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Education Must Never Be Left to the So-Called Elite

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Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge fought a spirited battle in 2021 to change the national curriculum so our children hate our country a little less. There is almost complete opposition by the educational elite, especially in university education faculties. The more they oppose, the more confident the minister should be that he has community support.

I say this based on a personal experience, a decade ago, when a group of Queensland parents, teachers and old-school academics formed a group called PLATOQLD and battled the educational elite.

The elites were shown to be far out of touch with community expectations. Politicians from across the political spectrum sided with us and made useful improvements to Queensland syllabi.

We were not fighting culture wars. I was a professor of physics at James Cook University, and - together with Matt Dean from the University of Queensland maths department we were worried about the maths, physics and chemistry syllabi in senior Queensland high schools.

Educational “experts” had hijacked them.

Long writing assignments dominated the assessment in these, the most quantitative subjects.

Ability in mathematics was less important than being able to write an essay.

Quite incredibly, the physics syllabus had almost no detail of knowledge to be taught – the sections on copyright, equity, and safety were each longer than the description of the physics to be taught for years 11 and 12.

Teachers could teach, or leave out, almost anything they wanted. And because Queensland had no external exams, there was absolutely no comparability between schools.

To make matters worse, an internal assessment scheme had been introduced where teachers were banned from using numerical marks to produce a final percentage from which a final grade could be given.

Instead, teachers were supposed to take the letter grades (A to E) for dozens of assessment tasks and then make a “holistic judgment” to award a final grade. Adding numerical marks was specifically banned.

The result was predictable. The standards of Queensland students in maths, physics and chemistry collapsed relative to other states.

The Australian Defence Force Academy (UNSW, Canberra), which takes students in large numbers from all states, noticed that Queensland students had extensive gaps in their knowledge.

So they did a series of tests on the first-year intake and proved it was not their imagination.

Queensland students were far behind their interstate counterparts. Not so long before, Queensland was well ahead.

When PLATOQLD started agitating, the educational elites pompously claimed that the Queensland system was the envy of the world and the government should not listen to our group of “dinosaurs”. What would we know? The experts know best.



A university physicist like me and the highly experienced teachers in PLATOQLD should simply be ignored.

And, obviously, parents should have no say at all.

Our break came in 2013 when Barry Arnison convinced education minister JP Langbroek to hold a parliamentary inquiry into the new-age Queensland syllabi.

The most remarkable feature of the hearing, and most pertinent to Tudge, was that of the 300 public submissions, only about 20 per cent supported the new syllabus.

Almost all of this minority came from those in power in the educational elite – Education Queensland, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, unions, the maths and science teachers associations, education academics, and senior administrators in schools. The 80 per cent who said the system was a disaster were almost entirely parents and ordinary teachers – the un-elite.

The parliamentarians came down on our side. I was concerned that a change in state government in 2015 from Liberal-National to Labor might derail our win, but the scale of the problem was so obvious that nobody was playing party political games.

Under then Labor education minister Kate Jones, the system was changed to be very similar to that in NSW and Victoria. The crazy assessment schemes were largely gone, and for the first time in nearly 50 years Queensland held external exams in 2020. And not just in maths, physics and chemistry as PLATOQLD had wanted – but in almost all subjects.

It was a win for the little people against the educational elite. It proved that the people and their representatives in parliament could beat an elite that had become used to doing whatever they wanted. And this was not the first time it had happened.

The name PLATOQLD was copied from a group called PLATOWA, which had done a similar thing in Western Australia.

I hope this example will embolden the Coalition, from Scott Morrison down, to make significant structural changes in education in this country.

There is so much to do. They must ignore the educational elite, and especially most of the “experts” in academia who will complain loudly. But this will only publicise the wonderful and necessary things the government is trying to do in education.

There is another lesson to be drawn. If the community wants improvements in schools, we must mobilise, as PLATOQLD and PLATOWA did, to show the politicians we care.

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