



Darlith Addysg Cymru
The Wales Education Lecture **2009**

*Closing the Gap:
a response from
the chalkface*

Sir William S Atkinson -
Headteacher, Phoenix High School



Cyngor Addysgu Cyffredinol Cymru
General Teaching Council for Wales

The General Teaching Council for Wales

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- to maintain and improve standards of professional conduct amongst teachers, in the interests of the public.

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The Wales Education Lecture

On 5 October 2009, the Wales Education Lecture was delivered by Sir William Atkinson at the National Museum in Cardiff.

Sir William S Atkinson - Headteacher, Phoenix High School

I wish to thank the Welsh GTC for inviting me here tonight to give this lecture that I have titled 'Closing the Gap'.

At the time of the invitation back in January, I was delighted to accept. I was attracted by the venue being in the Welsh capital for I have many fond memories of visiting Wales over the last thirty years or so.

My first visit was in the late 70s one soggy and cold January afternoon on or after New Year's Day. The venue on that occasion was Pontypool Park and I was playing for my local team, Saracens, against the famous and oh-so-formidable Pontypool Fifteen, which contained at the time four current Lions forwards, including the entire front row of Price, Faulkner and Windsor – and for good measure, Cobner in the back row. Needless to say that we were thrashed and battered in equal measure. Although it was by some measure our worst beating on Welsh soil, it was also one of the best after-match parties I can recall during my rugby career – the Pontypool contingent were as generous with the pints as they had been with the bruises during the game.

More recently I have accompanied several field trips to various parts of this beautiful country, as well as taking numerous holidays. Also, over the last ten years as a national judge and Deputy Chair of the national judging panel of The Teaching Awards, I have had the opportunity of witnessing some fantastic teaching practice and met a number of inspirational Welsh teachers.

Returning to my theme for the evening - Closing the Gap.



In common with the vast majority of teachers who choose to work in schools located in areas of conspicuous disadvantage, I am passionate about the need to ensure that the education system does all in its power to convey a sizeable and measurable advantage directly to the students we serve.

It is our mission to tangibly transform the life opportunities of our young people, too many of whom are earmarked from an early age for failure or mediocrity at best. I am fully aware that for decades many young people born into poverty have, through dint of their own talents, drive, accident and good fortune, transcended their starting position and enjoyed great success within the education system. I could spend this entire hour talking about my personal journey, but I will spare you that dubious pleasure. Instead, I will focus my attention on closing the educational gap between those youngsters born into poverty and those from more advantageous backgrounds.

A recent DCSF report contained the following observations:

“In this country tackling child poverty and the impact of pupil deprivation on educational attainment has been at the heart of the present government’s policy, but despite high levels of investment in education there has been a persistent lack of progress in reducing under-achievement amongst the most disadvantaged pupils.

The relationship between deprivation and education is crucial for understanding the significant impact deprivation has on later outcomes in adulthood. There is a clear pathway from childhood poverty to reduced employment opportunities with earnings estimated to be reduced by between 15-28% and the probability of being employed at age 34 reduced by between 4-7%. Crucially those who end up with lower earnings are those with a lack of skills and qualifications: in other words, deprivation has a negative impact on educational attainment, leaving young people with fewer qualifications and skills which in turn affects future employment. Poor educational attainment has short as well as long term consequences. There are direct effects on health (for example, quality of diet, chances of smoking) and indirect effects on health (for example, lower skilled people are more likely to find employment in hazardous occupations where there are greater risks of accidents). Indeed, education has an impact on life expectancy; one more year’s education has been shown to increase life expectancy in the United States by as much as 1.7 years. There is further evidence that lower levels of educational achievement can have a negative impact on an individual’s engagement with society: for example, the increased likelihood that an individual will engage in criminal activity.”

The desire to raise standards for all students, but especially for those who are missing out the most, is not restricted to teachers in this country but is a national and indeed international concern. It is something that is exercising the minds of policy-makers and educationalists in many countries.

What follows is a highly selective recap of a number of events that have taken place in the United States over the last fifty years or so. **These references serve to underline my assertion that central government, although possessing great power and influence, cannot dictate the behaviours of thousands of people in the educational system beyond the mere ritualistic.**

If we look across the other side of the Atlantic, where these issues are possibly even more urgent, due to the profound racial dimension, we see that both federal and state governments have wrestled with the thorny issue of how to close the educational gap for many decades. These concerns have spawned a number of commissions of enquiries, reports and a significant amount of legislation in an effort to break the relationship between class, race and educational achievement.

The launching of the Russian Sputnik in 1957 shocked the US public, fearful that their technological supremacy was being threatened. Prominent figures of the day were very critical of the performance of the education system. In his book, "*Education and Freedom*", Admiral Hyman Rickover made direct links between the security of the nation and the quality of education. *'The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.'*

This rising tide of concern and anger led President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 to instruct his Commissioner of Education to conduct a nationwide survey on the availability of educational opportunity. Prominent amongst the significant findings of the Coleman report, '*Equality in Education Opportunity*', was the contention that - "*taking all the results together one implication stands above all: schools bring little independent effect and therefore the inequality imposed on children by their home, neighbourhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront life at the end of school.*"

In the view of the authors, schools were responsible for 10% variance in student achievement and the other 90% was accounted for by student background characteristics although a number of statisticians have subsequently argued for a figure for the school effect of between 15 and 20%.

The next development in this unfolding story took place in 1981 with Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell's establishment of the 'National Commission on Excellence in Education' to examine the quality of education in the United States in response to the widespread public perception that something was seriously remiss in the educational system.

The Commission's charges included

- assessing the quality of teaching and learning in public and private schools, colleges, and universities;
- comparing American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations;
- studying the relationship between college admissions requirements and student achievement in high school;
- identifying educational programs which resulted in notable student success in college; and
- assessing the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last quarter century had affected student achievement.

Once again, the most powerful nation in the world, worried about its economic competitiveness and national cohesion, was agonising over the condition of its schools in particular and education system in general.

The recommendations of the Commission lead to a great deal of debate, some tinkering around the margins – but no fundamental change. Many commentators wrote long and impassioned articles warning anyone who would listen that the United States was 'A Nation At Risk.'

In 1994, the federal government passed the "GOALS 2000: Educate America Act" setting out a number of key goals to be achieved by the year 2000. Amongst these were that every child should start school ready to learn, that the High school graduation rate should increase to at least 90%, that US students should be first in

the world in science and mathematics achievements and that every school should be free of drugs.

2002 saw President George W Bush pass the “No Child Left Behind” (“NCLB”) act which has been described as the most significant and controversial change in education policy since the federal government assumed a major role in American education forty years ago.

The law was a bipartisan compromise involving the White House and Republican and Democratic leaders in Congress and produced a bill of over a thousand pages in length. Can you begin to imagine the complexity?

NCLB aimed to raise achievement and close the education gap by:

- setting annual test score targets for sub groups of students based on a target of 100% proficiency by 2014;
- improving early reading instruction;
- upgrading the quality of teachers in high poverty schools;
- providing information for accountability and improvement;
- setting goals that all groups of disadvantaged students make substantial progress every year in every school.

The law contained a number of significant ‘firsts’ including emphases on improving education for non-white students (Latino, Black); on children living in poverty and on children with special educational needs. The law also contained funding set-aside with targets tied to school sanctions that could lead to school reconstitutions or closure, as well as requirements for student transfer.

States were told how often they had to test children and what subjects were to be emphasised. The law specified how much progress schools must make in a year for every subject. It required students with little or no English, and special educational needs children, to perform at the same high levels as students from the higher performing schools. It also stipulated that all schools employ highly qualified teachers. It also mandated supplemental service voucher programmes. Crucially it imposed many new duties on States without providing additional funding.

Despite many good intentions and real precision in relation to what everyone in the system had to do, how, and when, the Act was generally seen as having limited impact.

The situation continued to give cause for concern and in January 2008 Joel L. Klein and Al Sharpton sent an open letter to the President-Elect Barack Obama.

“In the afterglow of your election, Americans today run the risk of forgetting that the nation still faces one last great civil-rights battle: closing the insidious achievement gap between minority and white students. Public education is supposed to be the great equalizer in America. Yet today the average 12th grade black or Hispanic student has the reading, writing and math skills of an eighth-grade white student.

That appalling four-year gap is even worse in high-poverty high schools, which often are dropout factories. In Detroit, just 34% of black males manage to graduate. In the nation’s capital – home to one of the worst public-school systems in America – only 9% of ninth-grade students go on to graduate and finish college within five years. Can this really be the shameful civil-rights legacy that we bequeath to poor black and Hispanic children in today’s global economy?

This achievement gap cannot be narrowed by a series of half-steps from the usual suspects. As you observed when naming Chicago superintendent Arne Duncan to be the next secretary of education, “We have talked our education problems to death in Washington.”

While we recognize that the ‘No Child Left Behind’ law has numerous flaws that need correcting, we staunchly support NCLB’s core concept that schools should be held accountable for boosting student performance.”

In April of this year, McKinsey & Company released a report titled, *“The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America’s Schools”*. The report identifies four aspects of the achievement gap in American schools: the international achievement gap, the racial achievement gap, the income achievement gap and system-based achievement gaps. The findings in the report are striking in their sense of urgency and come fifty plus years after the launch of the Russian Sputnik and a welter of laws, commissions, reports, targets, system changes and the co-option of the voluntary sector.

The authors state that *“the United States lags significantly behind other advanced nations in education performance and is slipping further behind on some important measures”*. It notes that *“on average, black and Latino students are roughly two to three years of learning behind white students of the same age.”*

The report, which used a formula McKinsey helped develop to link educational achievement to economic output, also estimated closing the gap in the US between white students and their black and Latino peers could increase annual GDP by as much as an additional \$525 billion, or about 4%.

My purpose here tonight is not to critically appraise the effectiveness or otherwise of the measures undertaken in the United States to remedy deficiencies in their educational provision for their citizens. It is to demonstrate that in Britain and the US, successive governments have had the laudable goal of improving the educational attainment of all its students but especially those drawn from the lowest performing sections of the population, and, in both countries policy makers have sought to bring about dramatic improvements through whole system challenges with increasing specification and sanctions in the event of failure.

On this side of the pond, central government interventions have for the most part made some difference. In addition, it is possible to identify dramatic improvement for a small but significant number of schools at both primary and secondary level. Also certain ethnic groups (Indian, Chinese) have thrived. However, regrettably, for the vast majority of white working class students – and those drawn from ethnic minorities - the achievement gap in this country remains unacceptably wide, and, on current rates of improvement, will take many decades before there is any sense of parity. In the meantime, lives and communities will continue to be blighted.

What then can we do that has not already been tried – and failed?

Let me say right at the outset, I do not believe in magic bullets or overnight transformation. Nor do I believe that the situation would be assisted by even more tinkering, re-calibrating or restructuring of the whole system. We need to get far more forensic and apply more bespoke solutions.

In many respects, we in this country are much better placed than the US to attack the achievement gap.

For me, the lessons from the failure of successive governments on both sides of the Atlantic to mandate success, underline what many educationalists in this country have held to be true for some considerable time. That is, **although central government can set a framework, determine structure, have a national vision, set targets, provide funding, provide teaching and non-teaching staff in schools and support the development of links between schools and external entities, ultimately, they are unable to reach down and determine standards achieved by little Johnny in school X in Newport.**

Central governments have a limited and largely ineffective range of tools with which to force compliance at school level. This is especially true in times when there is an

overall shortage of high quality teachers, places in the highest performing schools are finite and attempts to significantly enlarge these schools is likely to be resisted through fear of bringing in the “wrong kind of students”. **The fact of the matter is that real and sustainable improvements in the system will only come about as the result of teachers and other staff working together on a vision and mission that they own.**

Let me turn now to some of the key factors common to high achieving schools working in deprived areas:

- viable and relevant curriculum;
- challenging goals and effective feedback;
- parental and community involvement;
- safe and orderly environment;
- collegiality and professionalism;
- clear student goals;
- strong classroom effectiveness;
- use of data to support learning;
- use of data for accountability;
- academic challenge for all students;
- high expectation for all;
- effective and continuous professional development;
- sharing of best practice;
- effective leadership;
- shared vision and goals.

This list /menu is familiar to everyone in this room and therefore begs the question - if we all know what the ingredients for success are, why is there so much underachievement in the system, especially for those youngsters living in the most challenging circumstances? The answer I think is found in any cookbook written by a leading chef with mouthwatering recipes for fairly complicated dishes. This is one I prepared on Sunday!

THAI GREEN CURRY

SERVES 4-6

4 tablespoons sunflower oil
 6 baby aubergines, cut into quarters, or 8 Thai aubergines, cut in half
 2/3 head of a medium cauliflower, cut into small florets
 150g/5oz fine green beans, cut in half
 175g/6oz oyster mushrooms, sliced
 150ml/¼ pint stock
 4 kaffir lime leaves, rolled up and thinly sliced
 2 dessertspoons dark soy sauce
 1 dessertspoon brown sugar
 400ml/14 fl oz coconut milk
 large handful of sweet basil leaves
 salt
 chopped coriander leaves, to garnish

For the green curry paste:-

1 teaspoon coriander seeds
 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
 1 dessertspoon black peppercorns
 large handful of coriander stalks, chopped
 6 shallots or 1 red onion, coarsely chopped
 4 garlic cloves
 5 cm/2 inch cube of galangal or root ginger, peeled and roughly chopped
 2 lemon grass stalks, thinly sliced
 4 green chillies
 1 tablespoon dark soy sauce (or 1 teaspoon fish sauce)
 grated zest and juice of 1 lime

First make the green curry paste: dry-roast the coriander and cumin seeds in a small pan, then mix them with the peppercorns and grind using a spice grinder or pestle and mortar. Add to a food processor with all remaining ingredients and process until a paste forms. Store in the fridge if making in advance.

Heat the sunflower oil in a wok. When hot, fry the aubergines (sprinkled with a little salt to prevent them absorbing all the oil and drying up too much) until it starts to soften. Add the cauliflower, green beans and oyster mushrooms.

When the cauliflower starts to brown, add the green curry paste, stirring well to avoid sticking. When this is well combined, add the stock, kaffir lime leaves, dark soy sauce and sugar. When the vegetables are just starting to soften, add the coconut milk and sweet basil. Cook for a further 5 minutes, ensuring the sauce doesn't boil. Season with salt to taste, if necessary.

Serve with rice or noodles, garnished with chopped coriander leaves.

Although I am able to purchase the basic ingredients and work within the suggested time frame, my efforts invariably fall somewhat short of the mark. Success has something to do with the quality of the ingredients used throughout the preparation and skill in blending all the elements into a successful meal possessing the desired flavours and accents.

If we return to the key features of a successful school, we see that a majority refers to what goes on in the classroom. This is not surprising given that success is largely determined by students' academic outcome. It is widely acknowledged that the classroom is the main factor in determining the success or failure of a school. Professor Dylan Wiliam argues that:

“The conclusion from school effectiveness research is that an effective school is little more than a school full of effective classrooms. It matters much less which school a child attends than which classrooms they are in at that school.

In England, the variability at the classroom level appears to be as much as four times the variability at the school level. Children fortunate enough to be in the most effective classrooms will learn in six months what students in an average classroom learn in a year. And the children in the least effective classrooms will take two years to learn the same amount of material. In other words, there is a four-fold difference in the speed of learning between the most effective and least effective classrooms.

On the assumption that Professor Wiliam is in the right ball park, it would not be unreasonable to argue that just as how effective classrooms can make a significant difference to the rate at which students learn, it is also the case that effective schools can also have a dramatic impact on the rate at which students learn. It is difficult to see how effective classrooms can thrive in isolation from the expectations, culture, resource base and quality of leadership of a school. Schools do make a difference.

Given the importance attached to the effectiveness of the classroom it is no surprise then that the quality of the teacher is seen as a critical factor in supporting student outcomes. In a study of practices in primary schools, for example, Sammons et al. (2008) reported that the influence of overall teaching quality on reading and mathematics was stronger than the net influence of some background factors, including being eligible for Free School Meals (“FSM”).

The next question that comes to mind is what does the effective classroom look like? The universals would include a number of the following features, no surprises here then – remember the curry.

- high expectation
- strong focus on student academic achievement
- clear learning goals for each student
- good and appropriate use of performance data
- assessment for learning/personalization
- safe and orderly environment
- atmosphere characterized by fairness and respect

How do we identify those students likely to be in the greatest need? For the most part, governments and its agencies use eligibility for Free School Meals as an indicator of poverty. The research shows us that:

- a child on free school meals is less than half as likely to gain 5 GCSE A* - C including Maths and English as other students, and twice as likely to leave school with no qualifications. The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM is greater in primary schools (17%) than secondary schools (14%);
- about half of all secondary FSM pupils are distributed across three quarters of schools with the other half concentrated in a quarter of schools;
- in primaries, around 40% of FSM pupils are concentrated in just 13% of schools;
- pupils with special educational needs in mainstream education are disproportionately eligible for FSM: pupils with a statement of SEN are twice as likely to be eligible for FSM compared to pupils with no SEN, whilst almost a third of pupils categorized as School Action Plus are eligible for FSM;
- eligibility for FSM is particular high for three types of SEN: (1) behavioural, emotional and social difficulty (BESD); (2) moderate learning difficulty (MLD) and (3) severe learning difficulty (SLD).

The first table below shows England's primary and secondary school population eligibility for FSM in 2007 broken down by type of school, and the second shows the number of schools overall and the percentage of eligible pupils for FSM.

	Proportion of primary school population eligible for FSM in 2007	Proportion of secondary school population eligible for FSM in 2007
Community schools	19.3%	15.9%
Voluntary controlled schools	10.0%	8.6%
Voluntary aided schools	13.3%	12.6%
Foundation schools	11.4%	10.4%
City Technology Colleges	n/a	13.7%
National average	16.9%	14.4%
Academies	(Mainly secondary, but including some all-age schools)	33.8%

Source: *The Composition of Schools in England. DCSF Statistical Bulletin (DCSF, 2008)*. Position as at January 2007 in maintained mainstream schools in England. Includes sole and dual registered pupils who are full-time aged 0 to 15 or part-time 5 to 15

	All maintained mainstream schools, CTCs and Academies	Comprehensive schools	Grammar schools	Secondary modern schools
Number of schools	3399	3059	164	176
% of pupils known to be eligible for FSM	14.4%	15.0%	2.2%	12.0%

Source: *The Composition of Schools in England. DCSF Statistical Bulletin (DCSF, 2008)*. Position as at January 2007 in maintained mainstream schools in England. Includes sole and dual registered pupils who are full-time aged 0 to 15 or part-time 5 to 15

The vast majority of teachers I know believe passionately that when catering for students with multiple needs from deprived backgrounds the number of students in the class is a crucial factor in influencing their ability to properly cater for the students' disparate needs.

The effect of class size on attainment has long been contested, and does not provide clear UK-based evidence on any particular association between class size and outcomes for deprived pupils, although Wilson (2001) reported that US research appears to show a positive effect of smaller class sizes for pupils from disadvantaged groups.

Evidence on the impact of class size in secondary schools is limited.

The debate about class size within the state sector is one that baffles most front-line teachers. It is not a question of having effective teachers or significantly reducing class size. We need both. For any hard pressed teacher trying to diagnostically mark thirty exercise books, the opportunity of reducing that load down to twenty would be welcomed. Having twenty hands go up at the same time instead of thirty means that the teacher has a greater opportunity of hearing from a greater proportion of the class.

If class size is not really that important, why then do private schools still insist on having class sizes in most subjects at twenty or below? Why do we find that classes in special schools are habitually much smaller than is the case for mainstream? My wife taught for over twenty years in a school for autistic children in North London. She had responsibility for six students and was supported by two classroom assistants. It's got something to do with trying to meet the needs of the students.

The same applies to teachers working in our most challenging classrooms. Research is required on the difference made to students' rates of learning where effective teachers are teaching in groups of twenty or fewer compared to similar students who are being taught by equally effective teachers in groups of thirty.

Potential benefits of significantly smaller class size for schools in challenging areas with very high proportions of students on FSM, with SEN, low prior attainment, high mobility students or new arrivals to the country, could include:

- more individual attention;
- less stress for needy students seeking teacher attention during lesson;
- easier staff recruitment;

- greater staff retention;
- greater scope to practise assessment for learning.

If we were to look at teacher turnover and qualifications we would see a disturbing picture.

Teacher turnover is higher in schools with higher proportions of FSM: Smithers (2005) reported that teachers in secondary schools with 21%+ FSM eligibility were 34% more likely to move to a different school than teachers in schools with 0-10% FSM eligibility (a 16.21% turnover compared to 12.1%). For primary schools, the figure was 21% more likely (14.99% turnover compared to 12.4%).

Also, secondary schools with higher proportions of pupils eligible for FSM have, on average, teachers with lower levels of qualifications than other schools. The table below presents data from a 2007 survey (Charles et al., 2007) which shows that schools in the higher FSM quintiles had fewer teachers with degrees in the subject they taught, compared with schools in the lower FSM quintiles.

(Teachers with degrees in subject)	Lowest 20% FSM	Second lowest 20% FSM	Middle 20% FSM	Second highest 20% FSM	Highest 20% FSM
Mathematics	79	82	70	70	65
English	87	80	77	81	71
Chemistry	97	100	89	95	88
Physics	91	94	91	89	79
Biology	98	97	94	98	89

Source: Charles et al. (2007)

Let us now briefly consider what I believe to be important steps in determining the most effective way forward when considering significantly raising the performance of students from challenging circumstances.

First and foremost we must get the best-qualified and ablest teachers into our most challenging schools and keep them there. There must be a range of incentives to attract and retain these teachers. Crucial amongst these will be enhanced conditions of employment, including higher starting salaries with bonus payments at strategic points based on time spent in the school and effectiveness.

These teachers would be expected to teach in classrooms of between 15 and 20 students depending on the level of need. Most teachers would have the support of a qualified teaching support assistant who would be able to carry out specific tasks during the lesson. This would involve joint planning with the classroom teacher.

Careful consideration will need to be given to the kind of physical resources necessary to meet the needs of the students. These teachers and non-teaching staff will need to work closely with parents and carers within and outside the school day. Attention would need to be paid to the opportunities to engage in learning beyond the classroom. It is axiomatic that **the curriculum needs to be both engaging and relevant.** The classroom practice would need to have a high degree of assessment for learning as part of its DNA.

Policy makers need to weigh up the actual benefits of their numerous interventions over the last 20 years and decide whether their model going forward is fit for purpose. I would respectfully suggest a new paradigm is required if we are really to tackle the differential outcomes for different groups of students based on their social circumstances. Within the new paradigm, **government would have a central role in providing a framework, national accountability, curriculum, teacher supply and quality and safeguarding.**

Schools working individually or in small collectives would be responsible for raising standards and delivering the 'Every Child Matters' agenda. Schools would have a duty to develop a cadre of teachers who would carry out internal evaluation of the school's effectiveness as well as discharging a similar function in other schools within reasonable travelling distance. These Schools Improvement Groups (SIGs) would be trained and subject to three yearly re-licensing by Her Majesty's Inspectors. **Teachers involved in the SIGs would have their professionalism significantly enhanced and would bring greater focus to their own teaching.** Schools generally would have the benefit of knowing that the professionals carrying out their evaluations were practicing teachers with a good grasp of the issues. School Improvement Partners work would be restricted to those schools deemed to be 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate'.

Her Majesty's Inspectors would oversee the whole system and carry out a limited number of inspections to ensure that judgements made by SIGs in different parts of the country were consistent and professionally robust.

Local Authorities would retain their present responsibilities ensuring fairness and equity across their areas and in the process make sure that schools, while enjoying the greatest possible freedoms, nevertheless remain accountable to the local community.

Not a panacea, but a big step in what I think is the right direction.

In conclusion, it is clear from my thirty-nine years of teaching, which has included running three secondary schools and extensive experience of advising politicians and other stakeholders, that although central government can set the direction of travel, create a funding framework and make clear their expectations for the system, they cannot, at the end of the day, determine standards in the classroom. Standards can only be raised through the professionalism, commitment and determination of those charged with working directly with our young people and their families. The teaching profession recognises that although standards have risen in recent years, there is still a great deal to be done, especially when it comes to improving the achievement of those youngsters who come from the most challenging backgrounds. The task for government over the next ten years is to have a relentless focus on providing support, as well as challenge, to those of us fortunate enough to be responsible for the education of our students subject to multiple disadvantages.