A Confident Future

Speech to the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales

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I would like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, on which this conference takes place.

Delegates. Thank you for inviting me to open your conference here today.

As Minister for Education and Training I always value talking to local P and C’s - to have so many of you in the one room is a real opportunity.

Thank you for your warm welcome.

Leaving your child at the school gate for the first time is one of the greatest acts of trust in modern life.

Parents, trust schools to nurture their children as they have. To teach them and to guide them.

We cannot and should not expect parents to entrust their children to our schools if they cannot be confident that they have made the best choice. The right choice.

We no longer expect parents to leave their child at the gate, turn around - and hope for the best.

Parents understand how important a good education is for their children and their later success and happiness in life.

I believe your confidence in NSW public schools is well placed. Today I will outline why and what I believe is needed to keep this trust and build greater confidence.

**A Successful System**

Our system of schooling in NSW – our foundations – are sound.

Parents can look with pride at the success of their children – and their schools.

Results of international, Australian and state tests tell a consistent story of high achievement. Our results also show steady growth in achievement over time.

NSW tops international tests in maths, science and literacy.

NSW ranks highly in Australian test comparisons.

In 2005 the literacy scores for Year 3 students were the highest they have ever been since state testing began in 1996.

This success has not happened by chance.

The model of schooling that has been developed in NSW is based on consistent and enduring principles.
The feature that perhaps most distinguishes our system is the long-standing commitment to maintaining a content rich, mandatory curriculum.

From Kindergarten to Year 12 all students are taught the fundamental knowledge they will need for success in later life.

The recent debate about the curriculum in Australia is on the whole a healthy one.

It is right that in a democracy we should care about what it is that we teach our children.

A fundamental responsibility of schools is to provide students with the knowledge they need to be active citizens.

And knowledge is power. The power for students to choose a life course for themselves. The power to have a say. The power to benefit, and the power to contribute.

If we believe in a society where power should be open to all – regardless of birth – then we must provide the same breadth of knowledge to all.

And have the same high expectations for all.

Public schools in NSW have been doing this since the start.

We will always need to find new ways - and better ways - to do things. But our commitment to give every child access to knowledge - the essence of our culture - remains firm.

It is important that we remind ourselves of these strengths.

If you believed the increasingly alarmist interventions from the Commonwealth – you could be forgiven for thinking that Australian schools were in a state of crisis.

The truth is –we are not afraid of this scrutiny, the more they place our schools under the microscope, the better our system looks.

Every time a bright new solution is offered it turns out that we are already there.

The Commonwealth demands national testing of all students.

NSW is more than a decade in front – being the first state to introduce systematic testing for Years 3, 5 and 7 in all of our public schools.

The Commonwealth wants to recognise the professionalism of teachers.

We have established Australia’s first teacher accreditation body, the NSW Institute of Teachers, and invested heavily in professional development.
The Commonwealth Minister decides there should be an Australian Certificate of Education. A credential with real meaning for students, parents, universities and employers. Perhaps something with high objective standards and international recognition.

Turns out we have that already – it’s called the NSW Higher School Certificate.

The more reviews the Commonwealth commission, the more it becomes apparent that NSW is in many ways the gold standard for schooling in Australia.

We are not afraid to try new things, to improve. But we build securely outwards from our strength.

We avoid fads.

And our success gives us the confidence that we have the basics right – and that we have a sound basis from which to build.

**What People Have Told Us**

Because build we must.

The Government is committed to listening to the community, to parents, to teachers, to students.

The past four years has been an active time for reviewing and reflecting on our schools in NSW and how we can improve.

Reviews include the Public Education Council, the Futures work, The Aboriginal Education Review, the Vinson Report, as well as work on reporting by Professor Ken Eltis and VET in Schools by Bert Evans.

What are the messages we have received?

The good news is that there is generally strong support for the type of education that is provided in NSW, with its depth and rigour.

There is a general consensus that the fundamentals of our system are sound, but that we need to be responsive to changing circumstances and not be complacent.

There is support for more local flexibility and decision making and allowing schools to be innovative and respond to their communities. This is something the Government has been doing, but we have been given a strong message that there is clearly room for further reform.

More opportunities for students has been a common theme. Not to dilute the rigour of the system, but to be smarter in how we get all students and schools to have the same high expectations. The addition of VET in Schools to the HSC has been strongly supported and we intend to maintain the momentum of this kind of reform.
There is a clear need to find practical ways to more fully embrace parents as ‘partners in learning’. This includes finding ways to provide parents with more timely and clear information on how their child is performing and where their child is headed.

Schools also need to be responsive to parents as part of a two-way partnership.

Within these messages there also is a common theme – how do we ensure that in moving ahead we do not leave any student or group of students behind?

The message here has been encouraging. Teachers, principals and the community have been particularly enthusiastic in their support for looking at new ways of doing things for the most disadvantaged groups.

The Review of Aboriginal Education was particularly refreshing in its embrace of reform for one of education’s most difficult issues.

**Recent Initiatives**

In listening to the community we have already made a number of significant reforms and investments.

For example, the class size reduction program has been a great success. An investment of $650 million supports our philosophy of early investment reaping lasting rewards.

We have made New South Wales a leader by having every public school connected to the Internet. And we are rolling out 100,000 new computers.

And now every student and teacher in a public school has the option of their own email address.

We continue to build on the basics – with over $1.1 billion invested in literacy and numeracy support.

New student and school reports will improve the information available to parents and the community.

The government has also introduced greater authority and accountability for principals, including increasing the ability to recruit staff locally.

Maintaining our 2,200 schools and building for the future is a constant challenge. Our last budget takes this challenge head on, with an additional $120M for maintenance over the next 4 years. In 2006 this means a record $712 million to maintain and upgrade school buildings.

Fulfilling our responsibility to every child in every school every day is a great challenge. We recognise this.

There are no instant solutions or quick fixes.
A Confident Future - Key Themes

Today I will highlight four areas that I believe are important for the continued strength of public schools.

These are not the only areas where we can do more, but they fundamental to further strengthening public education.

The four areas are:

1. Maintaining high expectations for every student.
2. Providing parents with the confidence that our schools really know their child.
3. Giving our students strong values – and educating them on the responsibilities of citizenship.
4. And finally, providing more opportunities for every child by harnessing the strengths of the public education system.

1 High Expectations for Every Student

We start with the assumption that every child can succeed.

Parents are entitled to have schools share their own high expectations.

Educating all children to meet the same high standards and expectations is a hallmark of our system.

Research tells us that when students are given the opportunity to practice higher level skills, their ability grows. Teachers have more positive interactions with these students and students have greater motivation and self-belief. The research also shows that schools with high expectations have better discipline and fewer behavioural issues. Put simply students who teachers expect to do better, will do better.

Every child must be given the same opportunity for success.

I acknowledge that if high expectations is to be translated into improved outcomes we need to close the gap in performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and between disadvantaged communities, disadvantaged individuals, and their fellow students.

The development of a comprehensive Aboriginal Education Strategy has been significant step forward in addressing the persistent gap in performance between Aboriginal students and the rest of the state.

Many of you here have supported the development of the strategy and shown great commitment to its aims. I thank you for this.
The Government will also spend more than $79 million to support socio-economically disadvantaged students in 2006/07.

Last year I was pleased to announce that the innovative Priority Action Schools program would continue, with recurrent funding of 16 million per year.

Together PAS and PSFP support students from disadvantaged communities to improve their educational outcomes and just as importantly teach the whole system about what works in schools.

There are a number of areas where I will be looking to reinforce our culture of high expectations.

In our assessments we need more information about the range of student achievement. For example, we need to know how many students move on to higher levels of achievement once they have mastered the basics. Our new reports, with their focus on assessing students against 5 standards will reinforce teachers setting assessment tasks that challenge students.

One of the most effective ways to deliver on a promise of high expectations is to have every child go into their first year of school with the confidence to hit the ground running.

This is why I want to work with all of our stakeholders to develop stronger pre-school curriculum resources that help us set children up for success.

Age-appropriate forms of assessment nearer to the time of school entry is also an area where I believe we can do more.

We also have high expectations of teachers. It is only through the profession and professionalism of teachers that we can make high expectations a promise that can be delivered in every school. The Standards of the NSW Institute of Teachers will provide a strong base upon which to equip the whole profession with the skills and ability to make high expectations a reality.

It is also the responsibility of the Government to make sure that the current quality of the teaching workforce is of the highest standard.

I wish to stress that the vast majority of our teachers are fine educators whose transformational role in children’s lives can not be underestimated. However, as you well know, there are a small number of teachers in our system who are not suited to teaching.

They disadvantage the children in their care and make the working life of their colleagues more difficult.

The changes that the Government has recently made to the Teaching Services Act, will streamline the procedures for dealing with teacher performance and misconduct.
2  **Schools That Know Your Child**

The second priority is the need to deliver on a fundamental promise to parents – schools that really know your child.

Parents should be confident that teachers will know their child and are focussed on helping him or her develop to their full potential.

We know that neither schools nor parents working alone can help each child to achieve their personal best.

A genuine partnership is needed so that parents and schools share a consistent understanding of each child’s strengths and weaknesses and work together to develop plans to help them achieve to the best of their ability.

Our tests are a critical component – providing information to teachers and parents, and our new student reports will also strengthen the link between school and home.

The relationship between parents, schools and students can be built on, and improved, in a number of ways.

For example, we need to be looking at how we can give parents even more advice and straightforward information on how their child is progressing.

Information technology can be used to support a closer relationship between families and schools.

I believe that parents should be able to interact with their child’s school online.

This should include being able to access information on what your child is being taught, looking at what assessments are coming up and seeing how your child is progressing.

The TALE parent and community portal now available is the beginning of this partnership.

Another area where we can do better is in tracking student progress within and between schools.

Parents should be confident that their child will not fall through the cracks.

As part of our numeracy plan we will be making sure that schools transfer student records from primary to secondary schools.

This approach should be standard practice for all student information.

3  **Strong Values – Responsible Citizens**

The third priority is also the theme of your conference – values.
There is no validity to the argument that values are somehow less important in public schools.

Public schools don’t just preach values – they practice it.

Public schools will always be a place where our society is brought together, not forced apart.

Parents have the right to expect that all schools – public or private – will model and reinforce basic values such as integrity, trust, respect and fairness.

Students should not only be taught these values, but they should be given sufficient responsibility to practise and demonstrate them.

At this our public schools excel.

As Minister for Education I am immensely proud of the young men and women who I meet in our schools.

Modelling the values we seek for our students should also be at the heart of how schools operate.

Providing a well rounded education with languages, sport, music and community involvement is one of the best ways to broaden student’s horizons and encourage them to develop as individuals.

Our schools will continue to assist students to develop an appreciation of Australian citizenship with our unique heritage and culture, as well as an understanding of our place in the global community.

Public school students are being given the confidence to contribute – as generations before them have.

4  More Opportunities through Public Education

The fourth and last of the priorities I want to raise today is the need for us to harness the collective strength of our public education system as a means of providing increased opportunities for students.

In choosing a public school each child should have the advantages of joining a ‘network’ with access to a menu of opportunities and facilities wider than any one school can provide.

A comprehensive education will remain the bedrock of our system. But not every school needs to be the same in order to achieve this.

I see the public education system as a network of strong schools collaborating to provide a comprehensive education - together providing many more opportunities than a single type of school can give.
I believe that schools will need to work closer together, not in competition.

On a practical level, the specialist facilities of public schools should be more available to all public school students. This includes music and sporting facilities, as well as high level courses run by selective schools.

We should also be looking outside the school gate for opportunities to share facilities such as sporting fields or libraries with the community, TAFE Colleges or other nearby schools. Our recent announcement of 10 trade schools, offering collaboration between TAFE and schools is a good example of this.

The Northern Beaches Secondary College is one example of how combining the strength of a number of schools can open up opportunity to students. Formal secondary college structures are not the only model, or the only way.

Information technology will also make it increasingly possible to offer a broader range of subjects by using the combined resources of our public schools.

Right now students in Western Sydney are undertaking a trial where seven high schools combine to offer Ancient History, Biology and Information Processes using video conferencing and online assistance.

This is one of the futures for public education. Opening up access to knowledge for all students.

Making education deeper and broader with increased subject choice and more extension and enrichment opportunities.

**A Confident Future**

Today I have touched on the great strengths of our system and some areas where we can continue to build.

I am confident that we have the foundations right, and that together we can keep giving our children the best opportunities.

I want parents to be confident that their children will be given the knowledge that they need to live fulfilling lives.

That they will be given every opportunity to shine.

And the values to make their unique contribution to society.

By building on the strong foundations and enduring principles of our public schools, and by working in partnership, I believe that we can continue to provide the children of New South Wales with the confident future that they so richly deserve. Thank you.

**ENDS**