Youth Allowance or Austudy will be able to earn more from part-time and casual work without impacting on their payments, thanks to Gillard Government changes which came into effect on Sunday.

From 1 July, changes to the student income support system mean students will be able to earn $400 a fortnight, up from the current threshold of $236 per fortnight, before there is any impact on their student payments.

The Minister for Tertiary Education, Senator Chris Evans, said the Australian Government is making it easier for students to supplement their income support payment with earnings from part-time or casual employment.

“We know living costs can be a barrier for students, and this change to the income threshold will allow students to earn more each week before their payments are reduced,” Senator Evans said.

“After years of decline under the Howard Government, we are proud to see the number of students attending university once again on the increase.

“Having more students with the qualifications they need for tomorrow’s jobs will be of huge benefit to regional businesses, industry and the economy.”

The Parliamentary Secretary for Higher Education and Skills, Sharon Bird, said in addition, the Gillard Government is raising the Student Income Bank, from $6000 to $10,000.

The Student Income Bank is a way for students to ‘bank’ any unused part of their fortnightly personal income threshold to be used at a later stage.

“The accumulated credit can be used to offset higher income earned in other fortunights, for example, if students increase their work hours during university holidays,” Ms Bird said.

“These changes will mean students will be better supported to manage their ongoing study and living costs.”

To maintain the real value of these changes, both measures will, for the first time, be indexed annually to the Consumer Price Index.

The Government is also delivering extra assistance to students through the Household Assistance Package. Payments of up to $190 for eligible students were made this month ahead of the introduction of the carbon price.

Student income support recipients will also receive the twice-yearly Supplementary Allowance of a total $210 for single people and $175 for a member of a couple.

These changes come on top of the Government’s earlier reforms which have boosted the number of higher education students receiving Youth Allowance by 21 per cent.

The Youth Allowance reforms have given more students access to income support and contributed to the rise in the number of students enrolling at university by breaking down the financial barriers to education.
Boost to help create fly-in fly-out jobs

By CLEMENTINE NORTON

FRASER Coast workers will have extra help to access jobs across the mining and resource sector with the appointment of an industry workforce connect co-ordinator for the Wide Bay.

Two co-ordinators have been hired under a joint state and federal funding program – one for the Wide Bay and the other for the Gold Coast – to help maximise opportunities for Maryborough and Hervey Bay workers to become fly-in fly-out mine staff.

"The co-ordinators will attract, train and connect suitable workers to jobs on mining, construction and infrastructure projects, and this will include working with airlines to help workers commute to remote locations," Federal Minister for Skills Senator Chris Evans said.

"Industry is at the very heart of the program. They are getting the workers they need and Australians are getting an opportunity to participate in the mining boom."

"These appointments will benefit Queensland workers, major Queensland resource and infrastructure projects as well as the state economy."

State Minister for Education, Training and Employment John-Paul Langbroek said the appointments would help address skills shortages and create maximum benefits from the resources boom.

"These co-ordinators will help boost two of these pillars by linking job seekers with employment and training opportunities in the resource and construction sectors," Mr Langbroek said.

"We believe that people should have a choice about where they live and work and while a fly-in fly-out arrangement is not suitable for everyone, it can provide great outcomes for areas with high unemployment."

The Gold Coast and Wide Bay Burnett were chosen because of the potential workforce and air services. The appointment of the two new co-ordinators supports the National Resource Sector Workforce Strategy.

The commonwealth and state governments will each contribute $400,000 over two years.
Jobs help program unveiled

A new program has been launched to help Indigenous people in the Northern Territory secure jobs in the region’s booming resources sector.

The $400,000 program unveiled by the Federal Government Skills Minister, Chris Evans and Northern Territory Deputy Chief Minister, Delia Lawrie will initially focus on finding jobs for people in five remote communities.

“We know there is a huge demand for skills and workers as a result of the resources and oil and gas developments that are occurring,” Senator Evans said. “It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to provide training and job opportunities for some of the indigenous people in some of the communities in the Northern Territory,” he said.

Under the plan a new position will be created for a coordinator who will link companies seeking labour with people wanting to work in the communities.

“What we know is we have got workers and people who need job opportunities and we have employers in desperate need of labour,” Senator Evans said.

Ms Lawrie said many Indigenous people in remote communities had already been given job training as part of a housing program.
Boost for youth allowance

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