

OPINIONS



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this issue

AFTER 11 YEARS AT THE HELM OF THE PEAK BODY REPRESENTING INDEPENDENT EDUCATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA, AUDREY JACKSON WILL RETIRE IN JULY.

AS SHE MOVES TOWARDS RETIREMENT, AUDREY REFLECTS ON THE ROAD THAT HAS LED TO THE POSITION OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CONSIDERS THE CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR INDEPENDENT EDUCATION IN THIS STATE.



LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK...

I was once introduced with the words: "Audrey comes from Wigan, a town that everyone comes from but no one goes to" - a somewhat unfair analysis.

I was educated in the United Kingdom in the era of the 11 plus, attending Wigan Girls' High School in Lancashire and then studying Chemistry at the University of North Wales. After graduating with an Honours Degree, I moved to King's College at the University of London where I completed a Graduate Certificate in Education in 1969.

With my husband Charles, I then left England for Canada to teach in a small village in Northern Alberta, 1200 kilometres north of the American border. Between us we taught Science and Maths, Physical Education, Art and Canadian Law. The school was similar to a District High School but offered a modified Year 11 and 12 course.

An advertisement for teachers in South Australia, published in The Edmonton Journal, enticed us to take the next step in our journey. In August 1974, we arrived in Adelaide, air fares paid by the South Australian Government, and were posted to Underdale High School. This was my introduction to teaching Years 11 and 12. Charles and I started our Australian careers in the same school but our paths were to diverge dramatically within four years.

By 1975, Charles was lecturing at the Adult Matriculation College in Adelaide and I was the Deputy Principal of Methodist Ladies' College, now Annesley College, Adelaide. I was on the road that was to influence my future career profoundly.

My role at MLC/Annesley included teaching all the Year 11 and 12 Chemistry, four classes, and being house teacher of Olympia House. In my eight years at the school, I had opportunities to act as Principal and discovered that I liked being in charge! I applied for positions at three schools before being appointed to St Mary's Anglican Girls' School in Western Australia. During the process I learned two things that I share with aspirant Principals:

- An interview allows an applicant to assess the role and the school just as much as it allows the governing body to assess applicants.
- If you are unsuccessful, it hurts, but because the relationship between governing body and Principal is so critical to the success of a school, it is best that you don't get the job if you aren't perceived as being absolutely the right person because it won't work.

In 1996, I realised that it was time for a change. Coincidentally I had been asked at my interview how long I would stay. My reply was that a Principal needs time to introduce and implement change so I would stay no less than ten years but because longevity can lead to stagnation, no more than fifteen years. I left St Mary's in April 1997, having been Principal for fourteen years and one term!

HEADING UP AISWA – INTERPRETATION, REPRESENTATION, PROACTIVITY AND SERVICE

I would like to believe that I've created a focus for the organisation that shows we are here to support, assist and serve schools in all aspects of their operations, acknowledging their individuality. AISWA provides support to governing bodies, principals and teachers and, as part of being a service organisation, we represent the needs of schools to government. It is hard to believe there is such a degree of ignorance of independent education. I have never had to stop explaining to people how the stereotype of independent schools is incorrect.

I also hope that I have contributed to decision-making at both national and state level by ensuring that there is debate about the impact at the school level of legislation and policy. The independent sector has a responsibility to act in this way because it differs from the other two sectors of education which are systems and rely on system policy to implement government decisions.

As a corollary I hope that I have been able to interpret legislation and policy for schools so that they can meet the ever increasing regulation of education in all aspects. This is not simply curriculum but all the legislative requirements that impact on school operation: duty of care; OHS; child protection; industrial law; the list is seemingly endless.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMING

My role has two elements. One is to think and evaluate what it is that schools need to assist them. The other is to look at what is happening in the education environment, isolate the issues and seize the opportunities that those issues and changes are offering, to support schools. I think there are things that I have initiated which haven't been fully implemented because the time was not right. For example, implementing a program of professional learning for aspiring Principals has not been well supported in the last two years because the people targeted - Deputy Principals, Deans of Curriculum - were too involved

in trying to implement the new Senior Secondary Curriculum.

As another example, AISWALearningNet was not the success I had hoped. This does not mean that it is abandoned; rather it means that we need to re-focus and find out what is needed to make it of value to schools.

The governance structure of AISWA goes a long way to ensuring that only projects that are perceived to be of value to schools will be pursued. Sometimes those projects need to be re-thought to meet the changing needs of the schools and the demands on them.

I have really enjoyed the opportunity to understand and experience the diversity of the independent sector, to appreciate the wonderful service that all schools provide to their communities and the quality of education that they provide to young Australians.



ACCESSIBILITY, AFFORDABILITY AND CHOICE

There is now a greater choice of independent schools available to parents. Schools vary in philosophy, religious affiliation, size and fee level. Independent schools represent the whole spectrum of fees so do not necessarily charge high fees. As the number of independent schools has grown so have their locations become more widespread. The geographic accessibility of a school is important especially in the primary years. The newer schools are in the developing areas of metropolitan Perth and in growing regional centres. Hence they are seen to be accessible as well as being affordable to a wider group of families.

Choice is now a part of people's thinking in regard to education. If a parent wishes their child to attend a school with a particular religious foundation or educational philosophy this is now acceptable and possible. Of course, exercising choice increases demand not only for places in existing schools but for new schools.

As a community we no longer subscribe to a 'one size fits all' philosophy. Parents are selecting schools that they perceive will meet the needs of their children. They know that however alike on the surface two schools appear they can be very different in the way they educate their students. Because of the restrictions that are inevitable in a state wide education system, state schools of necessity are structured using generic models which limits responsiveness to community diversity and need.

The success of independent education is founded on each school understanding and implementing the education that their community seeks.

FEDERAL FUNDING

The sector will need to ensure that it does not take anything for granted. The signs are that the Rudd Government has moved on from the politics of envy that was evident in previous ALP election platforms. However, there will be a new funding model and it will be absolutely necessary to ensure that every child in

Australia receives appropriate funding for their education no matter what school they attend. While there will be pressure groups arguing that schools charging high fees need no funding or only minimal funding, this will need to be resisted.

DEMANDS ON SCHOOLS

I believe that the demands being placed on schools and particularly Principals have increased exponentially over the last eleven years. I am particularly disturbed by the fact that the school is seen to bear the responsibility for anything that is said to need improvement. It seems to me that the school is the only place in which children learn to live in a community because the other communities to which they may have belonged have disappeared. However, this does not mean that schools should have to take over roles that more properly belong to others.





CONSTANT CURRICULUM CHANGE

Curriculum seems to be in a constant state of flux and to be constantly expanding. There are always additions to what must be taught but few requirements are removed. Western Australia, in particular, has undergone a significant period of turmoil in regard to Senior Secondary Curriculum. With the courses of study still to be fully implemented, work has already begun on a National Curriculum. Constant change puts enormous pressure on Principals and Teachers. Teachers must teach in the prevailing context; at the same time they must prepare for the future context and ensure they are aware of how that context may change.

Curriculum is of prime importance as it sits at the heart of the school's operations and impacts on everything that supports its operations. It is not simply part of what happens in school - it is the foundation.

Fundamental questions around the subject of curriculum will be how can the school support teachers to deliver the curriculum and what changes will this impose on the school? Critical questions to ask will be how schools will be staffed and how the teachers will be supported?

FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

One of the most significant challenges for schools of all types, whether high or low fee, will be to keep their education affordable. In the short term, teacher salaries could have a significant impact and in the longer term teacher shortages may become a problem.

Large schools should resist the temptation to grow larger; not simply because a large enrolment may be difficult to sustain if there is an economic downturn but, more importantly because they will lose that personal interaction with students and parents. Parents want to be assured that principals and teachers know their children. Indeed, the value-adding in education stems from really knowing the student.

Finally, there is no doubt that a significant challenge will be to find and employ inspiring teachers.

AUDREY'S ROAD AHEAD

I will keep my contacts with independent education as I have committed to joining the group of Consultants who work with the Office of Non-Government Education in the registration process. I will also continue to be a member of a governing body. However, I am also committed to learning to say 'No' as I am really looking forward to some personal space. There are many activities that I currently try to fit into my working life – keeping fit, playing golf and doing The Times crossword. More time for each of these will be a bonus.

I also want to keep on learning and, since I believe that inside me is a creative person waiting to escape, I am going to learn to weave.

And of course there's travel. First stop South America and then, who knows?

PARTICIPATION AND RECOGNITION: A SAMPLE OF AUDREY'S ACHIEVEMENTS

BSc (Hons) University of Wales (1968); Post Graduate Certificate in Education, University of London (1969); Graduate Diploma in Educational Administration, South Australian College of Advanced Education (1983); Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management; Fellow of the Australian College of Education; Honorary Awards: D Litt (Honoris Causa) Curtin University of Technology (1998); Honorary National Fellowship of the Australian Council for Education Leaders (2004)

Chair, Western Australian Branch Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (1995 to 1997); Chairman of the Anglican Schools' Commission of Western Australia (1993 to 1995); Chair of the Board of the Scitech Discovery Centre (2002 to 2007); Pro Chancellor – Curtin University (1992 to 1996); Member of the Attorney General's Consultative Group on Children's Privacy



AISWA presents the opinions of a guest writer to stimulate discussion on a topical issue in education. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of AISWA or any of its member schools.



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