

## Schools First Conference – 19 March 2010

### Steve Bracks speech

#### Government Recognition of the Importance of School-Community Partnership and the role of government moving forward

Thank you very much for that introduction Jenny, and it's great to be here. It's great to see educators from right across Australia, and I think New Zealand as well here.

And it's great to see the partners who are here as well – the National Australia Bank, the Foundation for Young Australians, and ACER the independent research body for educational research in this country.

And I also have an involvement with Schools First. I think it's one of the best private sector investments that's happened to education in the history of this country, and I'll go into that in some detail later on.

As you know, Australia has had a unique, in some ways, history in relation to education provision. It goes back to colonial rules where each of the colonies had the principle of a compulsory secular and free education system enshrined in their colonial constitutions of that time.

In the example of this state, the original act requiring universality goes back to 1873, it's been revised more recently but that is not uncommon in what has been provided across the country. And of course that has served us extremely well, very well, because it has provided a base of qualification, a base of pre-qualification if you like across the country which is universally accepted as the right of all Australians.

And that has been the port and principle and has stood us in good stead right through periods in Federation and right through the post second world war boom and the development of our economy more broadly.

But more recently of course we have seen some movements on that across all jurisdictions.

And in particular to look at that pre-qualification standard and to say that we need to go further. We need to look at life long learning. We need to examine retention and completion as a principle of what is operated as objectives in our education system. And we need to encourage post compulsory involvement from the broader student population across the nation as well.



And that has been a push in all state and territory jurisdictions more recently for good and sound reasons. We know of course that we have some great attributes in this country. We can't compete though on low grade manufacturing products on price but we can compete on laboratory transform manufacturers and value added on design and financial service sector and logistics and a whole range of other areas. But it does require a significant increase in educational attainment to achieve that.

We need to know what we want to be good at. We need to know where we want to improve. And certainly that's where the push is across state and territory governments. Or even more recently of course this is what the Australian government has decided is one of its major transformational changes, what it calls an Education Revolution. Which is sometimes hard to understand and unbundle, but I think in its simplest form really means that more people should participate in education for longer gaining higher educational attainment and seeking lifelong learning as a principle that operates in this country. And it's very welcome of course to have the involvement of the Australian government, the balance sheet of the Australian government as part of that push as well, on what has been historically a state and territory responsibility.

And so it's all about participation, increasing participation, increasing skills and of course making sure that compared to other developed countries that we have an edge and an important extra attribute which is going to make us much more world competitive.

All this requires a rethink of our universal obligation. Not that we should revisit and whittle down the universal obligation, the compulsory secular and free, that should be mandated and of course is mandated in new education acts around the country. But it's not enough. That's the key, it is not enough.

What do we need? How do we get there? Are some of the key questions we should be asking across all our education systems across the country. And clearly we need more. Clearly we need to take into account the ageing of the workforce, the low participation levels compared to what we need, and education standards lower on OECD classifications than what is required for a developed country such as Australia.

We need to do better. We need to be more world competitive and the skills and abilities of our people are going to be one of the key ingredients for that opportunity to be more world competitive as well.



So we need a whole of community effort to actually bear on that task of increasing participation. We are unlikely to increase our birth rate significantly from what it is, and are probably likely to have some moderate increase in immigration but we are under represented in the workforce in participation terms and we need to do more on that.

Education is one of the keys to unlocking that. Giving people that opportunity, Training, retraining, opportunities for growth and part time and shared work in the future as well. All those things which are important and all relies on a strong push towards retaining, keeping and increasing the skills of the country. And it does require a whole of community effort to achieve that.

Governments are mandated to do the best they can for the whole of the population and that's important but we do have a responsibility to work with communities in which we operate, to work with the private sector in really achieving that aim. If we do that we are more likely to achieve greater success.

So private sector involvement, as a shared responsibility is important for the future. But there should be and must be, and one of the reasons I'm involved in Schools First, it must be a coherent contribution.

I understand there was some debate about this earlier on. I take a view that you are best placed to judge this matter. You are educators, you are best placed to make that qualitative call on what is appropriate. Within an educational framework, which you work within, and of course there is the education systems themselves which are going to make that judgement. But it should, and what attracted me to Schools First, it should be something that the school systems, the education systems, are not already doing. I think that's one of the important principles. Value adding of what we all aspire to. Not simply picking up the funding gap which should be provided in the mandated requirements under education acts around this country. I think that's an important first principle.

Secondly it should be based on good and sound research. Research partners are important – it's all about outcomes. You wouldn't be surprised standing up here as a former Premier to say its all about outcomes - it is all about outcomes. The outcomes might be about by people staying at school longer, it might be about transitioning with the workforce at a greater rate or less people dropping out of the school system in the middle years but its all about outcomes.



And of course having a good research base on what accrues to a better outcome is also important in the process as well. So it must be coherent in that respect. And it should be long term. We all know that small short term interventions can be frustrating for educators. I know that can be frustrating. You deal with change all the time. Regularly, constantly. If you're not equipped for that there's plenty of other professions I'm sure that could open up. But change is a constant for your profession. But the best change is that which is embedded, long term, with committed partners who are going to see it through. That doesn't mean just a single one off contribution to something that's reacted to as a request from you, but something that is a quality long term contribution leading to a better educational attainment and outcome.

That's why I like Schools First., because Schools First is based on the principle that in the end it is going to motivate students to stay at school longer if they can have a real experience which involves industry and the community more coherently to make the curriculum more relevant. And if we can assess that and Geoff [Masters] I know has sort suffered me on the Board of Schools First talking about this to some extent, and if we can longitudinally follow schools and students to assess whether we do get that outcome, a greater retention than otherwise would be the case without that intervention, then we know we are doing something which is worthwhile and long term, and I think that's important. That's an example of a quality partnership and I think a very good example.

I'm very encouraged by Schools First because its brought in at the ground level important partners - ACER, Foundation for Young Australians, and of course the major sponsor National Australia Bank. What has encouraged and surprised me is that it's not just handing out a cheque although that is often useful, but its not only handing out a cheque, its also bringing the weight of your organisation behind the reform and change. And that has been important. Every branch, every aspect of the National Australia Bank more broadly has really decided that this is an important long lasting reform. Not for seeking new clients, but for making a contribution, which was requested from the Board down, to that very task that Australia has required to increase educational attainment and keep students engaged in school longer. It's been that. So it's not reacting, it's not a reactionary, it's an organisation searching for a contribution to make which is important for the nation. And that's quite different you know. Think about that for the moment. Think about the requests that are made to you in schools, and you'll see that that is a significant difference.



It's also different because it's resourced well. There are a lot of programs that are not. This is and that's good. The highest single philanthropic contribution ever made in the history of education outside the education providers. That's a pretty good thing encourage on the people that do. And I'm very pleased that NAB has initiated that and as I mentioned has a whole of organisation commitment.

And importantly and I think what attracted me to support the program is that it is unashamedly aspirational. And I know this is a great debate isn't it in education, about needs based funding supporting people to assist and support them to address disadvantage. That is important, that's crucial. But I would argue that is a fundamental obligation of the systems themselves. It's a fundamental obligation of State and Territory systems and the commonwealth government. They're mandated to do that.

I don't see any problem with this program being aspirational. Aspiring to something for example, aspiring to do better through good examples of partnerships which can lead to a better educational attainment ie I know that when projects were assessed within NAB, there were some other worthy projects which were about addressing disadvantage and I think this one is really on the money and on the mark from that point of view.

It's not the first of course of major partnerships around the world. If you look for example at the new Obama administration, President Obama of the United States, for example, and I'll just mention a couple of examples, he recently announced his Educate to Innovate campaign, which is aimed at getting American students to excel in science and mathematics. He called for philanthropists, it's a resonating cause we hear it here. Philanthropists, scientists, engineers, educators and the private sector to join his campaign.

And to help the goal, President Obama has created 4.35 billion dollar US Race to the Top fund that challenges the states in the United States of America to dramatically improve schools and students levels of achievement.

We are not dissimilar in a way, and very important aspirationally I think for the future.



There are already some very high quality partnerships announced in response to President Obama 's call for action. The Time Warner Cable project called Connect A Million Minds is one of those. Time Warner Cabled has partnered with First Robotics and the Coalition of Science After School for inspiration and recognition of science and technology. The partnership aims to connect over one million students to high quality after school science activities. And already Time Warner Cable has committed about 100 million dollars on top of that by the government of the United States of America to that project. This is encouraging and should be supported if you're looking at quality contributions.

That's the example I'm using about quality contributions, of which NAB is probably the shining example in this country.

In Victoria we have had our own examples of successful partnerships supported by governments. You'd expect me to say that. But we do have some and I can use our examples. I'm sure there are examples from other states which are great as well, and you might ask me lots of questions.

The Local Learning and Employment Networks was really designed around that. We were grappling with the same issue, and we decided there should be a whole of community effort brought into the task of educating in this country. So the LLENS, or the Local Learning and Employment Networks, were set up about 2001 to bring together schools, TAFE and alternate community education, local government, youth services & employers to bring to bear on that same task of keeping students at school longer.

Why are they leaving? What can we assist and support to get them at school longer? How can we design programs to make the curriculum more relevant and appealing so the students can stay engaged for those decisions they need to make later on for further education or further work opportunities?

That's really what they were about, so its not inconsistent really with what President Obama's doing, what NAB's doing, but importantly what we need to do more broadly.

I think the way of the future will be with successful partnerships, so long as they are quality partnerships, they are resourced well, they are soundly based in educational terms and they are about the national goals and aspirations of our country.

And if they're about that I think they will go very well. I'm very pleased to be here to talk to you today. I'm pleased to answer questions. If I can congratulate the partners NAB, Foundation for Young Australians and also ACER.



I think this is a quality contribution. I hope you recognise it as such. But not just that, think about what else can be done outside as well with other contributions made and advocate and push for that also, because I think that's going to be important long term as well.

Thanks for the opportunity.

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