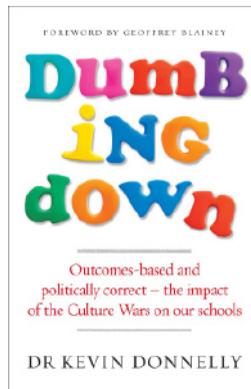


The curriculum crisis

Mark Lopez reviews

*Dumbing Down:
Outcomes-based and
Politically Correct—
The impact of the Culture
Wars on our Schools*

by Kevin Donnelly
(Hardie Grant Books
2007, 230 pages)



Kevin Donnelly's *Dumbing Down* is a book that many parents will read, wishing that their politicians were reading it as well. This book, like the author's 2004 offering, *Why Our Schools are Failing*, is a notable moment in the politics of education in Australia. It is a book that matters, about an issue that matters greatly: the quality of the education of the nation's children and youth. It has important criticisms to make, insights to offer, and solutions to propose.

Donnelly appears to care deeply about the declining standards of education in Australia. As a former teacher, he also cares about those current teachers who share his concerns about the issues he articulates, and he wants a better deal for them. However, he seems to care most of all about the students and their families whom he perceives as being short-changed by the current system, so much so that he is doing something about it.

Donnelly's study focuses more on developments in educational policy rather than on anecdotal evidence of grassroots classroom experiences to make his case. He is impressively conversant with education policy documents and curricula span-

Mark Lopez is an educational consultant, historian and the author of The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics, 2000.

ning the state and territory jurisdictions. He is equally familiar with the relevant research and various testing procedures that provide international benchmarks for comparison.

The target of *Dumbing Down's* criticism is an educational model that its advocates have jargonistically titled Outcomes Based Education (OBE). OBE is the latest umbrella term for a host of progressive, constructivist, Marxist, post-modern and other approaches favoured by the politically correct left-wing educationalists who, as Donnelly points out, dominate the state and territory education systems.

Donnelly argues that this model, and the concepts that informed it, has led to educational practices that have produced a decline in literacy, numeracy, and cultural literacy, and led to courses that produce an imperfect grasp of the fundamental knowledge required to perform best in the key disciplines of learning. It has also led to a proliferation of complex, non-competitive modes of assessment featuring euphemistic terminology that deny the motivated and talented students a sense of reward for their efforts, while also denying parents a clear understanding of their children's circumstances.

Above all, the current policy regime has produced politicised compulsory curricula constructed around the promotion of values associated with the ideology of political correctness, with educational-

ists brazenly using the education system to remodel society in the manner of their choosing.

Donnelly takes delight in using quotations, especially from members of the educational establishment, to make his case against them. For example, in regards to his explanation of the role of the Australian Education Union (AEU) in the politicisation of the curricula, Donnelly quotes AEU President Pat Byrne, who said the following in her address to her union's conference in 2005: 'we have succeeded in influencing curriculum development in schools, education departments and universities. The conservatives have a lot of work to do to undo the progressive curriculum'.

Donnelly's solution primarily involves the adoption of a liberal/humanist view of education, summarised as an appreciation of the best that has been thought and said. For example, in literature, students would study great works by great writers who are appreciated for their intellectual significance, rather than chosen, or assessed, according to their compatibility with political correctness. Donnelly's solution would also involve, where necessary, returning the organisation of knowledge and methods of inquiry to their traditional disciplines—that is, literature, history, geography, etc.. It would involve the reintroduction of a teaching syllabus to courses, which would provide each subject with a clear roadmap for teachers to follow. Importantly, he advocates a return to the standards approach, which involves challenging examinations and clear, competitive standards of assessment so that motivated students can be rewarded and the less accomplished given reasons to improve.

Dumbing Down is more than worth reading, it is worth re-reading. It represents an important contribution to the education debate and a fundamental resource on the politics of education.

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