

Progress on Education Reform

Minister Peter Garrett

17 March 2011

Transcript

Following the release of the second version of My School, Minister Garrett outlined the direction of education reform for the coming year and beyond. My School and NAPLAN have been important developments in Australian school education and their role in sustained education reform is increasing. Minister Garrett elaborated on the importance of these developments in the context of the next stage of reform, emphasising the key elements that will improve schooling in Australia.

In this important Grattan Institute event, the Minister articulated his reform agenda for school education in Australia.

Speaker: **Minister Peter Garrett**

Moderator: **Ben Jensen, Program Director – School Education, Grattan Institute**

Host Representative: **Sally Calder, KPMG**

AUDIO: This is a podcast from Grattan Institute, www.grattan.edu.au.

SALLY: Welcome to KPMG. My name's Sally Calder and I'm the Education Lead at KPMG and it's my very great pleasure to welcome you to our Melbourne offices this afternoon. And as is tradition at KPMG, I'd like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting this afternoon, the Elders past and present of the Wurundjeri tribe. I'd like to first of all thank you for waiting so patiently for our guest speaker who's been dealing with the uncertainties of domestic air travel, and introduce you to Dr Ben Jensen from the Grattan Institute, who is the Program Director of School Education, and will introduce Mr Garrett.

BEN: Thank you very much. You've all been waiting so I'll keep this quick. It's my great pleasure to introduce the Hon. Peter Garrett, Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth to this Grattan Institute event. It's worth noting this week marks six months you have been Minister, certainly a period of change in school education. And he entered I think during a time of significant reform and has pushed ahead with that reform in the short period he's been Minister. There's a number of issues that we face in school education, both new and old, within a context of increasing expenditure in school education over a number of years, and at least in some measure declining performance. However, it's also a time where I believe, or at least I hope, that there's a growing recognition of the importance of school education in Australia's, not only social, but economic future. And it's within this context that Mr Garret joins us tonight to talk about education reform. It's something we're all clearly interested in and I'd like to welcome you to speak tonight at this Grattan event and invite you to speak on the progress on education reform in Australia. Thank you.

MINISTER: Thank you very much, Ben, and I will add my acknowledgements to traditional owners as well and thank the Grattan Institute for the opportunity to speak to you formally tonight on Beyond My School 2.0, the education reform agenda.

Education is a serious enterprise. It's unique in that it delivers personal fulfilment and prosperity, it underpins our culture and productive capacity and it helps inform the nation's view of itself. So it is a genuine pleasure to be here amongst a group of people for whom education policy is an exciting subject. It can hardly be anything less, given the crucial role that education plays in the life of our country, and the importance of education reform for our future aspirations. As Ben pointed out, I've had this portfolio for around six months and I've relished that particular role. Already I'm struck by the passion of its participants and the variety of views and the sincerity with which they are held.

The central role education plays I think explains the passions it arouses. Contestation in the education sphere is a serious debate about who Australians are, how they see themselves and

where the nation is headed. For too many students education's the only way out of economic and social dependence. What happens in the classroom and at school provides many young people with their only opportunity to break out of the limitations imposed by demography and circumstance. And in a country as wealthy as ours, demography should never equal destiny. Your future should never be determined by your postcode. And words and expressions like this have been used by the Prime Minister and I repeat them here because we do believe that all children deserve the best education possible regardless of where they live or how much their parents earn.

If we take a snapshot of education in Australia, what do we see? Well, there are nearly three and half million students and almost 9,500 schools, there are eight state and territory governments, eight state and territory Departments of Education, eight Catholic Education offices and over 1,000 independent schools. It's a highly unionised workforce. The AEU through its state and territory branches has around 180,000 members, while the independent education union has 65,000 members. Fully 75% of the teacher workforce is unionised. There are special interest groups that represent every group and sub-group of the hundreds of thousands who work in schools and the millions who send their children to school each day. And then there's everyone else: all those who've attended school and have an opinion on education. This literally is a portfolio in which every Australian has personal experience and all have a view. And one of the most arresting features of being Minister for School Education is experiencing this cacophony of passionate education voices.

But what I've also observed is that many of these arguments and views can be reduced to a number of key themes. These central themes run through and across the numerous education debates. They are also the policy spaces in which the Gillard government has staked out clear ground as the first Australian government to identify school education reform as one of its defining features. The Prime Minister in an address to the Sydney Institute some 12 months ago identified and articulated these policy themes when she said we've set about putting in place the reforms, the architecture and the investment, a national curriculum, a new era of transparency, My School; funding agreements that apply the same requirements of transparency and accountability to all schools; national partnership for smarter schools. And these reforms have come with unprecedented investment. We're delivering almost double the funding for Australian schools over the current quadrennium compared to the last quadrennium. And that investment, I go on to add, currently stands at \$64.9b.

So the first message from this government then is that the days of debating public versus private schools has passed. Fresh thinking is required to produce policy that recognises that parents choose schools, not systems, and then in the care and education of their children they are not focused on an ideological debate. Recognising this is a necessary prerequisite for any successful reform of school funding policy.

The second message is the transparency about education resources and student results is essential for an informed discussion about reform. The third is that a schools curriculum, what we collectively believe to be the knowledge, skills, understandings and abilities necessary for a productive citizenry should be a universal provision. A national curriculum enfranchises the population. The fourth is that the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the single most important variable in improving student results. And finally, that while Australia compares well in international comparisons of student performance, our equity tale, those students who are not achieving national benchmarks, is way too long and some students are over-represented in that tale. Each of these positions has guided the government's reform agenda.

I want to initially address the transparency issue as many of the other policy initiatives are predicated on informed public debate. As you'd know, less than a fortnight ago I launched My School 2.0. The website delivers transparency in spades and now provides, amongst a wealth of local detail, the publication of data in relation to three key indices: the financial resources that a school has at its disposal to educate its students; a scale that identifies the socio-educational advantage of the cohort of students enrolled in the school; and the performance of students in a given year and over time. My School 2.0 gives individual and comparative school information on these three indices. It also allows an examination of the relationship between them. We can now consider what effect can be discerned from the amount of money going into a school and

student results and how is this influenced by the profile of the students, and ask which schools, given their student profile and available resources, achieve superior results and what can be learned from this.

My School 2.0 provides powerful information for academics, policy makers and politicians. But equally important, it stimulates informed discussion and debate among parents, at dinner parties, at barbeques, at the sidelines of sporting matches and doubtless at P&C meetings. My School 2.0 has been the catalyst for important and productive conversation between parents and principals, and this conversation is on a more equal basis. It provides principals with the opportunity to show what their schools do and explain what the schools' goals and objectives are. It allows parents to ask informed questions and to be involved in their child's school and in a more meaningful fashion. My School 2.0 gives vital information to the community but it also empowers principals and giving principals more power is essential for effective reform at the school level. And what My School 2.0 shows once again is the amazing breadth and diversity of Australian schooling, and it makes plain how wide the variation in financing and funding arrangements is school by school. It also gives us glimpses of the wonderful achievements of students and teachers and principles in schools where student gain is above the national average and greater than statistically similar schools. In schools it enrolls students from disadvantaged backgrounds and helps them to excel in schools that take relatively low levels of per student recurrent income and achieve results that go beyond the expectations associated with that disadvantage and produce student incomes that are better than better resourced schools.

My School 2.0 has proven to be a very popular website with nearly 400,000 visits since Friday, 4th March. It's disrupted traditional and longstanding education debates across the country and it's opened up dozens of smaller conversations that are now well underway. I think it's fair to say, and I do hope you'll agree, that this government's commitment to transparency with the debate eschewing stereotypes is paying dividends. As I said, a closer examination of the layers of information on My School reveals for the very first time which schools, given their context and resources, achieve disproportionately good results. Now this information needs to be analysed for policy implications and these schools should be recognised and rewarded. And the government has committed to rewarding school improvement, and this means identifying the criteria for improvement. Student results are obviously one criteria of a school's success.

So My School provides us with this and other information but deeper and richer understandings of the ingredients of successful schools also requires the establishment of a national school improvement framework, a framework that includes student results but is not limited just to those results. And this will be part of the work schedule of MCEETYA, the Ministerial Council of State Education Ministers and myself, and it will require the ongoing collaboration of state and territory governments.

And we know the two key ingredients in school effectiveness are leadership and teacher quality. The late Dr Ken Rowe once wrote that, and I quote, the quality of teaching and learning provision are by far the most salient influences on students' cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes of schooling. And because we recognise that quality teaching is at the core of improving student results, the government is undertaking a root and branch renewal of teacher training. The last meeting of state and territory education Ministers, the last MCEETYA meeting, was important for a number of reasons including something that I think was a little overlooked then, namely agreement for the first time ever on a national set of teacher standards. The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, AITSL, who have been charged with this work, will now oversee the introduction of common national standards across the country. National standards build a floor under teacher quality. They mandate curriculum knowledge, understanding of test analysis to target programming, classroom behaviour management, special education, IT skills and the other core knowledge skills and attributes of successful teaching.

There has been too much variation in the quality of applicants for teacher education and too much variation in the quality of teacher training courses. This is not good enough, every child deserves a quality teacher. AITSL is also currently working on common teacher training requirements that will demand high level maths and English skills for students enrolled in

teacher education courses and common course content based on the national teacher standards. And AITSL is also working on proposals to strengthen the assessment of teacher education students in comparable and transparent ways across universities. So the next meeting of Ministers will be considering the rigor of graduate assessments across teacher training programs across the country.

Teacher training is the most common entry point into teaching but it isn't the only entry point. Teach For Australia and Teach Next are Gillard government policies that deliver alternative access to the classroom for Australia's best and brightest young graduates or for career change professionals. Both are ground breaking initiatives genuinely that increase the pool of teacher talent. Teach For Australia, Teach Next and the new national teaching standards are also built on a common foundation. This is content knowledge. Deep subject knowledge is a prerequisite for successful teachers. It's not sufficient of itself but without it teachers can't unpack the building blocks of content for their students. And Australia's first national curriculum defines this content.

As you would know Australia's first national curriculum was agreed to by Australia's Education Ministers last December at that MCEETYA meeting I've been referring to. We now have core curriculum in English, maths, history and science from kindergarten or reception to Year 10. This is no small achievement. Getting all states and territories across the line was a significant task. But in a country with 22 million people, having eight different curricula is absurd. Nevertheless, each jurisdiction was defensive of its own material and unwilling to change unless it was to a better curriculum. And the Australian curriculum improved significantly on existing state and territory syllabuses. It will underpin teacher training and professional development, it'll mean that teachers or students who travel interstate will have a clear understanding of where they're up to and an expectation of the content to come.

The Australian curriculum provides students and teachers with a shared understanding of powerful content but many students need additional support to access this curriculum. And in a country as wealthy as ours too many students are achieving results below what we as a nation should tolerate. Too many of these students are from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, so in 2009 this government made \$2.5b available to the Smarter Schools national partnerships and low SES schools were the main target of this investment. Improvements must be demonstrated through improved literacy and numeracy outcomes and other indicators and we believe that the key to these improvements lies in teacher quality. The three partnerships, low SES, literacy and numeracy and teacher quality have been in place in some schools since the middle of 2009. And these partnerships have stimulated a wave of innovative practices across Australian schools from all sectors. New teaching classifications with increased salary have been introduced for outstanding teachers. New literacy and numeracy programs are being trialled. Schools have introduced family liaison and attendance officers, introduced literacy and numeracy coaches. Schools have been designated as schools and centres of excellence for teaching. Principal empowerment pilots are being trialled as well.

What we intend to find out is what are the most effective interventions and why are they effective. It cannot be underemphasised that never before has such a level of sustained activity occurred in schools directed at improving the results of our most disadvantaged students. And looking at preliminary data, the initial signs are promising. I want to make it clear that in some schools the national partnership activity has only been underway for a short amount of time. And My School 2.0 data has only been available for a few weeks and the drilling down to disaggregate the data has only just started. But early analyses indicate that a good proportion of literacy and numeracy national partnership schools have achieved reductions from 2008 to 2010 in the percentage of students in the bottom two bands. These are greater reductions than the trends observed nationally. For instance, in Year 3 reading, 59.4% of literacy and numeracy national partnership schools achieved a reduction of students in the bottom two bands which was greater than the national trend. And Year 5 reading, the figure is 46%. Now these are figures which tentatively suggest we may be reducing the equity tale. Again I stress that they're early figures and they need further and close examination. There's also the question of schools where there's been no movement. Here we need to ask whether the students in these schools have improved in line with the national trend, at less than the national trends or had no improvements at all. Of course this is one of the great benefits of a national database. We can

see what works and importantly, just as importantly, we can see what doesn't. These data will help us all to ask searching questions about where we want to see school reform go in the years to come, about what it takes to produce a great education for every child, and about how we can make the best use of the resources we have available. I believe that the case for further investment in education depends on our ability to direct investment to where it's been demonstrated to have worked. This level of investment only occurs once in a generation so it must be effective and we must learn from it. Now naturally investment in schools leads me directly to the inverted commas big ticket item in Australian school reform, the funding review.

I want to begin by saying that education funding in Australia can be characterised as a dog's breakfast. The schools funding debate has been at the forefront of education policy reform for nearly 50 years. Much of the debate has been unproductive and divisive. Elements remain so. Only those at the fringes of the debate are stuck in the old public versus private paradigm and this, unsurprisingly, is where the opposition under Tony Abbott and Christopher Pyne have positioned themselves. Now this evening I won't be foreshadowing or second guessing the report on school funding under David Gonski which will hand down its findings and recommendations later in the year, but I would like to make a few comments about school funding. The Gillard government respects and recognises the achievements of non-government schools as it does government schools. Government schools are the backbone of our education system, the place where most students' formal education begins, the crucible of the democratic right to accessible, affordable quality education. Choice in schooling is an important aspect of Australian democracy. Firstly, a significant proportion of Australians send their children to independent and Catholic schools. Nationally the figure is 34.5%. They've chosen their child's school for a variety of reasons. Their choice has been and will continue to be supported with government investment. Non-government schools have operated in Australia since the early days of white settlement. They are an integral part of the rich landscape of Australian schooling. They are successful schools who fought for and won the right to be funded. No non-government school will lose a single dollar per student as a result of the Gonski review.

Parents who choose non-government schools have often done so at significant financial cost. For many the non-government school their children attend is a seamless part of their view of the world and the culture in which they live. And two weeks ago we moved to amend the Schools Assistance Act in the Parliament to end funding uncertainty for non-government schools while the funding review takes place. This is an act of good faith and a signal of our bona fides in relation to non-government school funding. Similarly, the choice of parents to enrol their children in public schools is respected. Government schools are the foundation of Australian education. They must exist in every community where there are enough children to justify their establishment, they take all comers and for many are the only path out of economic or personal disadvantage. The success of Australian education is predicated on the existence of strong, vibrant, high quality public schools. Government schools teach the majority of students from poor families, the majority of students with a disability, the majority of indigenous and migrant students. And like non-government schools, government schools produce their fair share of outstanding scholars and athletes and artists.

At its extremes, the school funding debate is divisive because of the simple failure by some of its participants to see any merit in the views of those on the other side of the debate. And because of a decade of coalition inaction it remains as a longstanding policy fault line. And what I'm committed to and excited about is resolving this issue, ending the division and creating a fair funding system. And this can only be done by recognising the legitimate claims of participants on all sides and by not letting long standing ideological positions prevent a good policy outcome. The funding review will be sector blind, it won't be a private versus public view of the world. It will be fair and it will be transparent.

So where to next? It's my intention to find a solution to the 50 year war on schools funding. And I will lead a drive to empower schools and school principals so that they can make decisions that best suit their communities. I'll be working with the states and territories to find the best ways of recognising and rewarding teaching quality. No Labor government can be satisfied with the disproportionate number of low SES students who perform poorly on assessment and other indicators of school success. These students will remain the focus of our efforts. This is a large

Labor agenda, an agenda of profound importance for students, for their parents and for Australia's long term prosperity. Please join us in the journey. Thanks very much.

BEN: The Minister's agreed to take a couple of questions from the audience, so if anyone has any, please, there's a microphone going around if you have any questions.

AUDIENCE: Minister, you made the point that no non-government school will lose money with the funding review. Do we want the same thing to government schools?

MINISTER: I'm sorry?

AUDIENCE: Will the same be offered to government schools? Because in the past, with funding changes in Victoria, some government schools have lost money.

MINISTER: Well as you know the Commonwealth funds through government schools into the state system so I can certainly commit that there will be no diminution of Commonwealth funding through to the states.

BEN: And if you can just state your name and organisation before you put a question, thanks Bronwyn.

AUDIENCE: Well I'm Bronwyn Kingsley, University of Melbourne. I have a follow up question about your comments that no school would lose funding. There are a few different interpretations of that. One is funding guarantee that you won't lose funding immediately and then inflation will catch up with the new funding then. Or funding guarantee by mature planning [unclear 30:47] will remain the same even when education changes over time. The latter of which Bill Daniels who is the head of independent Schools Council of Australia said was highly unusual. I was wondering whether you looked into which definition of, you know, [unclear 31:03] might apply after this [unclear 31:05].

MINISTER: Well as I said in my formal remarks to you, I wasn't going to in any way foreshadow or second guess what Mr Gonski and his panel may find, but their terms of reference is quite broad as some of you will know, having looked at it and probably even provided submissions, and that will be a matter in the general for them to consider as they look at the best funding models that we might consider.

BEN: I might throw in a question if that's alright.

MINISTER: Sure.

BEN: We don't seem to have a series of hands here. You've said, talking about moving past the public v private debate in school funding, what do you think moving past that debate will look like in terms of funding, given I think the context that a lot of people are talking about in Australia of rise in expenditures and some performance measures that are either stagnating or perhaps not moving as forward as we'd like.

MINISTER: Yeah, look it's a good question. One of the things that struck me when I came into this portfolio was that there are many exiting things happening not only through the reforms that we're proud of and we want to pursue, but generally in education because of its centrality in people's lives. I think the key for governments and policymakers is not only to be able to articulate what we think is important in terms of reform, and that's what I've aimed to do speaking to you here tonight in Melbourne, but also to recognise those things which are out there which are already working well. So that's kind of like the preamble.

The other snapshot view that you get straight away is that whilst we're doing relatively well both nationally and by international standards, it's clear that there are significant challenges, particularly in some areas of learning, and that other countries are starting to show signs of improvement which will see them exceed where our students' learning has gotten to. We do live in a globalised world and one of the commitments that we have which will come subsequent to some of the ones I've measured here, is to develop an Australian baccalaureate. We do have a

number of people who don't only move interstate every year but also will work in two or three or four countries in their lifetime. So the globalised environment that people have to work in means that not only is there a requirement to have standards which we think are suitable and will drive us in making sure that people have a quality education here, but also have the necessary tools in their kit bag when they go elsewhere.

But our school system is a product of our federation. It's a product as is much of the way in which our institutions sit in decisions that were made in an era pre every ... just about everything that we take for granted and use in our political and social and professional lives. And the education system is a big one. And the states carry significant responsibilities in the execution of the delivery of education. So we have to harmonise our activity through our federal system, recognising that there are massive global challenges. What does that mean in terms of the question Ben asked me? Well let me give you one example. We will see significant changes in both the way in which particularly latter high school year classrooms operate and schools operate in the exchange of content and information. This is already happening in part through digitisation of the information, the digital education revolution. Well we've provided laptops for kids on that ratio in those cohorts. But also because systems themselves will inevitably have the capacity and hopefully the intentionality to share that material as well. So we're moving into a much more interactive, harmonised, national and international template for access to and learning, and I sometimes am now going to schools where you're seeing the beginnings of that. In that environment some of the debates that we've had in the past around public versus private seem pretty arcane and fairly olde-worlde. So I think they will partly fall away hopefully because of what I think we're trying to achieve in terms of reframing what it means to provide the necessary support for a quality education for all students, but also because of the massive changes, particularly changes in communication and mobility that are well underway right around the country and also overseas.

AUDIENCE: My name's Bill Hampel. I spent a number of years teaching [unclear 36:40] especially in a number of countries and states, and [unclear 36:46]. Minister, do ... this educational need, the government criteria of allocation of federal monies.

MINISTER: Are you asking me is it the dominant or should it be the dominant?

AUDIENCE: Should it be.

MINISTER: Well I haven't spoken specifically ... I know we've got some friends from the media here so they'll be all ears on this particular answer. Look, I haven't spoken specifically on this matter to this point in time, but clearly educational need is an extremely important criteria and consideration for education funding right across the systems and right across the Commonwealth. And again, without wanting in any way to foreshadow what Mr Gonski and his review will determine, they themselves, both in their terms of reference and in some of the work that they will get done to inform their recommendations inevitably encounter this question of need and what other criteria considerations ought to be considered in terms of alternative funding models and also what form they might take.

As all of you here probably know pretty well and some very well, the funding of education is something which is an essential first step for governments. And we have now a system which provides for funding which in part is directed at the Commonwealth end and that's directed through to non-government schools, but also provides the resourcing necessary for the states in their systems. And underneath that we have a number of programs which I've already identified to you and we've sought what I think has been a really big step in delivering what we think is much needed effort in education including on what you might describe is need, or the need for us to lift these kids in the low SES cohort by specifically focusing on them with the national partnerships. And so that is something which Mr Gonski and his panel will I'm sure consider and I won't say anything more about it other than we look forward to their recommendations.

But I guess the one thing I would add to that is that there's no substitute anywhere, whether you're a Minister, or in a special interest group, or a parent, or whatever your level of interest in education, or you've had the experience, Bill, and others, for actually going and seeing what's going on and trying to get a bit of a feel for the kind of effort that is underway. And some of the

things that I referred to in my speech, particularly around the national partnerships, I have every confidence will produce results. Now we're not at a point where we can start to quantify what those results might be, I've given some early indications to you as I've spoken to you tonight, but I know that when I go to a school, say for example a school that has quite a significant proportion of kids who are recently arrived in Australia, so they've got non-English speaking backgrounds, from a relatively low socio-economic community where there's socio-educational ICSEA figure would be a low one as well.

And so if you look at the school, I'll make it a hypothetical, on their NAPLAN and on My School, you get a pretty good sense and idea of where the school sits and that's really, really informing, powerful information for a policymaker. But then you go to the school and you find out that they've had a literacy and numeracy program going in through low SES and you say well how ... say to the principal how's that been given effect to? And what in some places is happening which is interesting for me is that it's really just been about freeing up the teachers to teach. Though in other words the resources are quite often used to facilitate, for example, the cultural exchanges and familiarisations that are necessary in low SES communities where kids are from NESB backgrounds. Or it may be having a community liaison officer working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and talking about the benefits of education and providing an avenue, a good strong avenue of communication between that community and the school. The sorts of things that teachers quite often have to multitask on, now we're finding with the support and the investment, the support and the funding that the Commonwealth's provided, that we're actually freeing up teachers to teach. And of course once that happens, you start to see those results.

And with the programs themselves, what are they about? Well many of them are actually about providing the actual focus and attention that a student needs, particularly in the Year 3, 4, 5 period, to get their literacy and numeracy going. And I'm often puzzled by some of the commentary which seems to think that a focus on literacy and numeracy is in some way narrow. People need to spend a bit of time in the schools. The schooling environment is not a narrow environment at all. Even at the primary level there's awareness of current affairs and community, there are a variety of activities that kids undertake. There's a broad curriculum in place. But the lit-num is the foundation, it's the building block. If you haven't got that then you don't have the capacity to take those other steps as a young person. And for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in particular, it's crucial because, as you know, ultimately this isn't only about the fulfilment that you get from education, it's not only about making sure that we have the appropriate curricula and standards in place for teachers, it's also tooling people up from their learning journey so that they can actually have a working journey as well. And that's especially important for those pupils in those places.

And so we'll be focusing very closely on how the national partnerships have been given effect to, looking very closely at where we can see signs of improvement and see ways in which we can build on that, and also if we're not seeing signs of improvement, get a clear understanding of how we might respond to that. Look, it's incredibly exciting. It's an area where the community and sectoral interest is high. There's a lot of interest around the funding review, as is appropriate, because it's a once in a lifetime, or it's a once in a decade or two, '73 I think when Carmel had a go at it, to actually to look at what a model might be. But in the meantime, getting on with this really acutely focused high energy work of lifting these students as they come through and getting them on that foundation is very much what we're on about and what we'll continue to be on about in the future.

AUDIENCE: Katrina Raynen, I work in Innovation in the Department of Education and Childhood Development.

MINISTER: Hi Katrina.

AUDIENCE: I was planning to ask this question before you said that. Without denying the literacy and numeracy is really important and foundation, a lot of the international debate is around other skills, our 21st Century skills, and I'm wondering about your comment or your commitment or where that might come up on your agenda in terms of measuring things that are quite different and making them available through My School.

MINISTER: Yeah, look I don't know if everyone had a chance to hear the question but it's really about IT learning and the other skills requirements that are being debated internationally, where they'll come up in the agenda and my own views about that. Well look I guess to state a basic position, I do think that students will need to be able to draw on a wide range of disciplines and knowledge and learnings in order to be able to have successful learning and work journeys. And that will clearly include things like IT and related matters. Some of you will be aware that in my former capacity as Arts Minister I argued very strongly that arts ought to be considered in the next tranche of potential subjects for inclusion in the national curriculum. And I did that not on the basis that I wanted people sitting there listening to rock and roll bands, but rather that the advice and the research was very clear that strong exposure to creative activity in the early stages of schooling not only has positive beneficial effects but is a great assist for kids in the school, whether it's through literacy, maths, social cooperation and the like.

And I think that Ministers will focus pretty closely on these questions when the next three potential additions to the national curriculum come through. So that's geography, languages and the arts. Ultimately a curriculum is set through the states with the national curriculum agreed by states Ministers and by the Commonwealth. There will always be, and I expect over time there will be emphasis of one kind or another given to certain subjects in certain school environments and in certain regions. For example, I can see, particularly over the next 10 to 20 years, schools in Western Australia and parts of Queensland and the NT really wanting to have some strong focus on those subjects which will equip those kids well to go into trades and to work, for example, in the mining industry. In other places, we already have schools which have an emphasis on sport activity or social sciences and the like.

At the end of the day there's no doubt that the provision of a curriculum which properly equips students to succeed in their learning journey must also include their civic and personal journey as well. But that stuff must come first. Those other things are a partnership between schools and carers and parents and community, and for kids who, you know, in their later schooling years are getting a bit of a sense about what they do and don't want.

Look, very quickly, the other thing to say is that there's no question that computers are transforming the classroom. Many of you will have seen this, and that will continue to be the case. So whilst IT I think is obviously going to be an important subject, and it is an important subject for kids, I think that the commentary and some of the academic work is just ... it's just a little slow, you know. It's happening, and it's happening at a mighty pace. And all of us, particularly those of us who have got teenage kids or others will know how accessible all of this is to them, how social media is just completely pervasive, and this is not a question of technical capacities or literacies, there are issues about time management and things of that kind, but I don't think it's going to be something which will be a challenge in the curriculum.

What's key, particularly for those states which weren't in a position to have fully developed curricula, is that a national curriculum provides that benchmark, it provides that overarching benchmark. That's so important. And just about everywhere you go people respond very positively to the fact that we will have one. Of course we're going to have a nice vigorous debate about what is going to ultimately be in it and what isn't. And we're very mindful of not having a curriculum which imposes additional heavy burden on school systems, but there's still going to be questions of choice as to what subjects people want to learn. We need to make sure that they're well laid out for people so they understand what the subjects are about.

BEN: Okay, we have to wrap it up there. Thank you very much for joining us tonight, Minister. You've given us a lot to think about, a lot to look forward to. Thank you all very much for coming and being so patient at the start.

MINISTER: Yeah, sorry we were late.

BEN: And if you could join me now in thanking the Minister for tonight.

End of recording