13 June 2014

Teacher Education Review

The Victorian Catholic Schools’ Parent Body (VCSPB) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Ministerial Advisory Group Teacher Education Review with particular focus on pedagogical approaches, subject content and professional experience.

The VCSPB represents parents of students in Victorian Catholic schools at diocesan, state and national levels, through school boards, or where none exist, through school based parent support groups.

The VCSPB supports the work of the Victorian Catholic education authorities in advancing the interests of Catholic schools and their students, particularly in those areas where parent input can strengthen the quality of Catholic school provision.

Throughout this document we have used the term ‘parent’ to include natural, adoptive or foster parents, guardians and caregivers of students; the term ‘child’ refers to children and young people.

Submission

The VCSPB is unable to comment in detail with respect to many aspects of teacher education, VCSPB has, therefore, limited its response to the areas that directly impact parents and to providing the views of Catholic school parents in Victoria.

VCSPB supports the statement made by the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) with respect to teacher education. In particular, VCSPB supports the view that:

- The national review is an opportunity to ensure that the way teachers are educated and prepared reflects the high expectations placed on teachers, and their important role helping young Australians to shape the nation’s future.
- Regardless of the path teachers take to the classroom, we need to elevate the value of the profession and ensure that it is a rewarding path.
- That teacher quality is one of the most significant factors that influence the quality of education delivered in Australian classrooms.
- The wholehearted support of international benchmarking of Australian teacher education programmes.
1. **What characteristics should be fostered and developed in graduate teachers through their initial teacher education?**

VCSPB considers that parents (as first educators of their children) and teachers have the capacity to impart great hope and optimism to students for their journey into the world. Given that hope and optimism play a vital role in the development of children as whole persons, VCSPB consider that the ability to impart hope and optimism is a characteristic that should be fostered and developed in teacher education, together with an ability to empower parents to do the same for their children.

Parents and teachers need to work together in order to achieve the best outcomes for children, but often teachers (particularly new teachers) fear their first interactions with parents or see parents in a negative light. Viewing parents as equal partners in a child’s education is a vital characteristic that needs to be fostered and developed as a top priority in all teacher education courses.

Developing a culture and positive attitude towards engaging parents as partners in learning not only throughout the whole school but also for each teacher and their class is crucial to maximising learning outcomes of each child. Engaging parents as partners in learning should be mandatory for each teacher when developing their class culture. Understanding that parents are able to provide support for learning and that communication around academic and social and emotional learning is imperative to developing relationships and building an effective culture of partnerships for the benefit of improving children’s learning outcomes and increasing their opportunities.

Viewing each child as an individual and valuing their many gifts (academic and other gifts) is another vital characteristic that should be at the core of any education system. VCSPB believes that an education system that values academic achievement (and world education rankings) at the expense of developing the whole child and their non-academic achievements would be detrimental to Australia socially, economically and morally.

Pre-service training should enhance graduates social, emotional and communication skills to enable development of relationships with all children, not just those they teach, but their families as well as other teachers and staff within their working environment.

The ability to encourage all children (irrespective of their academic capacity, family background or social/racial origin) is another vital characteristic that should be developed in teacher education. With this goes the ability to develop in each child a commitment to lifelong learning and to not be disheartened if the path to learning is not an easy one.
2. What teaching practices should be developed in graduate teachers through their initial teacher education?

In order to ensure a genuine commitment to parental engagement teacher education needs to enforce the positive results that can be achieved by engaging parents in their child’s education. Graduate teachers need to be given practical tools and strategies in dealing with parents, and practical on the job experience of parent engagement to enable them to work effectively with parents and to empower less confident parents to help their children.

In order to have confidence to deliver personalised learning, teachers need the skills to make connections between learning outside school (learning at home) and incorporating the learning with the curriculum. It is not as simple as trying to connect a child’s interests but looking at the bigger picture of their world and society and how learning in their world relates to the curriculum and vice versa. Knowledge of making connections and developing thinking skills in children to reflect on their learning is important in graduate teachers for increasing and improving children’s learning outcomes and skill sets to help to prepare children for their future.

Resilient and confident teachers are required in education. The wellbeing skills required to be resilient when faced with challenges needs to be emphasised in graduate training. Pre-service teachers also need the skills and attitude to continue to grow as learners in their profession and understand that it takes time to become a competent and confident teacher.

Entering a classroom on your own must be a daunting experience for a graduate teacher. VCSPB believes that it is critical, that teachers are given sufficient classroom experience in a supported environment so that when they enter a classroom for the first time they can do so confidently and have a positive impact on the children, the parents that they engage with and a great start to the careers as teachers.

An understanding of each child as well as using diverse methods for teaching to suit various learning styles is crucial for providing a rich and rewarding learning experience for children. Teachers need to be provided with time to get to know children and understand their learning styles to enhance engagement in learning. If teachers are not aware of the need to know each child, it can become obvious through their report writing and when parent teacher interviews indicate the teacher has not observed the child and their progress or other issues that may have gone unnoticed. Graduate teachers should also be provided with an understanding of how to identify learning and engagement methods so they are able to adapt and be flexible in their teaching to be inclusive of each child in the class.
3. **What level of integration should there be between initial teacher education providers and schools?**

VCSPB recognises that integration between schools and education providers can be problematic, but VCSPB considers that a higher level of integration would be to the benefit of new teachers and the children that they will teach. Alignment of pre-service training to the AITSL Teacher Framework and Teacher Standards requirements would be beneficial. Similarly, close strategic relationships between the education providers and the education sector employers (government, Catholic and independent) would ensure graduate teachers are skilled specifically for the context of their employment.

Transitioning to a new school is difficult for new teachers if schools are not implementing an induction process where teachers are provided with adequate information about the school policies and procedures, who to report to, what resources are available and information about the children and their families to ensure teachers are well equipped with knowledge prior to teaching their first class.

Transitioning programs could perhaps be developed as a collaborative effort between the education providers and schools to form a mandatory program to provide adequate transition for new teachers entering schools enabling relationship building with staff, children and parents and an understanding of learning standards and expectations.

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne/Australian Catholic University project *Partnerships in Learning: Enhancing Quality Teaching (PiL Project)* 2013 clearly demonstrates the benefits that a high level of integration has for new teachers and students and their families alike. Funded through Smarter Schools National Partnerships, this pilot project, aimed to enhance preparation for graduate teachers to work in partnership with families and communities to improve student learning and wellbeing.

The project outcomes realised included: a noted important growth in understanding of, confidence in, and positive attitudes of pre-service teachers and school staff, towards working in rich and diverse communities and engaging families and community; the critical importance of and opportunities for building family-school-community partnerships for learning; collaborative ongoing learning partnerships benefiting the deeper integrated learning outcomes of the PSTs; the promotion the wellbeing and learning outcomes of students. Further details of this project are available from Ms Helen Butler Helen.Butler@acu.edu.au.

VCSPB believes that giving training teachers the ability to have practical classroom and parent engagement experience in a supported and positive environment is the key to improving education outcomes for children and to elevating the profession in the eyes of parents and Australians in general. VCSPB believes that this is the case because as partners in a child’s education parents will be able to see directly the great work that teachers do and the difference that a good teacher can make to a child socially, emotionally, physically, spiritually and academically in creating caring and responsible Australians of the future.
4. **What balance is needed between what is taught and how it is taught?**

VCSPB believes that how a subject is taught is as important as what is taught because unless it is understood the lesson will fail. Children have varying abilities to absorb and process information and a child’s learning outcomes are disadvantaged if their development is not monitored and appropriate action taken in a timely way.

VCSPB believes that it is important that teachers are able to recognise and adapt their teaching content and style to meet the many learning needs and academic developmental levels that will be present in the classroom. Initial teacher education (and indeed ongoing professional development) should specifically address this and provide teachers with the requisite skills and strategies.

**How can we work together to build the capacity of pre-service teachers to understand and work with families and school communities?**

VCSPB believes that in order to build the capacity of pre service teachers there needs to be a genuine partnership between parents and educators. VCSPB would welcome the opportunity to provide speakers or resources in the initial training of teachers on the parent perspective to education providers. Parents and teachers have a common goal in wanting to empower children to reach their potential and develop lifelong learning; working together is the only way to achieve this common goal.

VCSPB believes that the PIL Project (referred to above in Q.3) provides a sound basis upon which educators and parents can work together to build the capacity of pre-service teachers to work with families and school communities.

The VCSPB acknowledges the importance of this review and is pleased to have the opportunity to canvass these issues amongst the Catholic school parent community and report through this submission.

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CHAIR