

## **AEU Response to the Review of School Governance in Victorian Government Schools**

The AEU believes that it is timely to re assert two principles in the governance of state school education. First, that shared decision making in schools should occur through a participative collaborative process involving the whole school community and second, that redressing disadvantage or discrimination should be the number one priority so that all students would be given an opportunity to achieve success.

These philosophical underpinnings date from the 1983 *Ministerial Papers on Decision Making in Victorian Schools*. Then, they were consistent with, indeed informed by, the policies of the union predecessors of the AEU. The AEU has remained committed to these principles.

The AEU hopes that this review will re-establish the primacy of these principles which are as timely today as then.

At the local level, school councils and their communities have largely remained focussed on school improvement, cooperation with neighbours and valuing every student through the policies of the school.

During the Kennett years, a few school councils were lured into behaving like pseudo private schools, i.e. self governing, independent of the state system, competing for students, resources and prestige. The Bracks Government put an end to such divisive experiments, which was welcomed.

The Kennett Government restricted the number of teachers/staff who could be members of a school council. Not only could no more than one third of DE&T staff be members of a school council, but a person who was a parent of a student at a school, and happened to be a DE&T staff member elsewhere, was counted in the staff category at that school. Unfortunately, the Bracks Government has continued this practice. This is fundamentally undemocratic and treats the other school council members with contempt.

The philosophy behind this position is that DE&T employees will unduly influence the “unknowing” others on the school council to the detriment of the students at the school. It is a preposterous argument. It is akin to saying that lawyers should not be elected to parliament because parliament makes laws. Whilst this might have populist support, it too is undemocratic and should not be countenanced.

Real democratic decision making was devalued by the Kennett Government and continued by the Bracks Government, in favour of governance by “experts”. In one of the most bizarre ironies of our time, practising teachers are not regarded as “experts” in education, rather, simply people with a vested interest. In no other profession is such a ridiculous notion entertained. The “experts” preferred to teachers are people with opinions on education matters with little or no practical educational experience (other than having been to school). These opinions are invariably anti-teacher in tone and/or reflect government views.

Democracy is an extremely fragile institution and cannot be restricted to voting every three or four years. It must be imbued throughout our community institutions including school councils. The children of tomorrow must see and know that our society embraces democratic decision making in all facets of Australian life; that it is synonymous with Australian life.

This is the philosophical position of the AEU and informs our response to the Key Issues posed in the discussion paper.

## **1. School Council Powers and Functions**

School councils should decide the major philosophical direction of the school program by their involvement in the determination of curriculum objectives, the use of resources and the general operational characteristics of the school. This should occur within statewide guidelines to ensure reasonable consistency.

In addition, individual school councils should not be able to change the fundamentals of state education by contracting out responsibilities or acting as a facilitator to bodies which may be pursuing an anti-state education agenda. This prohibition should be made explicit in the legislation.

The school council should be the ultimate democratic forum within the school community for decisions related to these powers and all other bodies associated with the school should report and make recommendations to the school council.

School councils should be aware of the boundary between policy and operations and accept that it is the role of principals and other staff to choose the educational means of realising council policy.

Policy includes the development and review of the school's compact (charter). This should reflect the school's aims, values, general principles and operational style.

The notion of partnership cannot be over emphasised. Parents were the first educators of their children and clearly have the primary responsibility for the eventual success and happiness of their children. Schools and their staff share this responsibility for the child from age five.

Under the previous government, a corporate view of the school emerged. Instead of the notion of a partnership between all sections of the school community, parents came to be seen as "clients" and the school council one more link in the management chain of the department. Any so-called devolution of powers from the centre in fact enhanced the individual autonomy of the principal whose role was to "manage" the school council on behalf of the department or, more precisely, the government.

The AEU rejected and rejects this corporate model. It distances the school from its community, gives negative signals on the value of parental involvement in education and undermines broader concepts of democracy.

The question of changes to legislation, regulation, lists of roles and responsibilities and procedures and practices misses the point. If the process is truly democratic and collaborative, such changes will not materially alter the workings of a school council. In any event, no one will ever be able to comprehensively and completely document such things. If a school council was to take advantage of an omission in order to act unilaterally then clearly there are more serious problems with the process.

Generally, the current lists seem adequate in order to provide the flavour for guidance. However, the processes relating to principal appointment and renewal need to be more open and transparent ensuring that school councils are fully and democratically involved.

## **2. Governance Standards**

The governance standards of school councils should be common and embody transparent democratic principles. This means that accepted values of honesty, integrity and respect should be the basis of communications and reporting.

It is the responsibility of the department to ensure that all school councils meet their obligations.

A whole industry has grown around the buzz words of “accountability” and “compliance”, particularly relating to companies and now applied to the public sector. Despite the stated intentions, the practices usually serve to deceive and make more unclear the actual practices of the organisation.

School councils should be spared this façade. The vast majority know what they are doing, how to consult with their communities, the need to audit in a proper way and how to report on their progress. Those councils which either lack the resources or the expertise to meet their obligations should be supported by the department through the provision of professional development and/or improved advice mechanisms.

## **3. School Councils and Community Strengthening**

In many rural places the school is the centre of the community. It not only acts as the formal education facility but as the community recreation centre, meeting place, town hall, sporting venue, fund raising focus, emergency meeting place, etc.

In such places, when a school disappears, the town disappears.

To a lesser extent, schools elsewhere serve the same purpose. If not, this should be the aim of the school council. This serves not only an economic purpose but one linked to the generation of community spirit. This is why

school councils should be truly democratic in nature and reflective of the community in membership.

Links with local government, local businesses and other significant groups should be recognised in the school compact.

#### **4. School Council Membership**

The AEU understands that within a general democratic framework, there is a need to ensure proportionality of representation on school councils. These two principles can be consistent. The AEU supports the following model:

Generally, there should be equal numbers of parents and teachers on School Councils. More specifically,

- (a) Parents, elected by parents of students at the school, should constitute
  - (i) no less than half of a primary school council;
  - (ii) no less than one third of a secondary college council;
  - (iii) an appropriate mix of (i) and (ii) above, where the school is some other structure, eg; P-12.
- (b) Staff (teachers and others employed at the school), elected by staff at the school, should constitute at least one third and no more than half of a school council;
- (c) There should be adequate student representation in relation to school size, structure and the expressed desire of the student body.
- (d) Up to one fifth of the total membership may be coopted to represent wider community interests where there is vote by a three-fifths majority of elected councillors.
- (e) The principal shall be a voting member of the council included in the staff number as automatically elected.
- (f) Parent clubs should have a nominated representative where this is desired.

It is desirable for there to be gender balance on school councils.

As stated earlier, parents who happen to be employed elsewhere by DE&T should not be included in the staff category for election purposes thereby discriminating against the staff employed at the school.

#### **5. School Council Elections**

The AEU believes that a two year term for elections of the whole school council is more appropriate than the current model. All councillors should face election at this time. This is the practice in most democratic institutions in our society with no problems for continuity, e.g. parliament. The timetable for

elections should maintain the current flexibility, which still allows new parents to become members of their school council early in their involvement with the school.

## **6. Role of School Councils in School Improvement**

This issue intersects with item 2, at least in terms of the discussion paper prompts.

However, the AEU views with concern the notion that school improvement is intrinsically linked with accountability. This notion sounds very similar to the actual reasons for introducing self governing schools manifested in the board of management approach – transferring all responsibilities to the school council thereby absolving the government from its responsibility and, presumably, accountability. In fact, the Victorian community at large did not accept this model and voted accordingly.

Every meeting of a school council is about school improvement and every day in between meetings, the school program is all about school improvement. Attendance, at random, at any school in and out of school hours when meetings are being held, would assure any doubter of this fact.

Discussing, reviewing, changing school policy and processes is school improvement. Formal centrally imposed processes have rarely had a positive effect on the education outcome of the school. They end up involving people in time consuming repetitive and formulaic work, resulting in cynicism. What school councils really want is addressed in the next issue – more resources.

## **7. School Council Support**

School councils have been told too often to do more with less, to add new responsibilities but accept no new or even less financial support from the government.

One reason that it can be difficult to recruit school councillors is that many have succumbed to the futility of the task. They raise funds, spend many voluntary hours, yet the maintenance and improvement of facilities can rarely be met through these measures. In recent years, the funding received by schools for maintenance has been less than the inflation rate because of the so-called “embedded tax savings” - a reduction due to the introduction of the GST. Schools never paid sales tax – there were no savings, just new costs with less funding.

The AEU acknowledges the additional expenditure that the Bracks Government has committed but a school modernisation program of 50 schools per year, when there are more than 1600 schools, is inadequate. More portable classrooms are not the answer. A massive cash injection of at least \$1billion is needed. This level of infrastructure investment will last for 30 years and enable school councils to provide the facilities that the children who attend our state schools are entitled to enjoy.

More accessible professional development needs to be provided to school councillors so that they can improve their knowledge of the role and, more importantly, interact with councillors from other schools who face similar issues. This should be collaborative in style enabling schools or groups of schools to choose the support model which best suits their needs.

Schools councils are government bodies which are responsible to the Minister. It is, therefore, appropriate that all non DE&T staff member councillors are paid sitting fees, even if this is nominal. This should be additional to the funds currently provided for the running of schools. These sitting fees may make it easier for parents to become members of school councils by limiting (or partially compensating for) their out of pocket expenses.

## 8. **Additional Issues**

There should be legislation enacted to enable an agreed governance framework to sit above a group of local school councils to allow for the integration of their functions. This could support governance structures of schools that are part of precincts, that wish to work more closely in a cluster/federation arrangement. The legislation must specify that these arrangements can only be entered into where all participating school councils agree in the first instance. The legislation must provide a clear statement of roles and responsibilities and spell out the line management and accountability mechanisms in any such arrangement. The legislation must make it clear that decisions taken at the cluster/federation level are binding on all constituent parts.