**Talking Teachers – Dr Ken Boston**

**Jane Hunter** [00:00:10] Hi, and welcome to Talking Teachers. I'm Jane Hunter. This is an Australian education podcast series wherein each episode will be exploring what is working and what isn't in our schools. We'll be talking to some of the most informed people in the field and asking questions about the big issues in education. We also want to investigate if it's at all possible to find new solutions to the current challenges in school based education. I'm co-hosting this series with my colleague Don Carter, and we're both teacher education academics at UTS.

**Don Carter** [00:00:54] Today, Jane, we have an absolute legend of education, a former Director-General of Education in New South Wales, someone who's held other senior positions in education. I mean, you can Google him, but we're really looking forward to interviewing Dr. Ken Boston.

**Jane Hunter** [00:01:10] Ken, thank you so much for coming into the studio today. I wonder if we can just wind back a little bit to talk about your time as director general of Education in New South Wales. And I'm thinking here specifically about what you might consider were your greatest achievements during that time, because you were in that role for a considerable period of time, a couple of decades, in fact.

**Ken Boston** [00:01:39] Well, I guess the achievements are really a matter for others to judge. I think there were some significant developments in my time in curriculum support, in student welfare and teacher student ratios and teacher pay and conditions, facilities, Aboriginal education, students with disabilities and other areas. There were also low points. The main low point was the Royal Commission into Child Abuse. And in 1997 of course, I became responsible for TAFE as well as for schools and for regulating private training. But I was not a William Wilkins or a Peter Board or a Harold Wyndham. The department, by the time I came, hadn't lost any immediate management role in relation to teacher education or curriculum or examinations. But there are three things I tried to do. And first was I tried to play a public role as leader of public education rather than be a faceless bureaucrat, invisible behind the minister - Virginia Chadwick and John Aquilina. With them, I was blessed with ministers who allowed that to happen. I spoke and wrote about public education being the crucible in which this multi-cultural state country has been formed. I spent a lot of time in schools. I spoke out on a number of controversial matters. One was the Howard Government's enrolment benchmark adjustment, which was immensely damaging. And the other was the Howard Government's refusal to allow children of refugees at the Villawood Detention Centre attend the local public school. I was trying to be a genuine public leader of public education rather than a faceless apparatchik serving the Minister's goals. Secondly, I tried to operate from a position of public education being a public instrumentality that is a tool that can be used to achieve excellence and equity, to give every child a fair go, to allow everyone to reach his or her potential. And I saw the department not as a bureaucracy there to provide food and water. To 2200 schools in which a thousand flowers might or might not bloom, but as a force for good, which developed evidence-based policies and implemented them to achieve a particular effect. I mean, as director general, I thought my role was generally to direct and I was a centralist and an interventionist in that way. And the third thing I think I tried to achieve was to genuinely have the Westminster system operate within the department, where people were prepared to offer ministers frank and fearless advice or tell them that a proposed ministerial initiative was just not on. And I hope I gave some confidence and that there were some ideas. There were some things I. Now wonder whether they were right. And just briefly, if I might mention, one was during my period there was a steep increase in the number of selective high schools. And looking back, I wonder whether we did the right thing with that. Barry McGaw recently drew my attention to what's happened in Poland, where in the start of the year 2000 was at the bottom of the table. It's now very close to the top. It's up there with Finland and Canada. And the reason is that it changed from streamed secondary schooling to comprehensive high schools, neighbourhood high schools and achieved a real turnaround. So, you know, when you say what did you achieve? It. It wasn't all achievement. And I look back now and with, you know, two decades down the track and think we'll really. Did we do the right thing with that?

**Don Carter** [00:06:42] That's very interesting, Ken. But I'm interested in your point about being an interventionist. I don't remember in recent years, the director general of education in New South Wales making public statements as such about public education. More the pity, I say. You mentioned the couple of former directors general of education, for example, Peter Board, Harold Wyndham. And you basically said that you don't believe you're of the same stature as those two, for example. Aren't you just being modest?

**Ken Boston** [00:07:16] Oh, I don't think so. I mean, when them produced a massive reform and Secondary Education Board, as you know, was the foundation in the growth of education for all and other things. I'm not being modest. They were people of immense calibre and stature and were able to achieve a great deal. I'm told I was after them. I've never checked that the longest serving director general, but I certainly didn't have the impact that they have had.

**Don Carter** [00:07:51] Well, I'd just like to point out, under your tenure there was the McGaw reforms to the senior curriculum, which were massive and far reaching. So in my view, you know, your stature is pretty high, Jane.

**Jane Hunter** [00:08:04] Yes, I absolutely agree with that. Very modest. And yes, I I'm thinking to myself as you're speaking. Oh, I wish. Could you come back? You know, could we sort of, you know, do AI on you? And it's no disrespect to people currently, but it's been such a different story over the last couple of decades. And, you know, this idea of frank and fearless advice and you leading and speaking about public education, I can just imagine our listeners, Don, you know, cheering when they hear the opening comments from you.

**Ken Boston** [00:08:38] But bear in mind, you've got a very good appointment now. So you're ready to carry the fire.

**Don Carter** [00:08:46] Yeah, I think people seem to be very happy with Murat Dizdar, which is, which is great. It's like a recalibration, reactivating public education in New South Wales. Can I just ask you one question? Going back to 2005, Ken, you're in Britain and the late Ted Wragg interviewed you. He asked you to reflect on your own school days and the study you did on glaciation. And you said that education is largely about exercising the learning muscle, the brain. Is education still about that today?

**Ken Boston** [00:09:23] Yes. I think that education is still about providing basic skills to prepare one for life in the future, a career so far ahead of you, and to exercise that learning muscle in the skull. So you learn how to learn. Bear in mind, in that interview with Ted Wragg, I was making the point in the context of vocational education. I was arguing that Britain is too binary, that it sees academic education as being education to grow the minds and the imagination of people to exercise that learning muscle in the skull. We teach French in history to exercise that learning muscle, not to produce interpreters or future professors of history. Yet when we get to the occasional curriculum, we automatically think of training. But if automotive practice or carpentry or farming industry. Which is about I mind brain coordination, thinking, reasoning, judging, doing. If those things exercise a learning muscle in the head, if they grow minds and imaginations, why should we cast it as vocational training? It is vocational education. That was the point I was making to take drag. And I think there's a lesson here for us too, because I think we still have an essentially binary approach to academic and vocational curriculum, and I think that's unnecessary and damaging.

**Jane Hunter** [00:11:09] Yes. And in fact, just picking up on that in the ACT in the senior schools, my last appointment, for example, students need to choose going into year 11 and 12 whether they are going to follow that vocational or academic stream. And whilst I would argue that in the ACT, the college system has been highly successful, I think that that idea of making a one or the other choice is problematic and maybe that's fed into the way we view vocational education in this country. And of course, we had a TAFE system that was the envy of the world, but unfortunately in more recent years it's been completely stripped out. And so it's really just a skeleton of what it previously was. And it and yet we've got this huge shortage of the trades and people to exercise their body and mind and brain to do those important building projects, engineering projects and so on. So it's a very interesting point you make, Ken, but I just want to move now to some of the more pressing issues, and I guess you could argue TAFE is a pressing issue, but I just wanted to talk specifically now about the teacher shortage occupying so much of our media and conversation for all of us in education. And we see not only international teacher shortage, we see student school refusal, for example, is on the rise. Hundreds more young people, if not thousands, being educated from home. The big emphasis on student test performance and also the issue of school funding. And it's a very grim picture often that we are seeing at the moment. So for somebody like yourself who has had the experiences that you've had and worked in, in the different spaces over a long period of time, what is the hope that's on the horizon? Do you see any?

**Ken Boston** [00:13:25] Yes, I do. I undoubtedly do. Absolutely. There is hope, but it resides in the very last point you made re funding. It affects everything else that you talked about. Funding is a necessary condition of all improvement. It's obviously not a sufficient condition, but the teacher shortage will be met only by funding. The status of teachers can be raised only by paying them what they deserve and bringing them to full professional status. Professional development costs money Time release costs money. The mentoring of beginning teachers costs money. Whatever initiatives might be developed to improve student refusal or address student refusal or student discipline and other issues. It's funding. And look, the solution to this is ready and available in Australia and it's been ignored. And I'm not talking about new funding in the first instance. I'm talking about Australia having a much better education system if the money it currently targets to education, which is $61.3 billion a year recurrent was targeted according to need, which is what Gonski was about. An enormous amount is wasted on low priorities in schools that don't need it and on things that don't matter. And of course, the result is very clear. The Productivity Commission sees that standards are plummeting over the last 10 years and the underlying factor is the neglect of the public schools, those schools which cater for. Students, including many for whom high quality public education. As they wonder, students in life have insufficient funding, insufficient specialist resources. Their learning is left lying in the ground. It's not in mind. It's not released. It's not revealed. It's not built. And that, to me, is the is the problem. If we're going to address your problem, Jane. Two things have to happen. Firstly, all state schools must be brought to the proper schooling resource standard. And tell that to Jason Clare when you interview him as soon as possible. And non-government schools must be stripped of their ever funding within the envelope of our existing 61.3 billion. And only then should we be deciding whether we want additional funding and how much it should there should be. So there's hope, but it requires political leadership from ministers and the capacity of governments to build a constituency for reform. And both sides of politics at the moment have failed to do that.

**Don Carter** [00:16:46] Ken, that touches on the next question that I want to ask, and it's about the Gonski funding model. Recently, you addressed an audience organised by the New South Wales Teachers Federation where you said that the funding model had been, quote, “blown off course by the winds of sector self-interest and navigated by the polestar of politics, not principle” unquote. I think you've touched on this, but can you talk some more about how this has happened?

**Ken Boston** [00:17:14] The Gonski report was initially very well-received and it was widely understood that socio educational segregation is at the heart of our declining international performance. There was a broad constituency for reform, including writers from the right and including financial journalists, not simply educational journalists, by seeking to mitigate the educational impact of socioeconomic advantage. We created a political problem. Social educational advantage is the hottest commodity in education today. Everyone wants it. Parents are queued up to buy it. They'll pay $42,000 a year in many non-government schools just to purchase it. And parents with low and middle incomes have the same view. Although some struggle to pay the fees set by schools even lower fees, those set by Christian and Catholic parish schools. They want to send their children to schools from which others can be excluded. There's no question of that for many. Exclusiveness is a greater attraction than quality. So the current arrangements of independent schools, non-government systems. Non-Government systemic schools and public schools all receiving a measure of state and Commonwealth funding, both recurrent and capital, is quite absurd. But it's widely popular, it's strongly defended, and in my view, it's virtually certain to persist. The only realistic way forward, which is what Gonski was about, is not by sweeping it away, but by mitigating it. And they were our loadings for socioeconomic advantage, low English proficiency, disability and so on, which, you know, now that was too much of a challenge. The easy political solution for governments was to say, we'll find some additional funding, we'll call it Gonski. Funding will establish some sort of resource standard. We won't have the national body Gonski recommended because that's simply another layer of bureaucracy and the law. Now there is another point that I think is worth making. The logic of Gonski was that the schooling resource standard would flow to each individual school. Each school would receive the amount generated by the standard, regardless of the sector to which it might belong. And that was quickly recognised by state treasuries and education departments and the non-government systems as constraining their capacity to move money around within their own envelope of funding. Neither the government nor the non-government schools, except the independent ones which don't belong to a sector, have accepted that position. And of course, one of the greatest defenders of the status quo has been the Catholic Church, which receives the money as a bulk amount and distributed according to its own idea of need rather than the national resourcing standard. State governments do precisely the same and cost shift. So we've got neither needs based nor sector blind funding, which is what Gonski is about. It was just politically to get bankrolling systems, not funding schools.

**Don Carter** [00:21:36] In the book *Waiting for Gonski How Australia Failed Its Schools*, Tom Green argues that the structural reform of our government and non-government schooling arrangements are the only solution to the problem of socio economic segregation and its impact on education outcomes. What is your view on this proposal?

**Ken Boston** [00:21:56] Well, I disagree. I don't think it's I don't think it is a possible solution at all. Tom and Chris call for a national conversation to develop a consensus, a new structure where there are fee paying schools which receive no government funding and are subject to no enrolment restrictions and fully government funded schools, which includes faith-based schools and which charge no fees. Now, if we were to start the banks a sheet of paper, I'd sign up for that. But with the long history of the current arrangements and the enthusiasm of the community to purchase socio educational advantage, I just don't think it's a possibility. Be far more difficult to implement than the Gonski recommendations and look at the trouble they've run into. I don't agree with Tom and Chris that there is a large body of religious poor out there wanting to pay no fees. They'd like to pay lower fees, but they want to belong to schools which don't have to take all children. And of course, in our Gonski report, talking to faith-based organisations and parent organisations about the possibility of a non-fee paying schools integrated into the state system. And you recall we actually recommended some non-government schools be publicly funded. We never got any support for for that. There was not one occasion on which that was seen to be desirable and even if it were on the basis my experience in England, I wonder whether that make any difference. In England, 93% of the schools government maintained that is government funded. They include the faith-based schools. And yet when you look at the key stage two. Test results, GCSE and A-level results, which was the business I was involved in in England. It varies enormously across the country. Postcode determines outcomes in England, just as it does here. The North is poorly performing the home counties and the worst performing Essex poorly performing. I don't think actually including them in government funding is going to achieve anything. What's needed in England, frankly, is a Gonski type funding arrangement.

**Don Carter** [00:24:45] Okay, fantastic. Thanks, Ken. I'm sure Tom and Chris will be interested to hear your views on that.

**Jane Hunter** [00:24:52] So it's really that time in the interview. Ken and I feel like we've only just touched the surface on so many of those issues that you've raised. Fascinating. But to have your rant. So here's a moment for you to direct where you think the focus of solutions, challenges in education lie and perhaps take up the gauntlet of a rant and get something off your chest for the next 30 seconds.

**Ken Boston** [00:25:23] A rant is not my style. I can offer an acerbic comment and it should be about capital works and wealthy non-government schools observing the building bonanza in non-government schools and signing off on the Gonski report. I no longer believe that the wealthier public schools which enjoy charitable taxation status, have massive investments, raised millions of dollars in donations, can pick and choose which students I accept and charge fees. Now approaching the national minimum wage should receive any public funding, while the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars flowing from governments to such schools can't be spent directly on facilities. They do cover much of the recurrent cost of teachers’ salaries in the non-government, systemic and independent schools, and that permits a substantial component of school fees to be spent on servicing the loans for capital works. And it is this which has fuelled the building bonanza in private schools in the past five years, which in New South Wales alone amounts to $1.5 billion. Now, somehow a cap must be placed on the capacity of wealthy schools to pocket government funding while charging an extraordinary level of fees and borrowing tens of millions of dollars on the strength of it to build a second grandstand, the third swimming pool, another wilderness retreat or wellness centre. So spending taxpayer funding on things that don't matter and schools that don't need it should not be a priority for government funding and it's rocket fuel for increasing socio education disadvantage.

**Don Carter** [00:27:31] Well, thank you very much, Ken. Well said. That was fascinating and we could spend all day. There's so many issues to talk about, but really appreciate your time and your insights.

**Jane Hunter** [00:27:42] Thank you so much, Ken. It was wonderful to meet you and to, you know, to be brought right back to reality. And with the wisdom that you have from the various positions that you've occupied, drawing all of that together in the way that you have is really it's. Although at times I was thinking I wanted to hear something else. It was a really wonderful insight. So thank you so much.

**Ken Boston** [00:28:13] Thank you. Thank you.

**Don Carter** [00:28:23] Well, Jane, that was amazing. Dr. Ken Boston, what a wealth of experience, deep knowledge about education nationally and internationally. We could have kept talking all day, too, Ken.

**Jane Hunter** [00:28:34] Yes, It was hard to really keep the conversation just to the length of our podcast. And, you know, when you think about where we're at the moment, being able to draw on his experience was really insightful. And I really hope that people more broadly who listen to this perhaps can be fortified by many of the comments that he was making about public education, and he was very much on the front foot and making those public statements and around public education. And we're seeing that a bit more recently with the changing of the guard within the New South Wales Department and also with Jason Clare, to be fair as well. But it's been a very long time coming, Don, All that.

**Don Carter** [00:29:26] That's true. And just going back to some of the things Ken said, we didn't get a chance to follow up on the selective schools. He mentioned that earlier on. I mean, that could be a topic for a podcast and in its own right. And he was very honest to talk about some of his achievements, but some things that didn't go well, and that was one of his regrets, I guess you'd say.

**Jane Hunter** [00:29:48] Yes. Yeah. The selective schools question has come up again, such a different time that we're in now and perhaps they have reached their use by date and we need to with globalisation, we need to get back to the local school in the community with its students and, you know, maybe that will contribute to wellbeing amongst our young people who perhaps because of COVID, because of the way that our society is focused now, social media and so on, it would make a difference to young people to be able to go to schools in their local area. But you know, the whole question of his rant around, you know, this the resourcing on capital works, I'm so glad he mentioned that because it's something that's really worried me. And we see the headlines in the in the press around, you know, this school now has these gates worth so many thousand dollars or another swimming pool or another wellness centre. It's just not right.

**Don Carter** [00:31:00] Look, I would agree with that and I was so pleased to hear Ken talk about quite plainly, quite clearly that pay and conditions for teachers need to improve. It's a no brainer.

**Jane Hunter** [00:31:11] It is a no brainer. And everything that he said came back to funding. It's that the money has to be found. If we don't find it, I'm very fearful.

**Don Carter** [00:31:24] Well, yet again, another fascinating interview. Thank you, Jane. And I look forward to meeting you for our next interview.

**Jane Hunter** [00:31:32] Right. Thank you so much, Don. Thank you for listening to this episode of Talking Teachers. If you'd like to know more about Don and me, you can look at the UTS website, simply Google UTS Teacher Education, where you'll also find show notes for this podcast. The podcast was produced by William Verity for Impact Studios at UTS, which specialises in turning research into quality audio. We wish to acknowledge that the series is being recorded on Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation. We thank and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.