

ISCA-EDUCATION FORUM 2018 Hyatt Hotel, Canberra, 20 August 2018

CLOSING ADDRESS

Dr Mark Merry, AHISA National Chair

Colleagues,

Would you please join me in thanking our emcee, Richard Morecroft, who has done a superb job today in shepherding us through a tight schedule?

I also want to thank the Minister for Education, Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham. Federal funding is a vital component of education provision in non-government schools. As public policy, it must not only be equitable, it must be *seen* to be equitable. Amid conflicting claims, it was important for us to hear directly from the Minister today.

With a federal election looming, it was important to also hear from all those who may wield a strong influence on what happens in our classrooms in the future, and I thank those parliamentarians who took time out from their busy schedules to share their thinking with us today. Their presence here today affirms my view that education is deemed to be a critical component of public policy.

On your behalf I thank all our speakers and panellists for their contribution to what has been a very memorable event.

And I'd like to mention AHISA's corporate partners, whose support has helped make the day possible:

- NAB Education
- NGS Super
- Woods Furniture
- Somerville
- MMG Education
- Image Seven
- and Latitude Group Travel.

The interest and commitment of our partners in independent schools and their communities of students, staff and parents is greatly appreciated.

I also want to thank ISCA as our joint hosts and our own events team. If there is just one lesson we should have learnt today it is that a united voice and collaborative action lend strength to what is a very diverse group of schools.

Whilst it is my task to conclude our Forum, I won't be rehashing what has already been said. I'm going to assume you were listening intently and have managed to work this out for yourself.

Instead, I would like to make some observations.

My background is in behavioural psychology, and in history – with a special interest in military history. It's proven to be a good mix for leading a school. And it explains my attraction to a recent book on leadership co-authored by General Martin Dempsey, former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and a Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. In 2015, *Time* magazine named him one of the most influential leaders in the world.

In their book, *Radical Inclusion*, General Dempsey and co-author Ori Brafman look at leadership in a post-9/11 world, a world where fake news or deliberate misinformation create something they liken to a 'fog of war', a fog that not only denies us access to the facts but actually convinces us of the validity of erroneous data.

According to Dempsey and Brafman, the world is moving from debates about facts to battles between narratives. They write that:

- Facts are by definition grounded in logic.
- Narratives are based on emotions.
- Facts depend on expert validation to persist.
- Narratives simply need to be retold.
- Facts need to be verified in order to have utility.
- Narratives gain power merely by spreading.

What does this mean for independent schools in Australia?

It means that the message that every child deserves reasonable government support for their school education and a graph illustrating the fact that high SES schools get the least amount of government funding are not strong enough to combat a narrative of privilege supported by images of sandstone buildings, Olympic sized swimming pools, equestrian centres or neatly uniformed students.

The independent sector has been fighting funding misinformation for years and we are no nearer winning the battle being waged across media websites.

But that's just one battle. There is another, far more pernicious battle that all schools in all sectors are losing.

This battle is the narrative of failing schools, of a system in dire need of 'reform' – a narrative most often illustrated with a graph showing the downward trend of Australia's PISA results. It's a narrative that robs educators of their professional expertise while promoting policy commentators to the role of experts and 'fixers'.

Ranged against that bad news story is our narrative that those of us here today live out on a day to day basis – a reality of professional dedication, educational excellence and great student outcomes.

So, how do we handle a post factual world?

According to General Dempsey, you can't win a narrative battle by simply proving that the opposing narrative is in some way inaccurate. A narrative battle is won, he says, by drowning out the counter-message. And he offers an interesting strategy on how to do that. He calls it 'radical inclusion' and it

entails two things: first, using communications resources that are as close to the ground or as close to the action as possible and, second, leveraging a diversity of voices.

That's a strategy that schools are well-positioned to adopt. Just look at the numbers. There are around 560,000 students enrolled in independent schools. That represents a lot of families who are on the ground and really close to the action. And we already know they are our best advocates.

And we shouldn't forget staff members. One of the most important jobs of a Principal is to develop and uphold the narrative of his or her school, and that includes making sure staff members know the narrative well and are upholding it too.

In fact, Principals are narrative specialists. If it comes to a battle of narratives, we are resourced with highly experienced leaders. What we need is an overarching narrative for the sector. Just as important, we need a strong and positive narrative about all schools to counter the deficit model thinking that has infected education policy making.

In our armoury we need some common messages that families can use to weave into their own narratives. Messages that speak to parents' passionate engagement in their children's welfare, messages that advocate the right to choice in education and which affirm parents' choice of an independent school for their child's education.

It's time for recycling, upgrading and repackaging these messages for use by schools alongside their own stories of celebration. It is a priority project for AHISA, and we'll be calling on our members to help build a strong sector narrative.

As I bring this Forum to a close, I leave you with a word from the Roman historian, Tacitus. In his account of the life of his father-in-law Agricola, the general responsible for the Roman conquest of Britain, Tacitus wrote,

Rarely will two or three tribes confer to repulse a common danger. Accordingly they fight individually and are collectively conquered.

In the 21st century, we in the independent sector have been effective in retaining our individuality while working collectively through our associations. Unity is a strategic advantage in a war and we need to commit to maintain it.

Now, rather naively perhaps, I am going to suggest the need for a broader kind of unity, upholding a narrative where we educators commit to every child in Australia receiving an excellent education.

A house divided against itself will not stand. The house I speak of is education more broadly – government, Catholic and independent.

Tribalism in education has got to stop. Decades of it has gotten us nowhere.

- Parts of academia purportedly committed to diversity seem curiously selective in their vision of diversity. A diversity that doesn't seem to include parental choice.
- Some in our media patronise and denigrate parents and their choices, imputing to them every motive under the sun for choosing an independent school except the right one: what's best for their children.
- Leaders in education are getting drawn into politics with dubious results. Has this really improved the lot of the children in their care?

- Those who challenge the very existence of an independent schools sector on the basis that it divides the community ought to seriously consider where the true responsibility for division lies.

AHISA proposes a different narrative:

- Choice and diversity in education is a good thing if there are not winners and losers.
- We are committed to genuine, transparent, needs based funding.
- All children in Australia ought to be supported by government in their learning in some shape or form. The question of course for all political parties is what does this look like in practice.
- The cooperation not competition we see 'on the ground' between our teachers from government, Catholic and independent schools ought to be mirrored by those that shape educational policy. Only then will Education Ministers get the high performing system they seek.

But that's enough for one day. Let's talk about dinner...

Check the screens for important information you will need for tonight, especially about bus times for those of you staying here at the Hyatt. And please remember to complete the feedback survey which will be sent out in the next couple of days. Your feedback will help us make the next Forum even more successful.

Thank you for joining us today. I look forward to meeting you again at dinner and in doing so declare our Forum for 2018 closed.

ENDS