

ADDRESS BY
HIS HONOUR MR TOM PAULING AO QC
ADMINISTRATOR OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
ON THE OCCASION OF
ANNUAL DINNER FOR THE
ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL LEADERS
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I have had a very educational day. It began at Batchelor College with the opening of a \$2.6 million E-Learning Facility by Julia Gillard, Federal Minister for Education. Marion Scrymgour, our Education Minister, participated – It was a real step forward.

Then following a series of meetings, I took my wife to the airport where she left for a short break. She is my advisor on ties. A striped blue and white shirt is difficult to match with a tie. I am unconcerned - as the British actor and raconteur Robert Morley once said *what I wear is fashion, what other people wear is poor taste*. On that note, the tie can go

It is a great pleasure to be your speaker this evening. Nothing is more topical for Australia than the future of education, but I would like to use the term “education” in its broadest sense.

It is not simply a case of a curriculum; or of data that determines pass or fail, whether of the student or the school itself. Education is not confined to four walls and a quad or sports oval. Education is something that sets us all on a pathway through life.

Further education opens doors to increased options, but it is early education, compulsorily acquired in the classroom, that defines who we can become. It may be as simple as a teacher passionate about Shakespeare, close to my own heart, who inspires one to look beyond the bounds of the legal profession, for instance, and instils a lifelong passion for the stage and The Arts.

Conversely, a physics teacher who has no idea how to electrify his students with the concept that life is all physics, and instead causes extreme tedium and ennui – on his, or her, head must rest some of the responsibility for those for whom physics are a mystery their whole lifetime.

I was educated at Drummoyne Boys High School. Our school motto was *Vincit qui se Vincit* – “he conquers who conquers himself”, a prompt for self control that has stood me in good stead.

In fact this school excited great passion in the Parliament of New South Wales in the early nineties when the local MP, Mr J H Murray, disclaimed: *I draw the attention of the House to a complete waste of taxpayers' money on a classic example of the failure of this Government's schools closure program, which has developed into a*

fiasco in the Drummoyne area. Honourable members will recall my protests in the past two and a half years against the Government's plans to close Drummoyne Boys High School. Unfortunately my pleas fell on deaf ears.

Well before its unfortunate demise, I experienced a scholarly epiphany of sorts. My fellow classmates and I were not a very studious lot but we had an outstanding English teacher, Brian Tapley.

One dark and gloomy day, Mr Tapley turned off all the classroom lights except a desk lamp on his table. He then sat cross legged at the front of the class and read the “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” by Edgar Allen Poe. He commanded rapt attention to the point that when the bell for recess rang, no-one moved.

It may well be that this lesson laid the foundation for preparing and analysing depositions later in my life. The short story, written as long ago as 1841, held as with all good literature, worthwhile truths. One such can be found within the following quote:

Vidocq, for example, was a good guesser, and a persevering man. But, without educated thought, he erred continually by the very intensity of his investigations. He impaired his vision by holding the object too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole. Thus there is such a thing as being too profound.

Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountaintops where she is found.

The truths about education can be misinterpreted in the pursuit of change for change's sake. Noel Pearson states *Education provides the skills and knowledge to contribute to wealth creation or to produce and disseminate ideologies and culture.*

He goes on: *They say* (“they” being middle-class culture producers) *education should be culturally appropriate. We say this should not be an alibi for anti-intellectualism, romantic indigenism and a justification for substandard achievement.*

This applies across the Northern Territory just as much as in Cape York. It applies from Anzac Hill and Areyonga to Woodroffe and Wanguri. Teachers often suffer from a problem common to the rest of us when they enter a classroom with a particular set of preconceived ideas, of reasons why a specific course cannot and will not work, instead of owning a mission to ignite and inspire.

The building blocks of knowledge, imparted from the earliest age, make it possible for every child to have a destiny that is not coloured by discrimination, disadvantage or family dysfunction. Let

me say, this has absolutely nothing to do with the financial standing of a school.

The wealth within our education system is right here in this room. It comes from within every single teacher, assistant principal and principal. A capacity to teach and share knowledge in a manner that takes hold in an individual has value beyond measure.

And preconceived ideas of what will work with each child are just that – preconceived - “*formed as an opinion prior to actual knowledge*”.

If, for example, you passed around a secondary school classroom tomes of the worthy but now largely overlooked Encyclopaedia Britannica, I vouch all of us would be surprised which items really grabbed the attention of individual students. I purposely refer to hard copies that one browses page to page, rather than the quick bites taken from googling an on-line version, as I fear the fun of browsing is sadly losing its appeal in this age of instant access.

The Directions Paper published by the ALP in 2007 calls for Australia to become “the most educated country” and notes “*A significant constraint on Australia’s productivity growth in recent years has been under-investment in education*”. This is a sentiment that the Prime Minister enlarged upon in his National Press Club address ten weeks’ ago.

You probably know the text of Canberra's National Policy Partnership better than anyone. But what leapt from the rhetoric was that *“research shows that nothing at school influences student outcomes more than excellent teaching”* and *“we can give schools more control over their performance and more support in achieving better outcomes”*.

This brings us back to the Association of Northern Territory School Educational Leaders. I applaud your association for providing a meaningful forum. Your newsletters include coverage of events such as 2008 Online Conference which reached far beyond the boundaries of the Territory. And ANTSEL has the capacity to comprehend the difficulties of the present and contribute a great deal to solutions for the future.

I wish you all the best in your continued endeavours for the children of the Northern Territory.

Thank you.