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OPINION (page 15)

Time to cane OBE and can levels

New Education Minister Mark McGowan must abandon the myths peddled by his predecessor, says **Steve Kessell**

Education in WA is at a crossroads, evidenced by poor literacy and numeracy results, angry parents, frustrated teachers and a totally botched implementation of outcomes-based education.

Our new Education Minister, Mark McGowan, has an excellent opportunity to rectify the problems created by his predecessor Ljiljana Ravlich, the Curriculum Council and the Department of Education. He must examine all the evidence against OBE and levelling, listen to classroom teachers, and abandon the myths and untruths peddled by Ms Ravlich and bureaucratic vested interests.

Firstly, he must accept that three of the Government's major claims about OBE are fundamentally wrong:

- Levels and the process of "levelling" are valid for student assessment.
- OBE has been successful in WA in Years K-10.
- OBE has been implemented successfully across Australia and in most OECD countries.

Levels are meant to replace percentage marks and letter grades, but in fact are way too coarse for student assessment.

Each learning area (formerly called "subjects") is divided, quite arbitrarily, into eight levels of achievement. These are meant to cover all learning from kindergarten through Year 12, so a single level covers more than a year and a half of schooling, and these are meant to replace traditional marks.

The Curriculum Council commissioned a study of levels by international assessment expert Professor David Andrich. The Council buried his report for a year, but it finally emerged in September.

Dr Andrich concluded that levels can only be used as a very rough guide to student achievement, and that they are totally inappropriate for detailed assessment and reporting to parents.

The Curriculum Council has tried to refine them, by dividing each level into bands of first, middle and high. Professor Andrich says this is totally invalid:

"I am recommending strongly against this process for all courses for the following specific and additional reasons. First – the levels are generic, that is, general and abstract, and cover a wide range of achievement, both in breadth and in the range between levels. Therefore, the tasks that are provided for assessment will not fall naturally into the 3 sub-levels any more than they will fall naturally into levels....

"Second, and very importantly, this kind of approach gives the impression that the distance between levels is the same in some sense – that is, that the difference in achievement between levels 5 and 6 is the same as between levels 6 and 7. This is not the case." (Andrich Report)

As an example, a student obtains these marks in four Year 12 TEE subjects: levels 6H, 6F, 5H and 7F.

From this, you must now calculate a Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) to two decimal places. Do a 6H, 6F, 5H and 7F produce a TER of 82.67? Or should it be 67.82? You might as well try to average "good, good, OK and very good", and then attempt to create a mark valid to two decimal places. It is utterly impossible and totally invalid.

Worse, your child could miss out on the university course of her choice with a TER of 78.56, while a friend gets in with a mark of 78.57. In my opinion, this is a criminal misuse of invalid assessment, which can arbitrarily destroy a student's intended career.

More recently, the Curriculum Council commissioned another report on levelling, by Professor Jim Tognolini. It came to the same conclusion: levelling is invalid for fine-grained assessment and utterly useless for reporting to parents.

Levels and the levelling process must be abolished.

Ms Ravlich waxed lyrical about how successful OBE has been in years K-10, but there is not one shred of evidence to support this blatant assumption.

The recent WA Literacy and Numeracy Assessment revealed that about 20 percent of Year 7 students do not meet even the most minimal benchmarks, which were set as low as 36 per cent.

These Year 7 students have been subjected to OBE throughout their primary school careers.

There has been absolutely no independent evaluation of OBE in primary school, and the Curriculum Council and the Department of Education clearly do not want any independent evaluations performed.

The single piece of evidence offered by the former Minister for Education is this: All principals were asked, in 2004, if their school was implementing the Curriculum Framework. It's no surprise that all said they were (Hansard 2/11/06). I'm sure that any principal who said he wasn't would have been given an immediate management-initiated retirement. There was no mention of OBE. No one was asked if OBE had improved anything.

This is the single datum upon which the claim that OBE has been successful in K-10 rests. The WA Literacy and Numeracy results suggest that it has failed utterly.

The former minister also touted OBE as "world best practice", claiming that it has been implemented across Australia and throughout OECD countries. The last part of that statement is technically correct: OBE was implemented in many of those places, and virtually all of them are now abandoning it as a failed experiment.

The United States has suffered terrible student results since OBE was first implemented. In the Washington D.C. area, 81 per cent of schools failed to meet basic literacy and numeracy standards (Washington Post, 27/9/06). Students were obtaining excellent school marks but failing national standardized tests (Washington Post, 21/11/06).

The prestigious US National Council of Teachers of Mathematics is now recommending a complete "back to basics" program (New York Times, 14/11/06). The State of Texas is now requiring all students to take four years each of maths, science, English and social studies in order to receive a high school diploma (Dallas Morning News, 19/11/06).

The situation in the UK is similar; it's back to basics and a wholesale abandonment of OBE and student-directed learning (The Times, The Guardian and The Independent, June – Dec 2006). The UK Office for Standards in Education has even recommended drafting business executives into schools to help raise standards (The Times, 23/11/06).

Closer to home, the NSW and Victorian curriculums are OBE in name only; they have returned to assessment using marks and have implemented proper syllabuses.

Tasmania abandoned its OBE-style Essential Learning system, and introduced plain English descriptions of student literacy and numeracy, after it cost the education minister her job and nearly cost her seat in state parliament (Hobart Mercury, 18/11/06). South Australia similarly has introduced a new Certificate of Education based on "rigorous and detailed performance standards" (SA Certificate of Education website).

Here in WA, Kelmscott Senior High School teachers unanimously voted a motion of no confidence in the Curriculum Council's implementation of OBE and levelling.

Teachers at TEE flagship Rossmoyne Senior High School told the Education Department that letter grades derived from levels are meaningless: students, who are performing a full year behind their grade level, are receiving grades of A and B under OBE.

In conclusion, all of the available evidence says that OBE is a very poor and widely discredited method of teaching and learning, that the proposed assessment with levels is utterly meaningless but can arbitrarily deprive students of a university place, and that virtually every education department that has implemented OBE or something similar is abandoning it.

Mr McGowan now has the opportunity to rectify the mess made by his predecessor. 'Getting it right' is much more important than political or bureaucratic face-saving.

The essential first step is to abolish levelling and return to meaningful reports that parents can understand.

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