The Problem with Education

Don Hyatt
12th August 2010
Asian language push in disarray

Country high school drop-outs on the rise

Furore as schools asked to chip in for online programs

Plug pulled on students' virtual chatroom

By JEWEL TOPSFIELD

THE state government has been accused of hiding cost blowouts in its $77 million virtual classroom project.

The project — an online network that will give parents round-the-clock access to their children's lessons, homework, results and attendance — will be rolled out in every state school by September.

Education Minister BronwynNS yummy are ready to receive the Ultralanet. Opposition education spokesman Martin Dixon said the government was hiding a cost blowout by asking schools to top up the funding. "Asking students to contribute because they needed IT upgrades would be those that are under pressure claim to primary its that it was con-

National leader Peter Ryan. "Our country teachers do a engement has promised to her.

deputy secretaries Darrell Fraser and Jeff Rosewarne said in the letter.

The Australian Education Union said schools asked to contribute because they needed IT upgrades would be those that
ded." But Ms Pike said the department offered schools $5000 dollars for IT upgrades if they matched the contribution.

"All government schools will have access to the Ultralanet and any school experiencing diffi-

By JEWEL TOPSFIELD

THE Education Department has been forced to scrap part of its $77 million virtual-classroom project after the Privacy Commissioner raised concerns about children chatting on Facebook-style pages.

The ultranet — an online network that will give parents round-the-clock access to their children's lessons, homework, results and attendance — will be rolled out in every state school in Victoria by September.

But the department has ditched plans for every student to have a so-called "eXpress landing page", which would have allowed them to chat via Facebook-style message walls.

Students also will no longer be able to have "learning contacts" — similar to friends on Facebook — access their personal profiles on the ultranet.

The Age believes there were fears this could lead to social exclusion.

Victorian Privacy Commissioner Helen Versey said the Education Department commissioned a privacy impact assessment from an independent consultant that highlighted concerns, including issues relating to the eXpress landing page.

"I share those concerns," she said. "I have been advised that the department is addressing the privacy issues raised by the privacy assessment, which will result in some changes being made.

Cyber bullying is a growing problem in schools, with research suggesting one in 10 students is bullied online or via other digital technology.

Last year Karen Rae claimed her daughter, Geelong schoolgirl Chanelle Rae, 14, took her life after reading something posted about her on the internet.

At the beginning of National Cyber Security Awareness Week this week, Ms Versey warned of the need to stop and think before sharing any personal or financial information about yourself, friends or family.

In a memo seen by The Age, Education Department deputy secretary Darrell Fraser said a privacy impact assessment of the ultranet was undertaken from September to April. "As a result of the report's recommendations, students will not have an eXpress landing page or wall [and] students will not have learning contacts," the memo said.

Students will be able to communicate with one another on "collaborative learning spaces" but The Age believes teachers will moderate comments before they are posted.

The memo says students will still have a profile, a learning profile and learning goals in the "eXpress Space". Teachers will be able to see student spaces.

The ultranet, which has been introduced to 350 schools, can be accessed only by students, teachers and parents.
In science, we’re back with the dinosaurs

By ELISABETH TARICA

A USTRALIA’S scientists are not surprised. They’ve been warning for years about the problems the country faces because of a failure to embrace the sciences. Now they have fresh proof.

A national science literacy poll released last week has dented notions of a clever country by exposing a critical lack of understanding of the basics.

The poll found that one in three Australians believe humans and dinosaurs lived together. Many others thought the Earth took a day rather than a year to travel around the sun.

Only 60 people of 1500 answered all six questions correctly in the poll taken for The Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) and the Australian Academy of Science. Jenny Graves, secretary for education and public awareness at the academy, says the results are sobering.

“It highlights that science education is just not good enough for a country that prides itself on being a clever country,” Professor Graves says. “None of us are all that aware for a few years that Australia is losing ground in science and maths but it’s a real wake-up call that . . . we have a very sizeable number of people who really don’t understand some of the absolute basics of our lives.”

The poll, which copied a survey by the California Academy of Sciences, also found 29 per cent of those surveyed did not think that evolution was occurring now. While Australians generally fared better than the Americans, about 25 per cent did not think humans were influencing the evolution of other species.

The results are worrying, but FASTS president Cathy Foley takes heart that 80 per cent of those polled said science education was very important to the economy.

This concern is not translating to more students taking science and mathematics at secondary or university level. While science still enjoys a respected position as a cornerstone subject, Dr Foley says interest in both the study of and teaching of science is going through a decline. “We are doing something wrong,” she says. “We need long-term funding of vibrant education programs to see generational changes, there’s no quick fix.”

Australia ranks 20th out of 30 OECD countries in producing university graduates with science or engineering degrees.

Figures from the past decade also show a continuing slide in students choosing higher level maths — with a 27 per cent drop in the number of secondary school students taking advanced maths.

Professor Graves says science was particularly neglected in primary schools, where students would benefit from investigation-based programs to encourage their curiosity. “[Students need] an attitude of finding out something rather than digesting a lot of stuff.”
Robyn Williams: And now, the bad news. No, don't run off - this is interesting - even Quite Interesting, as Stephen Fry might say.

Here I'll quote directly from a statement put out by FASTS, The Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies. They have found, together with the Australian Academy of Science that 'a snapshot of 1,500 Australians shows that a third of them believe humans were around at the time of the dinosaurs'.

Oh well, they go on: 'Over a fifth of university graduates think it takes one day for the Earth to travel right around the sun' (and that scores worse than the score of the Americans!)

Twenty-nine percent of Australians don't think evolution is still happening. Other findings: Australia has seen a 27% decline in the number of high school students doing advanced maths in the last 15 years or so, and we rank 20th out of 30 OECD countries in the number of science or engineering graduates we produce each year.

Science, in other words, is sinking fast in our schools and universities, at the very time that demand from industry for these skilled people is soaring.
Australians are great believers. We believe in angels, psychic powers, miracles, and life after death. But, above all, we believe in God. **David Marr** reports.

Next weekend the nation's churches will be filled to overflowing. But then, Christmas and Easter are the exceptions to the great Australian indifference to worship. Belief for most Australians is about values far more than devotion. It's belief without belonging.

But those beliefs are strong. They challenge old assumptions that Australia is an essentially secular country. When 1000 of us were quizzed by Nielsen last weekend for the special poll on faith, we identified ourselves strongly as believers and strongly Christian. Half of us say religion is important or very important in our lives. And even many non-believers still identify themselves as Christian by background.

We aren't dogmatic. We doubt the Bible is the actual word of God. And most of those who do believe the Good Book is divinely inspired don't regard it, word for word, as literally true. Only a hard core of the faithful believes there is one and only one way to interpret the teachings of their own brand of religion. But that core of dedicated Christians makes up about 20 per cent of all Australians.

What you make of these figures depends on where you stand. The view from both sides is disappointing. Christians might despair that 7 million or so Australians seem headed for hell — not that most of us believe hell exists. But the anti-God brigade can look at the same figures and despair that roughly 10 million Australians are still caught in the toils of superstition.

Belief is shrinking and disbelief is growing. But slowly. Those sceptics who believe time will, of its own accord, wipe Christianity out in this country are fooling themselves. The more religious Generation X is heading for the grave — confident, by the way, in life after death — but Christians keep rolling off the production lines.

Sceptics can take this comfort: they now make up the biggest denomination, followed by Catholics and then Anglicans. But this puts Australia only about midway in a list of the top 50 non-believing nations. The great deniers of God are the Scandinavians and Japanese. The great believers of the Western world are Americans. The US remains religion central.

Immigration has changed the mix of races more than the mix of religions in Australia. We remain a Judeo-Christian nation. After a decade of drum-beating about the impact of Islam on Australia, Muslims amount to less than 2 per cent of the population. Those committed to faiths

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ODD SPOT

One in five people in Britain thinks haggis, the Scottish dish made of a sheep’s lung, liver and heart, is an animal that roams the Highlands, according to a survey. Fifteen per cent said it was a Scottish musical instrument and 4 per cent said it was a Harry Potter character.