Transforming education
The New South Wales reform journey

Adrian Piccoli
New South Wales
Minister for Education
Australia

Education World Forum, London
21 January 2014
Overview

When the New South Wales Government was elected in March 2011 we inherited an education system that was coasting along on its history and traditions. It was a system full of education “initiatives” and “programs” that were not producing the best outcomes for students.

The system was not bad but it was not great, so we owed it to our students to intervene and initiate system-wide reform to ensure they could compete with the best in the world.

As NSW Minister, and with the full backing of the NSW Premier, I took the lead to shape the future of education. In less than three years we have implemented major reforms and laid the foundations for a sustainable continuum of high-quality learning – from early childhood education, through school, into training and higher education.

Notably, we achieved reform in difficult budgetary conditions when all portfolios across government were being required to make savings. We ensured that savings measures did not impact inside the school gate and, at the same time, achieved historic systemic reform without industrial action.

Our combined series of evidence-based reforms are the most comprehensive reforms to education in NSW in a century and they are all underpinned by our philosophy to put students at the centre of every decision we make about their education.

There is no silver bullet solution in education. We have recognised that systemic reform and improvement comes from the hard grind of data-based and evidence-backed policy work. Each reform we have introduced is necessary but individually not sufficient to see systemic change in educational outcomes in NSW. It is through the integration and implementation of the series of reforms that we will see sustainable change in NSW.

At a macro level the NSW agenda has targeted structural reforms to lift education performance across all schools – government (public) and non-government (Catholic and Independent) – as well as sector-specific reforms and targeted reforms that address persistent problem areas.

Across all schools and sectors the NSW Government has:

- Put in place clear and decisive policies to improve the quality of the teaching workforce.
- Adopted fundamental state and federal funding reform to direct resources to students who need it most, regardless of school or sector.
- Established a new educational architecture emphasising very high expectation and accountability standards. In addition, significant reform is underway in the provision of NSW government-funded and operated public schools, including targeting areas of specific need.

Across NSW public schools, the Government has:

- Implemented a new Resource Allocation Model to allocate funding based on student need.
- Reformed the governance and decision-making structure across public schools from the previous highly centralised bureaucracy to one that puts trust in the leadership of principals.
- Targeted reforms to bridge student performance gaps between rural and remote and metropolitan students.
- Micro-targeted reforms in schools with the most complex communities, where we have thrown out the rule book and introduced a radical school and community partnership model.

The New South Wales education system

The state of New South Wales is the economic, educational and cultural centre of Australia. It is more than three times the size of the United Kingdom and home to 7.3 million people.

New South Wales has a mixed provider model of education that aims to support student and parental choice. There is a mix of government, non-government, for-profit and not-for-profit education providers throughout the early childhood, school and vocational education and training sectors. In the schools setting, 2,200 public schools cater for 748,000 students and 900 non-government (or private) schools cater for 390,500 students.

As the Minister for all schools, not just public schools, the sectoral differences add complexity to the landscape on which system-wide reform can be built. While the State operates and is the majority funder of public schools, non-government schools can be either system-managed or independently managed and have historically received most of their public funding from the Federal Government.

The public system is operated by the Department of Education and Communities. The bureaucracy has historically been highly centralised and schools have had limited say in how they spent their budget, hired staff or made decisions about their local students.

This “control and command-style” bureaucracy was not equipped to meet the challenges of the rapid global transformation of education.
Building the case for change with the profession

Governments and Education Ministers pull the levers for education systems to change, but the reform agenda will falter without the support and engagement of teachers, principals and parents. It is important to listen to the many, and often conflicting, views about the right course of action. There are many schools of thought in education and, unfortunately, too many advocates of fads and trendy solutions.

I devote a lot of time to personally listening to my education stakeholders – parents, principals, teachers, the unions, academics. I take advice from the education experts in my department, but I test that advice and listen to dissenting views. I seek and encourage contested advice.

I encourage those who are directly impacted by change to speak freely and frankly to me. Whenever I meet with principals, for example, I ask that their director – who is their boss – doesn’t attend.

As a Member of Parliament in Opposition I built a representative alliance of education stakeholders and this assisted in the endorsement for change when we were elected to government in 2011.

I often say to education stakeholders to “be careful what you wish for”. I have often pushed reforms further than what was demanded if I am convinced by the evidence base that we can aim higher to create, own and drive sustainable change.

Our reforms have involved extensive consultation that provided the Government with a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges. We have released discussion papers to spark debate and focus the issues and used every form of communication from traditional meetings to online forums and social media.

Creating better value

Governments are elected to lead change and in NSW it has been important to challenge the status quo and stand up for what is right for students, not what is politically palatable.

In education, particularly as it intersects with political cycles, it’s easy to fall back on the need for “more funding”, “more computers” or “new buildings” to bring about improvement.

Of course more money matters. Like every Minister, I will always ask my Treasurer for more money for my portfolio. However, we are focused on leveraging value out of what we already invest as a starting point to ensure that we maximise any additional investment. Out of an $AU8 billion annual public school staffing budget, a 10 per cent lift in teacher effectiveness will result in more significant change than any injection of new funds from Treasury.

The NSW education reforms

1. Reforms across the teacher career cycle

The quality of the teacher is the most important in-school influence on student performance. Research shows that the difference between good and poor teachers can amount to two years in student achievement, so raising teacher quality is the starting point for changing the way education is delivered across all schools.

For years we have heard the rhetoric in Australia about the need to raise teachers’ standards but few governments have taken the bold steps needed to bring about real change.

In 2013 I announced our Great Teaching, Inspired Learning reforms that span the career cycle of a teacher. We looked to international education jurisdictions that have the highest standards and have improved classroom practice – countries like Finland, Singapore, Canada and Korea.

I listened and consulted widely across the community. I commissioned research on the best national and international practice and personally spoke to scores of stakeholders. A provocative consultation paper elicited 100 formal submissions and almost 600 online contributions.

The clear messages from that consultation was the need to lift the quality of entrants into teaching, strengthen their standard of tertiary training, better support new teachers, provide career-long professional support and career opportunities, recognise their achievements against a set of standards, and better prepare school executives for leadership roles.

We have wasted no time implementing the blueprint for action, Great Teaching, Inspired Learning, and have invested $AU155 million in the first stage of the strategy in public schools.

Applying higher entry requirements to teaching courses is a common practice in top-performing education systems around the world. Our aim is to raise the status of the profession and to, thereby, attract the best people into teaching so we continue to lead educational performance in Australia.

In NSW, we now require school-leaver entrants to Initial Teacher Education courses to have achieved at least three band 5 results (80% or higher) in their senior secondary teaching so we continue to lead educational performance in Australia.

are working with universities to improve the content and practical components of teacher training, as well as the quality of the practicum placement in schools. This will require higher standards for both schools and universities.
Our aim is to ensure that no matter what school you attend, public or private, the teacher in front of the classroom is indeed the best possible teacher.

I also required further operational reforms to be implemented in public schools to ensure that teachers develop and maintain best practice once in the classroom.

Beginning teachers have been given extra time out of the classroom in their first two years so they can undertake additional training, observe experienced colleagues and work with their mentors. We have also provided additional funding to provide release time for experienced teacher mentors to help develop the skills of those beginning teachers.

We have recently negotiated a new teachers’ award with the public school teachers’ union and have gone further than any other Australian state or territory to link teachers’ pay to national teaching standards.

NSW will move to a standards-based pay system where the rate of teacher remuneration is dependent on the attainment and maintenance of national professional teaching standards, rather than on length of service.

At the top of the scale, a classroom teacher who achieves the highest professional standard will be rewarded with a very significant pay increase — rising from $89,000 to $AU101,000 — that recognises their ongoing professional learning and keeps them in the classroom to share their skills and expertise with other teachers. Importantly, this is based on the teacher meeting rigorous, agreed national standards, not on the test scores of their students.

Professional learning for teachers will increasingly emphasise the use of student assessment data to inform teaching practice, complemented by enhanced feedback and appraisal systems for teachers. We are building an evidence base of quality professional development programs so that teachers have a greater capacity to evaluate, monitor and adapt their practice for a closer alignment with student needs.

The reforms are complemented by a tougher performance management process, where underperforming teachers will have to make sustained improvements to their practice or face dismissal. We want every single student in every classroom to have a great teacher, not just an adequate teacher.

We have introduced a new disciplinary system for teachers who consistently refuse to comply with the lawful and reasonable directions of their principal. There is a very small minority of recalcitrant staff who refuse to, for example, return parents’ phone calls or do playground duty, but under a so-called “three strikes” policy these teachers will be disciplined or face dismissal after three warnings from their principal.

Managing stakeholder concerns, however, does not mean you have to compromise on the reform agenda. We didn’t compromise on these reform aspects, because it would have been bad policy to do so.

2. A funding model that puts students first

The school funding debate in Australia, particularly between government and non-government schools, has always been complex and controversial. Only in the past 12 months has Australia moved to a needs-based funding model which, now more accurately than ever before, distributes state and federal education dollars to schools in a sector-blind manner and to students based on their individual needs.

This was a massive breakthrough in Australian education history. Too many disadvantaged students are slipping through the cracks and as a wealthy country we have an obligation to recognise that these students need additional support to realise their educational potential.

We have a much stronger correlation in Australia between socioeconomic disadvantage and poor educational performance than most comparable OECD countries. We also have evidence of a decline in student performance against international competitors, despite record funding on education. So the argument is not simply about the quantum of funding; it is about how we best allocate it to achieve improvement in student outcomes.

The previous funding model was broken and needed to be replaced and my government seized the opportunity to adopt fundamental funding reform. NSW was the first state to reach agreement with the Federal Government to implement the “Gonski” reforms, based on an independent review of funding chaired by businessman David Gonski.

This significant funding reform ended the “public versus private” debate about equity in school funding that has plagued education in Australia for decades.

Under the new funding system, each school sector has the discretion to make system decisions about how the additional state and federal funding is allocated. But in NSW public schools we were already introducing a new and fairer funding model based on the principles of the Gonski Review.

The NSW public school Resource Allocation Model has been described as a world-first model in the way it funds schools based on the complexity of student circumstances, rather than on a strict numerical formula of student enrolments.
The Resource Allocation Model provides each school with a base amount of funding needed to operate the school and then adds in equity and targeted loadings for a range of factors we know contribute to students’ educational underperformance. These factors include socioeconomic disadvantage, disability, Aboriginality and English language proficiency.

We developed a new measure called the Family Occupation and Education Index to calculate students’ socioeconomic status based on their parents’ educational levels and occupation, because research shows these factors account for more than 70 per cent of the variation in performance across schools.

From this year 390,000 students will be funded under the new socioeconomic background loading, more than three times the 120,000 students we funded under previous equity programs.

Similarly, the new Aboriginal loading more than doubles the number of indigenous students receiving support. For the first time we will provide additional funding to all 49,000 Aboriginal students in our public schools.

More than 90 per cent of public schools will receive increased or similar funding under these two equity loadings.

We are using the same principles to introduce a new funding model for early childhood education, or preschool. Our target is to provide universal access to early childhood education in the year before children start formal schooling, because an investment in the early years is an investment in better health, education and employment outcomes for life.

Our new evidence-based funding model – the Community Preschool Funding Model – is targeted at children most in need and builds on the recommendations of an independent review commissioned to provide advice to ensure we meet the universal access target. The model will support increased participation in preschool and a key feature is an extra funded year for three-year-old children from Aboriginal and disadvantaged families.

We have raised preschool base funding rates for four- and five-year-olds, added equity loadings for socioeconomic background, Aboriginality, English language needs and geographical remoteness. In dollar terms, we have increased our investment in community preschools by 20% to $AU150 million.

International research tells us that all children benefit from preschool and the benefits remain evident up to the age of 10; that children make more gains when they are taught by qualified staff, and that early childhood education improves intellectual development and social behaviour.

### 3. Education architecture for the future

The right education architecture needs to be in place to ensure that reform can be properly supported and is sustainable for the future.

The first change in education architecture was to move responsibility for early childhood out of the community services portfolio and into the education portfolio. This meant that for the first time the importance of the early years on education outcomes was recognised, providing full visibility into the entire learning continuum from early childhood, through school and into further study.

When school funding was being reformed, early childhood funding was undergoing a parallel process whereby the needs-based principles behind both sector’s new funding models were aligned for greater effect.

The second structural change came in November 2013 when the NSW Government passed legislation to bring together for the first time in Australia the three cornerstones of education standards – curriculum, student assessment and teacher quality – under a single authority. By amalgamating the responsibilities of the curriculum and school registration authority, the Board of Studies NSW, and the NSW Institute of Teachers, which registers and accredits teachers and endorses their professional learning, the Government created a new governance body called the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards.

An important aspect of this merger is that for the first time there will be a coordinated focus on the education standards that are critical to the improvement of student learning across the school sectors.

The merger draws on evidence from leading OECD countries and will put a greater focus on how we capture information and data on student assessment and teacher standards and how we then apply that information to improving quality teaching and student outcomes.

Modern, effective education policy must be responsive to evidence and reliable data and this new body will give us the capacity to capture and analyse student assessment data and use that knowledge to improve policy, services and teacher practice.

Ultimately, how effective our teachers are in the classroom hinges on their understanding of the curriculum, their capacity to assess students and the career-long development of their professional skills.

The new authority builds on our quality teaching reforms and will be responsible for ensuring that new teachers know the curriculum requirements, all teachers meet the literacy and numeracy requirements of their subject areas, teachers are trained to analyse student outcome data, and that future teachers meet the higher standards of achievement required for entry into the profession.

### 4. Public school governance

The lessons from high-performing education systems around the world guided our policy development. Key features of these systems point clearly to factors that lead to better student outcomes, including increasing school principals’ authority over decision-making and fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation within and between schools.
We are in our second year of a five-year implementation period to devolve more decision-making to public school principals, the people who are best placed to know the specific learning needs of their students.

Our Local Schools, Local Decisions reform is harnessing the power of the individual by giving principals more power to direct their resources while maintaining the obvious and important strengths of belonging to a large system. We want to avoid duplication and waste as well as retain external accountability over how public funds are used in schools.

In doing so, we are breaking down the highly centralised public schooling system and redirecting staff and resources from head office directly back into schools. The staggered implementation of our new funding model will ultimately see schools manage more than 70% of the total public education budget, compared with the current level of 10%. Schools will have one budget guided by a single school plan focused on delivering better outcomes for students instead of multiple reporting requirements to a number of authorities.

We have established 65 networks of principals to encourage collaboration across schools and innovative approaches to student engagement and learning needs.

The priority in our schools is teaching and learning but our centrally controlled system had overseen a proliferation of policies, memoranda, rules and directions. A department review found more than 200 policies that applied just to schools. This included “Rocketry activities in schools” and a policy on school policies!

There are now fewer and simpler policies and 120 policies have been deleted or amalgamated.

To further reduce the red-tape burden, principals now have authority to make decisions on annual school maintenance and the flexibility to purchase from local businesses, as well as through government contract arrangements.

Already we are witnessing the innovation that comes with freedom and flexibility. Schools are hand-picking staff with particular expertise for their local needs, rather than having teachers imposed on them through a central transfer system.

Schools have, for example, collaborated to hire a business manager to manage accounting in order to free up school executives to focus on teacher professional development to improve classroom learning. Or they have brought in speech therapists, music and drama coaches or specialist literacy teachers. This was not possible under the former rigid staffing formula of the centralised bureaucracy.

5. Targeted reform – closing student performance gaps in rural and remote schools

Our school improvement reforms are universal across the public education system, but the Government is also targeting reform to specific areas where we know there are persistent issues and intractable problems, and where new thinking is required.

One of those areas is the significant education performance divide we have in NSW and Australia between students in the cities and rural areas in every year level, and across all subject areas tested in national and international assessments.

This remoteness gap is not unique to NSW or to Australia but the gap is larger in Australia than the average of other OECD countries and it is larger in NSW than almost any other state or territory in the country.

The disadvantage starts in early childhood and flows through to school outcomes. Fifteen-year-old students in NSW rural schools are now 1.5 years behind their peers in metropolitan schools, according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment. Only about half of our rural male teenagers reach the last year of secondary school compared to nearly 70% of all male teenagers in NSW.

My firm belief is that children and young people are entitled to inspiring, relevant and quality preschool, school and post-school education to equip them to live in and contribute to our complex and globalised society. This is true for all students, regardless of where they live.

The Government’s political imperative was to step in and stop this decline in student performance by helping young people stay in school and then attain skills or undertake further study to support economic development in regional and remote areas.

We commissioned an evaluation of evidence of the different outcomes of rural and remote students in Australia and looked at the way other systems, in Australia and internationally, responded to the challenges of rural education.

We developed an $AU80 million Rural and Remote Education Blueprint that builds on the broad reform agenda and particularly targets the key areas of curriculum access and attracting and retaining high quality teachers.

To attract top teachers into our remote schools, principals will be able to offer teachers a 10-week trial placement, a $10,000 recruitment incentive and rental subsidies. Incentives are also provided for teacher education students to work in rural and remote schools.

To overcome the tyranny of distance in a state large enough to cross two time zones we are establishing a “virtual” secondary school to link via technology students in rural and remote areas and give them the opportunity to study specialist subjects not available in their own school. It will also offer classes for gifted and talented students for higher-order subjects such as engineering and extension mathematics.

To address difficult home, social and community experiences in some of our rural and remote locations we are establishing 15 specialist centres that link education to health and community services. This measure aims to address at-risk students, disengaged students and those with poor school attendance patterns.

We are guided by evidence and research as we reform the NSW education landscape, but there are times when governments need to throw out the rule book and start afresh with new ideas and new thinking.

There are some schools – and their communities – where no amount of money has been able to address chronic problems such as poor student outcomes, attendance and behaviour and a corresponding high staff turnover.

Our largest gap in education performance is between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the oldest surviving culture in the world and they are also the most disadvantaged group in Australia. We recognised that a new approach was needed in some of our most complex and disadvantaged communities, because the “one size fits all” approach in the teaching and learning domain had not resulted in improvements for these students.

We looked at evidence, we looked for leadership, and we listened to the communities.

We selected 15 schools to pioneer a radical model to position each school as the hub of the community, linked to other government and non-government agencies such as childcare, health and transport.

The school, in effect, is the symbol of hope for the renewal and sustainability of the community.

This reform, Connected Communities, disrupts traditional organisational systems and procedures to ensure the ownership and capacity for improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students is embedded within the local school community.

Connected Communities is not just an Aboriginal initiative because the schools are not Aboriginal schools. They are public schools and the reforms will benefit all students in these schools. However, the strategy aims to positively reinforce cultural identity to develop stronger engagement in education by students, parents and communities to raise student outcomes.

A ground-breaking feature is the teaching of Aboriginal languages and culture in each school, because language is an important part of cultural identity and the connection of Aboriginal people to their country. We are reclaiming, revitalising and maintaining Aboriginal languages with the involvement and active participation of communities.

To bring about significant change in these schools we have overturned staffing agreements and introduced a new classification of executive principal who are now the highest level and highest paid principals in NSW government schools, despite the fact that most work in relatively small schools. Their job is to effect generational and cultural change in their schools and to forge genuine community partnerships.

Paying principals based on the complexity of their school community rather than on student numbers is now a key feature of our broader school decision-making reforms and these 15 school leaders were the first to receive this benefit – and the first to develop school decision-making protocols in partnership with their communities.

We require all teachers in these schools to have high expectations of their students, or they will be transferred to other schools. It is absolutely critical that we have highly talented, motivated teachers who can effect change, provide leadership and inspire and engage students.

Thirty teachers and administrative staff are being relocated and replaced with teachers and admin staff hired on merit who have the talent, ideas and empathy to succeed in these unique school communities.

The strategy is overseen at the highest level. The Director-General of Education and Communities chairs the state steering committee, which operates within a governance structure committed to improving the educational, social and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal people in NSW.

I have taken a close personal interest in the progress of this reform and have visited a number of these schools to reinforce that Connected Communities is supported at the highest political level.

I have made it clear to my bureaucrats that I need to see the worst-case scenarios so I can actually fix some of these long-term problems. I do not want to be shielded from the bad news; I need to know about it.

When I saw the state of one of these secondary schools, Walgett High School in remote NSW, I was disgusted at the poor facilities and I knew this state of disrepair would not be accepted in our metropolitan schools.

I made headlines when I told the NSW Parliament: “I think it is fair to say that we have treated Aboriginal people like rubbish.”

My comments shocked some people who are used to governments sweeping negative news under the rug, but enough was enough. Shortly after that visit I announced $AU35 million in capital works funding to ensure that these 15 schools were of the same standard as any other public school in NSW.
Delivery, delivery, delivery

It is all very well to talk about reform but the real challenge – actually the only thing that counts – is that you deliver.

Too often a politician makes an announcement and then thinks the job is complete. I often say that the press release is the biggest threat to good policy. The message of reform has been delivered, but not the actual reform.

The policy is often shipped off to a department for implementation without any further input by government. Implementation is effectively divorced from the policy development process and when it comes time to measure a reform’s success, it is no surprise we often find that the reform failed.

I have always pursued a collaborative and positive relationship with my department when developing and implementing policy. My Director-General, Dr Michele Bruniges, was selected for the role because she is a highly regarded public servant and, critically, also an educator. I trust her advice and expertise, because I know that she shares my vision for the successful delivery of policy that leads to better outcomes for students. We don’t have to agree all the time, but we do need to trust each other in the pursuit of that shared goal.

The department has responsibility for operationalising reform but both the department and I have responsibility for implementing reform. My job is to make the case publicly for change.

I insist on knowing how implementation is progressing. I ask questions of everybody – the officials, the teachers, the principals and the parents. I listen and test those opinions. My goal is to know what is occurring on the ground level because if there is an unintended consequence, if the policy isn’t getting the right outcome, only I can authorise the department to change course before it is too late.

Evaluating our reforms as they are implemented is also critical to ensuring they are appropriately delivered. Historically, in the education sector, there has been very little or no evaluation of the plethora of programs and initiatives rolled out in schools. Where evaluations have been done, they have not necessarily informed future practice.

For example, I set up a Ministerial taskforce to advise me on literacy and numeracy interventions in schools. The taskforce found there was almost no available evidence regarding the efficacy of the range of literacy and numeracy interventions being used in schools.

I established the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation to undertake in-depth analysis of education practices and their effectiveness, using reliable data and knowledge. This evidence can then be used by policy makers to make more informed and better decisions about what to change, where to invest, as well as helping educators choose programs and strategies that actually work in their unique school settings.

The next steps

We are well advanced on the journey to transform education in New South Wales and there is a strong sense of ownership of our reforms by the teaching profession, students and parents.

But there are still areas of reform that NSW is yet to get its head around.

For example, we know that testing when used for diagnostic purposes improves student outcomes. However, the obsession with testing that has emerged in Australia in recent years is creating negative consequences for teaching practices in schools.

Australia is also moving closer to a national curriculum, but there continues to be an over-politicisation of content and the curriculum is becoming increasingly crowded.

The latest PISA analysis clearly shows that improving teacher quality, granting schools greater authority and resourcing education equitably are the unifying factors of high-performing education systems around the world. This is our blueprint as we comprehensively reform education in our state.

Our reforms have deliberately been framed as an investment in our future, in our young people, and not as a cost to taxpayers.

We have an economic, social and – to a large degree – a moral imperative to improve our schools and we are acknowledged in our country as leading the education reform agenda.