



Independent Schools
Council of Australia

NATIONAL WELCOME

2004 ISCA National Biennial Conference Gold Coast, Queensland, 20 – 22 May 2004

**Mr Chris Tudor, AM
ISCA Chairman**

Good morning, everyone.

It is my very great pleasure to welcome you to the 15th national biennial conference of the Independent Schools Council of Australia.

Last night we were welcomed by Dr Roger Hunter on behalf of the Association of Independent Schools of Queensland, our hosts for this year's conference. Roger was assisted last night by some talented dolphins in a fabulous show. I can't promise you anything even half as spectacular, or as memorable, but I do want to add to Roger's welcome, especially to those of you who are joining us for the first time today.

In particular, I want to acknowledge the presence of the Chairman of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, Mr Malcolm Lamb; the Chairman of the Association of School Bursars and Administrators, Mr John McCausland; and from New Zealand, the Chairman of Independent Schools of New Zealand, Mr Peter Ferguson; and the Executive Director of ISNZ, Ms Joy Quigley.

I want to acknowledge our keynote speakers. Today we'll have the opportunity to hear from Air Vice-marshal Julie Hammer, who will be talking to us about leadership training in the Australian Defence Force, and from Professor Kwong Lee Dow, who led the Commonwealth's recent Review of Teaching and Teacher Education.

We will also be addressed via a video linkup by the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson, federal minister for education.

Tomorrow our keynote speakers are Professor Steve Dinham and Tony Mackay, who will address us on teaching and learning issues, and Bill Daniels, Executive Director of ISCA.

All of these speakers are leaders in their field and I'm sure you are looking forward as much as I am to listening to and learning from them.

I also want to acknowledge those of you who are delivering the elective sessions. These sessions are an invaluable opportunity to learn from our peers. They are offered on an entirely voluntary basis and I thank you warmly for this contribution.

Very special thanks are due to Dr Roger Hunter, who is the AISQ representative on the ISCA board, to Dr John Roulston, Executive Director of AISQ, and to Carole Williamson and other staff at AISQ who have put so much time and effort into this conference. Without that effort we would not be here, so our sincere thanks to you and congratulations on a fantastic job.

I had quite a few things to say to you today on the theme of our Conference, 'Learning and leading in a culture of innovation'. However, while many of you were visiting schools or enjoying a round of golf yesterday, the board of the Independent Schools Council of Australia was meeting here at Jupiters. I, along with the other ISCA board members, representing each of the states and territories, and supported by the Executive Directors of the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools and ISCA's Executive Director – we all felt so strongly about the current threats to independent schooling in Australia that I have decided to cut short my welcome today to first deliver a warning.

Make no mistake, this is a critical time for independent schooling in Australia.

No doubt you have all seen the ALP's outline of its policy on schools funding, with its intention to redistribute funding from the so-called 'over resourced' schools to those they will determine as resourced below a national standard yet to be set.

Yesterday, the Greens announced their schools policy, which includes a proposal to freeze funding to private schools over the next four years pending the outcome of a full inquiry in to the funding of non-government schools. As well, they will be cutting funding to the so-called 'wealthiest schools', that is, former Category 1 to 3 schools. Through this they are aiming to deliver an additional \$660 per student per year to government schools based on the cuts to these schools.

They will also put an end to what they call the discrimination in private schools against students on the basis of sexual preference, ethnic background, religious belief or physical, sensory and/or intellectual disability. It's what they call an 'access' issue.

Last Thursday, the Democrats successfully moved in the Australian Senate that a Senate inquiry be taken into schools funding.

There is clearly an agenda by the ALP, Greens and the Democrats to not only reduce financial support for non-government schools and the students who attend them, but to curtail their autonomy and scrub away at everything that makes them different, unique and excellent in their chosen way.

We have grown used to the freedom we have to establish and grow schools that are born of a passion for education for its own sake, from a passion for education of the whole person, for the development of individuals who are fully human intellectually, physically and spiritually. But we cannot grow complacent, because this freedom is now at risk. The policy proposals I have just mentioned are driven by a vision in which education is little more than an instrument of the state, in which the pursuit of equality is played out in the application uniformity.

These policies also represent a very serious threat to the freedom of parents to exercise their rights in shaping the education of their children.

What the ISCA board affirmed yesterday was that – as we face this opposition – we will continue unequivocally to support all independent schools. It is vital that we all understand that is not just the former Category 1s that are at risk because they are wealthy, or the low-fee schools that are at risk because they pose the most threat to government schools, or the boys' schools or girls' schools that are at risk because they want to enrol students of one sex, or the Jewish yeshiva that's at risk because it exists to serve Jewish students. It is independent schooling itself that is under attack. Every one of us stands to be affected in some way or another if these kinds of policies are implemented.

I want to assure you today that the Independent Schools Council is battling on behalf of all schools. The Category 1s to 3s, the boarding schools, the single-sex schools, the Christian schools, the Islamic schools, the Jewish schools, the Montessori and Steiner schools, the indigenous community schools, the small schools, the big schools, the metropolitan schools, the regional schools. We represent all independent schools.

We support – and celebrate – the incredible diversity of schools in our sector and the right of parents to be free to choose them as places to educate their children. We advocate for the right of all school students to receive government support for their education, no matter which school they attend.

I want you to actively join with us in this endeavour. If we stand united we can be an effective political force. Fragmented we are weak. United, our diversity can be a strength. Divided, our diversity will become our point of political vulnerability.

That's a very serious start to a conference! But it's something I feel passionately about, it's something all ISCA board members feel passionately about.

In my role as Chair of ISCA, and also in my capacity as head of a school belonging to the international Round Square group, I have attended several international conferences of independent schools. If it's one thing I have learned, we are not alone in our passion for independent schooling.

Just in the past six months or so I have attended:

- The September 2003 national conference of the Independent Schools' Association of Southern Africa, co-hosted with the South African Heads of Independent Schools Association
- The 2004 United States National Association of Independent Schools national conference in Montreal in March
- and just last week the Independent Schools of New Zealand annual conference, held at Wanganui Collegiate School on New Zealand's North Island.

As you might imagine, these conferences were all different in size and style, but what was really fascinating was to see not only how diverse schools can be but how much independent schools have in common, whether they are in South Africa, the United States, New Zealand or Australia, whether they are situated in the city or in rural areas.

Recurring themes at all these conferences were:

- the challenge of meeting the needs of students in a rapidly changing society
- the increasing demand for more sophistication, and more transparency, in school governance
- a concern with an increasingly litigious society
- recognition that schools belong not just to their immediate community but to the wider world
- and the increasing inroads on, but continued importance of school autonomy.

I want to take a moment now to tease out some of these themes and the way in which they presented at the conferences I attended.

The title of the NAIS conference in Montreal was 'Beyond Borders', and the intent of the conference was to explore the global context of schooling in a post-September 11 North America, at a time when the US and its allies had been at war in Iraq for 12 months.

As we know, September 11 and the Bali bombings have had a profound effect on our own students. We now have the task of educating young Australians as global citizens in a world that is increasingly secular yet in which major conflicts have a religious dimension.

One of the speakers at the NAIS conference, psychologist Rob Evans, calls this the New Age of Anxiety. According to Evans it is no longer enough for schools to confine themselves to thinking of how they can better serve their students and families. They need to ask what conditions need to be in the lives of students and families to make their education better. He urged schools to be bolder, to provide for parents some of the essentials for sound and healthy development just as they do for students.

That's a very challenging idea. It's difficult enough to meet the needs of students without embracing their families as well! But Evans makes an interesting point. He says an important way for a school to support parents is to be clear about the values that define the school, and to model those values.

As of January this year, values have become a challenging topic in the schools sector in Australia. But it would be a shame if we allow political point scoring to obscure what is a very, very important aspect of independent schooling. Nor is this a time for schools with a religious affiliation to resile from their specifically religious values.

I know from my own experience and from talking with other principals of schools with a religious affiliation that many families are now looking to schools, not churches, to provide a spiritual dimension to their lives. The school is providing not just community, but specifically a spiritual community for its families. I know of schools opening up chapel services to family members; I know of schools where pastoral care is now extending well beyond the school gate; and where the influence of school chaplains reaches right out into the heart of families.

I am certain all independent schools, whether or not they have a religious affiliation, are feeling the pressure to redefine their spiritual boundaries in some form or another.

Another speaker at the NAIS conference, Rushworth Kidder of the Institute for Global Ethics, also addressed the challenge of developing young citizens for the 21st century.

Kidder's message was an imperative: We may not survive the 21st century, he said, with the ethics of the 20th century. Forty years ago our students might have been caught stealing hubcaps; today they have the capacity to create a computer virus that can cripple global networks. Technology has leveraged ethics, says Kidder, because the stakes are so much higher.

Kidder believes independent schools are attractive to parents who are rejecting the moral relativism that has prevailed over the last three to four decades. If he is right, if indeed our sector has benefited from a hunger for a more rigorous ethical environment, then our schools must respond to the responsibility that this expectation brings. We must be prepared, says Kidder, to deliver a powerful, ethical message; to create a school climate that supports ethical behaviour; and develop a school culture that is transparent.

These are weighty issues that touch on the behaviour of governors, administrators, teachers – and particularly on school leaders. It is my personal belief that independent schools have played, and will continue to play, a very important role in the spiritual and ethical life of our communities. Clearly, though, we must be ready to redefine this role.

For me, the message from the NAIS conference was that we must be prepared to be as innovative in the ways we approach matters of the heart and soul of our students as we are in the ways we approach matters of the mind. We must also be aware that we operate on a world stage and that many of the issues we deal with – and that our students deal with – are international issues.

At the South African conference, an issue that attracted considerable attention was that of increasing litigation. Society is becoming increasingly litigious and this is presenting ethical dilemmas. We saw in the controversy surrounding the former Governor-General that the legal position on issues that cut very deeply into our ethical foundations is to avoid saying 'sorry' at all costs. Never admit liability. Similarly we are advised to have behaviour management guidelines, not policies. Guidelines are legally less binding.

In South Africa, the advice was to have solicitors handle expulsions, because expulsions are a form of breaking a contract. Clearly there is message here for us to revisit our traditional practices – even our language – to see if we are unwittingly placing our schools at risk, and compromising our ability to act in a way that reflects the values we teach.

I was reminded at yesterday's ISCA Board meeting that it is also timely to review our relationships with parents. The revival of the 'public versus private' debate this year has intensified media interest in our schools. It also seems to have disturbed our parents in subtle ways. Disgruntled parents who want to air grievances about schooling issues in the media are finding the media more than willing to oblige. If we do not have good communications practices with parents in place, then we may well find ourselves embroiled in time-wasting engagement with the media.

Autonomy is another issue that is of interest to independent schools everywhere. It was disturbing to read recently of the closure of private schools in Zimbabwe. Inflation in

Zimbabwe is running at some 600 per cent per annum and the schools were closed because they raised their fees higher than the 10 per cent allowed.

Both the level of fees charged and annual increases in fees in our schools here in Australia are a subject of speculation in the media and the subject of scrutiny by the public education lobby. I point this out because at first you would reject any commonality between our situation and that of the schools in Zimbabwe but, in fact, what we see is similar issues played out in different circumstances and on a different scale.

One thing I was surprised to hear in South Africa, and that may be of interest to those of you who are principals, is that the South Africans see our heads as actively writing and publishing. If what I hear from other principals in Australia is true, most of us would not have the time to even think about writing articles, papers or books. I find the school newsletter adds to the time-challenges of my week!

What we do have in Australia, and I can guarantee it, is plenty of passion for our schools. Recently I talked with the elected heads of other non-government school groups in Australia and without exception all have incredible passion for the style of education they're involved with as well as for the principle of independence. We would do well to let this passion be the thread that draws us together as a sector.

This passion is not ours alone. I have seen it in so many countries now, and again just last week at the New Zealand Independent Schools Conference.

What is very clear to me from the conferences I have attended over the past year is that we must translate the macro to the micro. What really counts is what happens in the classroom, on the sports field, in the dormitory or on camp, in the playground and even in the corridors between classes. Our core business is our students.

As an Economics student at Monash University during the halcyon age of reason of the early 1970s, I came to the conclusion that the relationship between the micro and macro of the world – whilst often viewed separately – were intrinsically intertwined.

Majoring in Economic History I studied the exponential effects of the Industrial Revolution but quickly learnt to connect them to the diet of the working class during that time.

To view the macro, as we do – government policy, funding, objectives of boards and educational spokespeople either in parliament, the press or in the tangle of daily conversation, even in the construction of a building – we need to be constantly reminded of its relationship to the micro – to the individual in a class whom you are trying to reach with your enthusiasm for education.

I am indeed privileged because, in spite of my role as a head and my involvement in the wider spheres of independent schooling, I continue to teach – Year 8 SOSE and Year 9 Level 3 maths. Students, after some time, afford me no special privileges because I'm the principal but relate to me as a teacher, which fundamentally I am.

One of Australia's great heads, Paul McKeown, has a fundamental question with which he challenges me: 'Christopher, how do children learn?' After 30 years of teaching I can't

give you a fully definitive answer, but I can say the mystery continues to be exciting and challenging.

To illustrate my point about the micro and macro I need to tell you about my dog, Sketch.

Sketch is a genuine Alice Springs hound – a Heinz variety in extremis but with the mandatory ingredient of bull terrier and red heeler to make her truly authentic.

Sketch was bought by my children while my wife and I were away at the ISCA conference in the Barossa Valley. ‘Not a camp dog’ is her title – because she cost \$50.00!

As is so often the way with one’s children’s pets, Sketch is my constant companion. She comes to school with me, and sits under the desk. She’s attended various AISNT conferences and AHISA retreats as some of you will recall. She has met ministers, mayors and sundry power brokers, and faithfully follows school policy for dogs.

I’ll let you in on a secret. She comes with me to class where there is a young chap who takes a particular interest in her. He wants to sit near her and pat her every lesson. He’s a bright young man – although not specially neat and tidy. He participates well in class discussions and often has obtuse ideas. He writes some good stuff. He can be a little naughty, but why does he obviously love the dog?

Love of a dog, divergent thinking, confident in one sense, not in another. What does all that mean? The jigsaw is far from complete but throughout his time at our school I’ll work on it.

My point is that as board members, government officers, politicians, heads, bursars – yes, we must deal with the macro. But let us never lose sight of the micro. Let us never deprive ourselves of the excitement of the individual. Let us remember that the difference between macro and micro is only one letter – not much.

I encourage you over the next two days as you listen to keynote speakers, participate in the workshops and talk and share with all the people here, I encourage you to ask yourselves, how can this make a difference to my school – and, in particular – how can this make a difference to my students.

I am certain that every one of you will be able to take away from these few days something that will be of value to your students and to your school. It is in this spirit that I recommend the conference to you and with great pleasure that I now formally declare it to be open.

Thank you.