

AUSTRALIAN LITERACY EDUCATORS' ASSOCIATION

Submission to the

Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education

April 2007

The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) is pleased to have the opportunity to present the following submission to the Inquiry. This submission is focused on the first of the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

1. Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:

- *the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage; and*
- *the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.*

The Australian Literacy Educators' Association is a professional association dedicated to the improvement of literacy development and language learning at all levels. It provides support and professional development to educators and others interested in literacy through international, national, state and regional conferences, workshops and seminars, journals, position papers and other publications. Currently there are over 2000 members of ALEA, from all sectors and levels of education.

We note particularly the expectation that submissions:

will cover, among other things; the success or otherwise of literacy and numeracy programs in primary schools, the relative merits of teaching methods across the curriculum, factors bearing on teaching quality, the relative success of remedial programs, catering for 'bright' and gifted students, the effects of social change on the curriculum and on teaching practice, the effects of cultural and technological change on how students view the acquisition of skills and knowledge, and any attitudinal changes that might have been measured or perceived in the way students and teachers value knowledge.

The broad and genuinely representative nature of the association means that ALEA is well-positioned to articulate teachers' understandings of the diverse needs and experiences of students and teachers in Australian schools.

In this submission, we draw attention to seven themes of major relevance to the subject of the Inquiry.

The centrality of literacy in all learning

Literacy is central to all learning, for all students, in all discipline areas, throughout the years of schooling. Literacy is a major focus of learning in the early years of schooling, and continues to contribute extensively to students' achievement as they progress through primary and secondary school. To a significant extent, effective

literacy learning plays a key role in enabling students to achieve high academic standards.

Effective teaching practices

There is a considerable body of evidence about the repertoire of literacy teaching approaches utilised by effective literacy teachers in Australian schools. For example, the recent national research study, *In Teachers' Hands*¹, identified the evidential link between students' successful literacy performance and the classroom practices utilised by their teachers. As a national professional association, ALEA is well aware of the range of effective literacy programs developed in recent years within state and territory education systems, and in Catholic education systems.

International comparisons

ALEA has noted the high levels of Australian students' achievement in reading literacy in the OECD project, the *Programme for International Assessment (PISA)* involving 15-year old students. In an international context, Australian students' performance is high, reflecting the success of the teaching programs in schools. However, ALEA is also well aware of the wide distribution of literacy achievement amongst Australian school children, the equity issues involved in this situation, and the need for targeted resources to address these equity issues.

Quality teaching

The quality of teaching plays a crucial role in providing students with opportunities to achieve high standards. ALEA recognises the significance of high quality professional learning opportunities for teachers to maintain and enhance the quality of literacy teaching.

Curriculum and assessment

ALEA supports the design and delivery of consistent and flexible curriculum programs from school entry to Year 12 to set high standards for students' progress in learning. Monitoring learning progress through a range of strategies is also of major importance in identifying achievement and learning needs. Effective monitoring of learning occurs in many ways, including the formative assessment practices of classroom teachers and whole cohort assessment in literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. ALEA acknowledges the strong link between curriculum and assessment, and is concerned that state and national testing programs are designed so as to maintain high curriculum standards, rather than degrading curriculum to a narrow focus on what can be tested.

ESL and adult literacy programs

ALEA recognises the diverse groups of learners in Australian schools, and the need for targeted support for many of these learners. ESL and adult literacy programs are of particular importance for many learners, and the provision of effective programs

¹ Loudon, W., Rohl, M., Barratt-Pugh, C., Brown, C., Cairney, T., Elderfield, J., House, H., Meiers, M., Rivalland, J., & Rowe, K. (2005) In teachers' hands: Effective literacy practices in the early years of schooling. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 28 (3) – whole of issue.

plays a key role in providing access to learning for many students. Home literacy practices significantly impact on literacy achievement in school, and adult literacy programs that strengthen home literacy practices are essential to improve opportunities for many students, for example, Indigenous students.

The impact of information and communication technologies

To be effective participants in a democratic society, students now need to be able to utilise the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). School curricula, resources and teachers' expertise contribute to students' capacity to use ICTs effectively and critically.

Members of ALEA would be pleased to meet with the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee to discuss these issues. ALEA would also be pleased to make suggestions about schools to be visited by the Committee during the course of the Inquiry.

This submission to the Inquiry is presented on behalf of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA)

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