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Life lessons

Abang Anade Othow's extraordinary journey

Uluru Statement from the Heart

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are aliened from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. *This is the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.* It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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For more information refer to NESA or TQI websites.



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Editorial

From child refugee to fashion model, teacher and author, Abang Anade Othow has led an extraordinary life.

Her memoir *Buckets of Hope* details her journey from refugee camps in Africa to teaching throughout NSW and Queensland.

In this edition of *IE*, Abang discusses how her childhood experiences helped build hope and resilience to endure years of hardship (page 6).

Attracting and retaining teachers is vital to addressing staff shortages. Our feature on early career teachers explores what new members of the profession need to thrive (page 12).

A new education hub at Charles Darwin University, meanwhile, aims to support the next generation of First Nations teachers and educators (page 14).

Australian students are among the world's biggest users of digital devices. But concerns about declining academic results have prompted schools to switch off devices to reduce distractions in the classroom (page 20).

Our feature on handwriting investigates how swapping technology for pen and paper can enhance learning (page 16).

However, technology is a powerful tool for learning. Two IEU members explain how artificial intelligence can support teachers by assisting with administrative tasks and freeing them to focus on teaching (page 34).

We also meet history professor Anna Clark, whose innovative podcasts for primary students are designed to engage young listeners (page 28).

A year after Australia's social media ban for under-16's was implemented, we explore new research that suggests moderate social media use can be beneficial for children (page 22).

Finally, we join members for a day of "Wild Learning" at the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch environment conference at Taronga Zoo, discovering practical teaching strategies while enjoying close encounters with creatures great and small (page 30).

Carol Matthews
Secretary
IEUA NSW/ACT Branch

AUS WIDE

Australian Capital Territory

Teachers demand to be consulted on new assessment procedures

ACT senior secondary teachers are raising serious concerns about new requirements imposed by the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (BSSS) to upload and publish assessment tasks, marking schemes and answer keys.

Members warn that publishing complete assessment packages will prevent materials being reused, requiring teachers to develop new tasks each year.

Concerns have also been raised about academic integrity, intellectual property, purchased examinations and the substantial time required to manually upload materials.

Equally concerning is the absence of any meaningful avenue for teachers to provide feedback. The IEU invited the BSSS to send a representative to the next meeting of the Monaro Sub Branch in Term 4.

The invitation was declined, with the BSSS referring teachers to existing communication channels that appear focused on distributing information rather than hearing concerns.

These concerns are not about resisting transparency. They reflect the time, professional judgement and care required to produce fair and rigorous assessments.

The IEU is now gathering evidence from members across sectors. Teachers must have a genuine opportunity to shape decisions that significantly affect their workload, professional practice and students.

New South Wales

Union demands full transparency on school funding

Union members are deeply concerned by revelations that public funding for NSW Catholic schools may have been wrongfully spent on Liberal party branch stacking.

The NSW Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC) is investigating allegations that Catholic Schools NSW made illegal political donations to the NSW Liberal party at the behest of its former chief executive Dallas McInerney.

McInerney was sacked in August after what *The Sydney Morning Herald* described as "his damaging appearance in the witness box".

IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews said union members supported full transparency in the use of public funds by non-government schools.

"IEU members would be deeply concerned if any public funding for non-government schools has been diverted from its intended purpose," she said.

The ICAC heard evidence that up to $265,000 in Catholic Schools NSW funding may have been diverted to a conservative Liberal factional group known as the Reformers via two consultancy arrangements.

It also heard evidence that members of the Reformers employed by Catholic Schools NSW recruited and renewed members to the Liberal party during work time.

Matthews said public funding for non-government schools should be used to improve academic outcomes and enhance the learning experience for students.

"Regardless of the findings of ICAC in this matter, there should be greater scrutiny of bodies such as Catholic Schools NSW, which receive public funding on behalf of non-government schools," she said.

Northern Territory

Unions unite against attacks on Teacher Registration Board

NT teachers are campaigning against proposed changes to teacher registration ahead of the *Education Standards and Registration Board Bill 2026* returning to parliament in October.

The bill would merge the existing Teacher Registration Board and Board of Studies into a single body made up of seven ministerial appointees.

Concerns have been raised that the changes would reduce independent oversight of the profession by removing guaranteed seats for representatives of teachers, principals, parents – including unions.

IEU-QNT Branch Secretary Terry Burke said the removal of legislated representation for unions means teachers can be excluded from the board of an organisation funded by their own registration fees.

"The government has not adequately explained what was wrong with the existing two-board structure, where seats are provided to teachers', principals' and parents' representatives alongside other stakeholders," Burke said. "This is a plan with no purpose other than weakening a system that does not need fixing."

IEU-QNT is encouraging members and supporters to continue advocating for the protection of professional standards across NT schools ahead of a vote on the bill.

Queensland

Collective bargaining gains momentum across schools

IEU members across several sectors are currently negotiating replacement collective agreements, seeking improved pay and working conditions for teachers and school officers.

In late August, our union met with Queensland Anglican School employers for the first Single Bargaining Unit (SBU) meeting, where employee representatives formally tabled a log of claims.

Key priorities include fair pay and conditions, action on unsustainable workloads, improved work-life balance, contemporary recognition of promotional positions and stronger consultation processes. At the time of writing, employer representatives had not yet presented their claims.

Meanwhile, Brisbane Grammar School reached an in-principle agreement that will see classroom teachers among the highest paid in Queensland. From 1 January 2028, graduate teachers will be paid salaries of $104,934 and experienced classroom teachers will earn $146,238 per year.

The proposed agreement also delivers improved workplace protections through enhanced consultation and dispute resolution processes, superannuation contributions of up to 14%, reproductive health leave, expanded compassionate leave and recognition of IEU workplace delegate rights.

Collective bargaining negotiations with Catholic employers are focused on tackling workload pressures, securing fair and competitive wages, strengthening workplace rights and recognising specialist and leadership roles.

South Australia

Members take industrial action to demand a better pay deal

Members at 17 Catholic schools took industrial action in August and September against their employer, campaigning for better pay, workloads and conditions.

Members at other Catholic schools are also applying for protected industrial action and will join those 17 schools in Term 4.

At Cardijn College in Adelaide's southern suburbs, more than 80 teachers and support staff stopped work for a full day.

IEU members at other Catholic schools also took industrial action, including not attending meetings and refusing yard duty and after-school events.

The industrial action was covered extensively on ABC 891 Adelaide and local newspaper *The Advertiser*.

IEU (SA) Branch Secretary Tim Oosterbaan said teachers were "looking at a broader stop-work action", with hundreds of teachers at 17 schools threatening a coordinated strike as early as October.

"Just voting something down doesn't get a better offer," he told *The Advertiser*. "Make the offer better and we won't have to take industrial action."

IEU members want an annual 6% pay increase over three years, but Catholic Education South Australia is offering annual pay rises of only 3% along with a one-off upfront cash payment.

Members at Catholic schools are receiving strong support for their campaign from parents and colleagues at other schools.

Tasmania

Holding employers to account on staff safety

Increasing reports of student harassment of staff in Tasmanian schools are deeply concerning.

But the actions of one sub branch show that when members unite behind clear demands, positive outcomes can be achieved.

Following incidents of student abuse, the sub branch raised concerns about psychosocial hazards arising from cyberbullying.

Members reported incidents and near misses, including potential vicarious trauma. Affected staff were encouraged to make complaints and access the EAP or workers' compensation.

The IEU met with the employer to discuss its positive duty to prevent psychosocial hazards and consult staff about managing and preventing them. The sub branch made clear it would follow up on progress.

The employer responded with hazard assessments, online monitoring, eSafety Commissioner support, student education, greater parent engagement and stronger action against unsafe behaviour.

The school subsequently wrote to parents outlining behavioural expectations and its commitment to staff safety.

This is an example of what collective action can achieve and a model other IEU members can consider when confronting threats to staff safety.

Victoria

Building pressure for a strong agreement

Members in Victorian Catholic education continue to push for a Single Interest Authorisation (SIA) to secure an agreement that delivers the best possible outcome on pay and conditions.

The SIA is a tool to increase pressure on employers and give members greater collective bargaining power. It is not the goal in itself – a strong agreement is.

The Fair Work Commission will determine the SIA application, and members will continue to build pressure by helping gather as many signatures supporting the SIA campaign as possible.

The recent Victorian government schools settlement has strengthened the benchmark for Catholic education employees.

But employers have proposed changes that would weaken important conditions, including professional time, overtime and time-in-lieu protections, flexible work arrangements and other workload safeguards.

This is why the Victorian branch is seeking petitions of support for an SIA – from non-members as well as members.

It is essential that we hold the line to ensure the eventual agreement reflects workload necessities as well as wage parity.

Western Australia

Delegate conference builds skills and networks

The IEU WA branch in August held its first ever paid delegates conference and development day, bringing together union delegates from across WA to strengthen their knowledge, skills and networks in support of members and workplaces.

Delegates also had the opportunity to farewell outgoing ACTU Secretary Sally McManus.

The event emphasised the role delegates play as workplace representatives, advocates and leaders in the union movement.

Delegates heard from a range of speakers, including McManus, IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes and Assistant Federal Secretary Veronica Yewdall.

Presentations covered federal advocacy on professional issues, the WA union movement, psychosocial hazards in the workplace, and employee rights and remedies.

The conference provided insights into industrial and professional issues, strengthening delegates' understanding of their role and fostering connections across the union and education community.

We thank our committed IEU delegates for attending, along with our guest speakers. We look forward to an even bigger and better delegates conference in the future.



Life lessons

The challenges that made Abang Anade Othow

From child refugee to fashion model and teacher, Abang Anade Othow has had an extraordinary life, writes Andrew Taylor.

Refugee. Fashion model. Mother. Teacher. Advocate. Author.

Abang Anade Othow is not exaggerating when she compares her life to a roller coaster.

An idyllic childhood in Juba in South Sudan was brutally disrupted by war, forcing Othow to flee to Ethiopia and later Kenya where she eked out a precarious living in refugee camps.

In her memoir *Buckets of Hope,* Othow describes life in a refugee camp as "harsh, fragile and overwhelming".

"Privacy did not exist. Comfort did not exist," she writes. "Nights were long, with the distant sounds of crying children, coughing elders and the occasional sharp command of a soldier."

Yet the dramatic upheavals in her childhood contained valuable life lessons that helped Othow to navigate loss, displacement and trauma.

"My father did a really good job teaching me about being flexible and adaptable from a young age," she says.

"It has really helped me because my life has been very unpredictable."

Overcoming adversity

Buckets of Hope is both the title of Othow's engrossing memoir and a guide to overcoming adversity inspired by her childhood experiences.

Recalling the brightly coloured buckets used by her family to carry food and water, Othow would imagine they represented a vital part of life – yellow for joy and gratitude, green for growth and generosity, red for survival and intuition, black for resilience and resolve.

A blue bucket symbolised the flow and adaptability taught by her father Paul, a prominent Sudanese academic and government minister who was assassinated when she was 14 years old.

"These colours kept me alive, even when the brutal world around me was turning to ash," she writes.







Abang Anade Othow has travelled around Australia to speak about her experiences as a child refugee and how she overcame adversity.

"One thing I always teach my students: there is so much harm and trauma in the world, we must also learn to notice the joy and gratitude that can so easily be overshadowed."

Othow held onto her imaginary buckets after she landed in Australia at the age of 17.

"When I arrived in Australia and began modelling and travelling around the world, I realised that I shouldn't throw them away," she says.

Yet Othow was surprised her method of coping would interest anyone.

"It was really born from a fear of forgetting the beautiful memories of my childhood and only remembering the horrors," she says.

"I just wanted something else, so I looked for beauty.

"And it was such a shock to me to realise that so many people were interested in buckets of hope."

Joyous memories

After decades of war, Othow's homeland, now South Sudan, voted for independence from Sudan in 2011.

However, both countries are still experiencing armed conflict, which has led to the mass displacement of millions of people in the past few years.

Yet Othow's earliest memories of her hometown of Juba, now the capital of South Sudan, are joyous.

Near the banks of the White Nile, she lived in a close-knit community where food, family, music and storytelling were paramount.

In the opening chapter of *Buckets of Hope*, Othow describes her homeland as "saturated with songs, mango trees and 64 tribal languages intertwined like beads on a woman's neck".

Othow says it was a "blessing to be born in such a beautiful place" even as war cast a dark shadow.

"I have really worked intentionally to have memories of joy and gratitude because without that, we lose our humanity," she says.

"One thing I always teach my students: there is so much harm and trauma in the world, we must also learn to notice the joy and gratitude that can so easily be overshadowed."

Father figure

Othow's father Paul looms large in her memoir, a man from humble beginnings whose talent and hard work led him to the upper echelons of politics. But his success arguably came at the expense of his family.

A painful experience recounted in the memoir occurs when a young Othow was taken by her mother to Khartoum for treatment for malaria. They discover Paul, who moved to the Sudanese capital when he became a government minister, has another wife.

Othow's mother leaves Khartoum, beginning a separation from her daughter that would last 17 years – until they were reunited in Australia.

Othow had always thought of her father as a hero but, she says, "as I began to write, it became quite clear to me the complexity of his character".

She began to question whether he thought about the consequences of his actions on his family, including his political activism and polygamous marriage.

"As I kept writing, I began to have empathy for my mum," she says. "Before I just felt like I didn't have a connection with her. I just felt obligation.

"What I've actually learned also is that you can hold two conflicting views about somebody, and it's never just one way or the other."

Coming to Australia

The period following her father's death is one of the most heart-wrenching in Othow's memoir.

Life with her stepmother was increasingly harsh as the beatings and humiliations culminate in a violent confrontation involving fists and a knife.



Abang Anade Othow cooked dokwa, a South Sudanese dish made with lamb, spinach and peanuts, on an episode of The Cook Up with Adam Liaw *on SBS.*

"The blade caught my neck, not cleanly but enough to leave a burning line that marks me to this day," she writes.

Othow was taken in by relatives, but her life did not return to normal.

Instead, she was moved to Kakuma refugee camp where she lived a precarious life for four years.

"It became quite clear very early that I didn't have control over the bombings," she says.

"I didn't have control over the government or the rebels. I didn't even have control over my own body in some ways. But what I had control over was my mind."

She was eventually issued a humanitarian visa to Australia, arriving in Sydney during the 2000 Olympic Games, just before her 18th birthday.

Othow says she walked everywhere, marvelling at the beauty and safety of the city.

"I was in the most beautiful part of the world, and I just felt how could my heart hold on to this?" she says.

"I'd walk to the beach and get myself an ice cream. I just couldn't believe that I was in a place where I could walk down the road and there was nothing that would happen to me."

Othow's life took another dramatic turn not long after when a stranger suggested she enter a modelling competition.

In Africa, Othow says she was mocked for being slim.

"It was variously blamed on athletics – I'd done track and field sports in Nairobi – or on 'too much thinking'," she writes.

It was not long before she was signed to a modelling agency and travelling to New York for fashion shows.

Modelling is just one of many chapters in Othow's roller coaster of a life, alongside mother, refugee advocate and teacher.

The gift of teaching

Othow traces her love of learning to Nairobi where the family fled in 1992 after conflict flared yet again in Sudan.

It was in the Kenyan capital that she first entered a school as an 11-year-old placed in first grade with six-year-olds.

She learned Swahili and English and soon advanced to Grade 5.

"When I was first exposed to education, it was so illuminating and so transformative," she says.

"It just hit me that my life did not have to be reduced to being a refugee.

"Education opened the possibility of other worlds, other people's stories and other people's lives."

Years later, Othow taught English and geography in NSW and Queensland after winning a scholarship to undertake a Masters degree in education.

She also worked for the NSW Department of Education running mentoring programs for students who were struggling at school.

Othow says teaching was challenging but also the "most unexpected gift of my life".

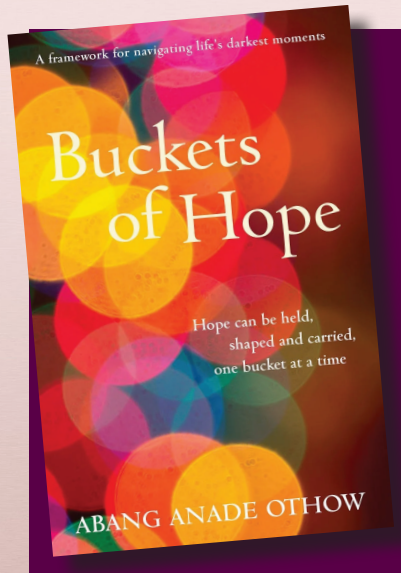
In *Buckets of Hope*, she says teaching opened up a world beyond survival.

"It secured my wandering spirit to something generative, to young people who carried both wounds and wild hope," she writes.

"Every time I watch one of them succeed, I feel pride and excitement."

More information

bucketsofhope.com.au



WIN A COPY

Buckets of Hope
by Abang Anade Othow

We have two copies of Abang Anade Othow's book to give away.

Separated from her family when conflict engulfed Sudan, Abang Anade Othow's childhood was marred by displacement, death and trauma.

But a memory of the colourful buckets her family used to carry formed the basis of a guide that sustained her through years of hardship.

Othow's memoir *Buckets of Hope* details her extraordinary journey from refugee camps in Africa to becoming a fashion model and later a teacher who worked throughout NSW and Queensland.

To enter, email by Thursday 10 December to giveaways@ieu.asn.au, with the book's title in the subject line. Include your name, postal address and membership number in the body of the email.

New education agency

Teacher voice vital for national body

Teachers must be at the heart of the proposed new national education agency, writes Will Brodie.

A reform of federal education agencies offers a chance to ensure that teachers have a central role in shaping policy.

The federal government last year proposed to consolidate four education bodies into the new Teaching and Learning Commission.

The proposed national body would bring together the work of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and Education Services Australia (ESA).

The commission is intended to improve coordination across curriculum, teaching, assessment, research and reporting, helping governments implement national school reforms while reducing duplication.

Consultation welcome

Under successive federal Coalition governments, education unions had little formal input into key national education agencies.

Over time, teachers faced growing compliance demands, ranging from the documentation required for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability (NCCD) to expanding accreditation and reporting requirements.

Many of these initiatives had worthwhile aims, but were too often developed without sufficient teacher input, adding unnecessary workload.

The IEU has long argued that teachers must help shape reforms before they reach the classroom.

Thankfully, the federal Labor government has taken a different approach to its Coalition predecessors.

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes and Assistant Federal Secretary Veronica Yewdall are helping to shape the new commission through a working group.

"The government has been very inclusive and consultative in its approach," Hayes says.

Reduce workloads

Hayes says the commission could help reduce unnecessary administrative work for teachers and school leaders.

"It can help reduce duplication of compliance and administrative tasks currently imposed on teachers and school leaders," he says.

"The voice of the profession must be central to the work of the new Teaching and Learning Commission, if it is ultimately agreed by education ministers.

"Education unions must be involved in whatever a future Teaching and Learning Commission structure looks like, with governance or board positions allocated to both the IEU and Australian Education Union given our vastly different sectors."

The federal government has allocated $5.6 million to continue developing the proposal.

Teacher voice crucial

Hayes says the proposed commission is "a critical opportunity to restore teacher voice to the heart of the education system".

Any new authority must be built in genuine partnership with the profession, he says.

"Our school leaders, teachers and school communities strive every day to deliver the highest quality education. They must, in turn, be supported by the highest quality resources and expertise from government.

"To achieve better outcomes for students, these agencies must work in genuine partnership with the teaching profession."

Hayes says the proposed commission should be guided by transparency, educational expertise and respect for the profession rather than political agendas.

As with any machinery-of-government change, merging agencies can create uncertainty for employees.

The IEU has called for extensive consultation with staff and unions across existing agencies to minimise job insecurity and other adverse impacts.

"The government's plan is an opportunity to repair and rebuild an education system grounded in teacher voice and professional expertise," Hayes says.

> "The government's plan is an opportunity to repair and rebuild an education system grounded in teacher voice and professional expertise."



Under surveillance

Protecting your right to privacy

Public debate about teachers often extends beyond what happens in the classroom, writes teacher and IEU member Jessica Prouten.

Federal politicians in September accused teachers of "pushing agendas", illustrating the expectations placed on teachers to separate personal beliefs from their professional role.

That expectation is not unreasonable: teachers hold positions of considerable influence and have clear responsibilities towards the young people they teach.

But where does that professional responsibility end?

The question becomes particularly complicated online. Commentary about teachers' use of social media, including from podcaster Abbie Chatfield, raise concerns about student privacy and what teachers share from their classrooms.

Yet these debates have extended to questions about whether teachers should maintain public profiles, use pseudonyms or make their private lives visible.

Under surveillance

These debates reveal a curious tension.

Teachers are expected to keep their personal views out of the classroom, yet what they say and do outside school can also be scrutinised by students, parents, colleagues and employers.

This tension sits at the centre of my doctoral research involving 125 teachers in Australia.

Of the respondents to my survey, 52 identified that they had experienced or observed surveillance online, while 48 indicated they had not.

Importantly, responses elsewhere in the survey suggested that the distinction was not always straightforward.

Some teachers who did not identify themselves as having experienced surveillance nevertheless described behaviours shaped by the possibility of being watched, meaning this statistic becomes 88 to 12.

Teachers also recognise that there are different groups conducting surveillance, with different consequences: students, parents, the broader community, colleagues and employers.

Generally, though, teachers' experiences of surveillance are linked to negative emotions.



Teachers have lives beyond their classrooms and a right to participate publicly in them.

Emotional labour

Teachers have good reason to feel anxious. Survey respondents, academic literature and the media all provide examples of teachers who have faced disciplinary action for what they post online.

The survey included responses from people who had lost their job, been blocked from promotion or faced complaints from parents or students.

A much larger proportion have observed consequences happening to others or heard about them and shared their stories.

This forms part of what I describe as a "whispering gallery" of teachers through which stories are shared to help others avoid similar consequences.

This contributes to the emotional labour of being a teacher.

Emotional labour is the effort it takes to regulate emotions. Whether it be putting on a happy face when teaching Year 9 in the last period of the day or not getting angry when a student is disruptive, teaching is a profession that requires emotional regulation and labour.

This labour spills over into our social media interactions. It might mean not posting about the terrible day we had or not replying to a troll online because this might be observed by the community, a student or reported in the media.

Alternatively, it might be the overthinking that follows a post we made, and the anxiety that it might be misinterpreted. All this requires emotional labour on the part of teachers.

Becoming less visible

To assuage their worries, many of the respondents to my survey are implementing 'rules' about what they post, who they are friends with and how they interact on social media.

Some of the respondents only present professionally online: "I'm always a teacher."

Others only post about personal things, completely hiding the fact that they are a teacher. And many sit somewhere in the middle.

All respondents have developed a way of using social media that they perceive as being "safe" for them.

In some ways, this reflects a solution Chatfield proposed: keep profiles private; and use a pseudonym or otherwise make it harder for students to find the teacher's profile or personal or political views.

But this places the responsibility for managing surveillance almost entirely on teachers themselves.

More importantly, it assumes that the appropriate response to being watched is to become less visible.

Cost of withdrawal

There is a cost to that solution. Teachers have lives beyond their classrooms and a right to participate publicly in them.

We join sporting clubs, attend events, advocate for causes, contribute to community organisations, express opinions and appear in other people's photographs.

Making ourselves difficult to find might reduce the risk of professional scrutiny, but it also asks teachers to conceal perfectly ordinary parts of their identities simply because somebody connected to their professional lives might see them.

All of these "rules" reflect some kind of withdrawal. Whether it be complete withdrawal from social media, withdrawal from teacher groups or withdrawal from posting about our lives outside teaching, there is a cost.

When silence feels safer

One of the biggest costs of social media surveillance is teachers withdrawing from participation in civic discourse.

Of the 79 survey responses describing rules that teachers had developed about what they would post online, 36 concerned politics or political expression.

Further detail demonstrates that this is not because teachers are uninterested in these issues, but rather because they are concerned about what expressing those views might mean for them professionally.

Comments from Nationals leader Senator Matt Canavan and Liberal leader Angus Taylor suggesting some teachers pursue political agendas in the classroom show teachers' concerns are warranted.

For teachers employed in the public sector, the question is complicated further by the precedent set in *Comcare v Banerji*, in which the High Court upheld restrictions on the political expression of public servants, including expression made outside work.

This is not to suggest that teachers' online conduct should be beyond professional scrutiny.

There are legitimate boundaries around student privacy, professional conduct and our responsibilities towards young people.

What is less clear in the minds of many of the survey respondents is where those professional boundaries end.

A key issue arises when teachers are expected to keep their political views out of the classroom but also feel unable to express those views as private citizens outside it.

For many, the safest response is simply to say nothing. Yet that silence has consequences beyond the individual teacher.

Teachers bring considerable experience of education, young people and their communities to public debate. When they withdraw because participation feels professionally unsafe, public discourse is poorer for their absence.

Online accountability

Teachers do not leave their professional responsibilities behind when they leave the school gates. There will always be circumstances where conduct outside the classroom becomes a professional concern. The difficulty is determining where that boundary lies.

Being a teacher should not automatically make every aspect of a person's life a professional matter.

Teachers are also citizens, community members, friends and family members, with a right to participate in public life.

There may be no simple solution to this tension. Social media has made teachers more visible, while expectations of the profession make that visibility potentially consequential. But asking teachers to become less visible shifts responsibility back onto individual teachers without resolving the underlying question.

That question requires an ongoing conversation between teachers, unions, employers, regulators and the community about how far professional expectations should reasonably reach. Teachers have a right to privacy, but they also have a right to engage in the public sphere. Becoming a teacher should not mean becoming invisible.

Union support

Contact the IEU if you need advice and resources to help protect your career in the social media age.

Jessica Prouten is completing a Doctor of Education at the Queensland University of Technology.

Early career teachers

Supporting the next generation

Workforce retention starts with the best possible support for early career teachers, writes Will Brodie.

The federal government knows that keeping early career teachers in the profession is crucial to addressing critical staff shortages. It has made teacher retention a national priority in the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan.

The latest data from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership shows that 40 per cent of early career teachers expect to leave the profession before retirement, while a further 41 per cent are unsure whether they will stay.

They are struggling with workload, classroom management challenges, and inadequate induction and mentoring.

To help address these challenges, the Teaching Forward Conference was launched in April by the IEU Victoria Tasmania, the Australian Education Union and RMIT University.

More than 300 pre-service teachers and recent graduates attended, connecting with academics, school leaders and teaching peers.

Voice of the graduate

A first-year graduate teacher at Melbourne's Billanook College, Nalini Kuhanandha, attended the conference's graduate teacher session.

She says it validated the struggles she had during her first semester while offering practical strategies for maintaining work-life balance.

Panellists shared candid stories from their early teaching experiences and offered practical advice such as how to manage conflict between students.

They encouraged new teachers to see challenges as part of the journey and highlighted the importance of support networks, realistic expectations and prioritising wellbeing.

Kuhanandha says schools need to create opportunities for early career teachers to get together "so they can share their relatable successes and struggles".

She says being surrounded by colleagues who are "genuinely nurturing and proactively share tricks of the trade" has been



crucial during her first year of teaching. Sometimes, support can be as simple as seating new staff alongside experienced colleagues in the staffroom.

"No matter how challenging classroom management is for me, everyone at my school has always had my back, which makes all the difference for the mental wellbeing of a graduate teacher," she says.

Teachers' perspectives

Conference organiser Peter Anstee says students need information and guidance provided "in a positive way", acknowledging challenges but instilling "the joy, the surprises, the actual love in teaching".

Anstee, who is also the chairman of the Australian Teachers of Media, says stronger links are needed between schools and teacher education providers.

"There is often a disconnect between what is being taught in schools and what is taught in universities," he says.

"This can cause problems for pre-service teachers when they are on placement as they are often getting conflicting advice."

Anstee says new teachers are not always paired with mentors who meet their needs. He advocates a "mentor club", giving graduates access to teachers with different expertise while reducing the burden on individual mentors.

Australian Catholic University senior lecturer in education Catherine Reid says teacher autonomy is important from the start.

"To develop positive classroom environments and relationships, it is crucial that beginning – and all – teachers enable their students to co-develop and take ownership of class guidelines for behaviour, collaboration and mutual respect," she says.

"And even how the classroom space is set up for effective learning.

"Establishing positive classroom relationships, behaviour and learning spaces is the foundation of effective learning across the curriculum."

Reid encourages beginning teachers to maintain their ideals and seek opportunities to enact positive change.

Coping with classroom demands

Former teacher and course chair for the Bachelor of Education at Victoria University, David Clements, encourages students to question fundamental assumptions about learning and teaching to find sustainable ways to cope with classroom demands.

His questions at the conference included:

- Does teaching cause learning?
- Is education necessary?
- How do we learn?

Clements says many teaching students are eager to engage with broader questions because they have been trained in "a very instrumentalist, outcomes-focused teacher education environment where the focus is primarily on lesson planning templates, differentiation strategies, assessment rubrics, and 'what works' evidence-based interventions".

"By contrast, some students are convinced that education is much more than this and that it includes developing students into good, virtuous, moral or critically thinking democratic citizens," he says.

Australian Catholic University senior lecturer Jonathon Sargeant says beginning teachers are often told to 'get behaviour under control first' before considering relationships, voice, or participation.

"In reality, these things are deeply connected," he says. "Effective classroom management is not about control alone.

"It is about creating predictable, respectful environments where students feel safe, heard, and able to participate.

Sargeant says the voice of students and children's rights can be embedded through everyday practices such as offering meaningful choices, explaining the purpose of learning tasks and inviting student feedback.

"They often strengthen engagement, reduce behavioural disruption, and improve learning outcomes," he says.

"When students feel respected and included in decisions affecting their learning and wellbeing, classrooms become more inclusive, safer, and more effective places for everyone."

Role of unions

Anstee says education unions "have never been more important", offering graduates resources, professional support and opportunities to develop.

Clements says unions "remind us that teaching isn't a solitary vocation".

"A strong union helps protect the space for teachers to exercise professional judgement rather than becoming mere deliverers of prescribed outcomes," he says.

IEU-QNT research officer Adele Schmidt says her branch's mentoring program assists beginning teachers who cannot access the guidance they need in their workplace.

Mentors receive formal training, and their experience can support their own career progression to leadership positions or Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) certification.

Schmidt says the program is "very much driven by members".

"We now have a number of mentors who were once mentees, who view this as a way to bring their experience back and further consolidate relationships between different cohorts of members," she says.

Schmidt says access to quality mentoring and a sense of being genuinely supported during the early years of teaching is a "key predictor" of longevity and engagement.



"A strong union helps protect the space for teachers to exercise professional judgement rather than becoming mere deliverers of prescribed outcomes."

First Nations people
Building a stronger workforce

A new education hub has been launched to support the next generation of First Nations teachers and educators, writes Paige Furner.

First Nations teachers are significantly underrepresented in the NT, with only 4.6 per cent of registered teachers identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander compared to 39 per cent of NT students.

Throughout Australia, just 1.3 per cent of the total teaching workforce identify as First Nations, compared to six per cent of students, according to the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER).

A new initiative at Charles Darwin University (CDU) is aiming to change that.

Opened in December 2025, the First Nations Training and Teacher Education Hub is designed to grow and strengthen First Nations education across the NT.

The hub works with First Nations students, teachers, educators, schools, communities and government partners to strengthen the entire education workforce.

It aims to develop First Nations education professionals at every stage of their career, and provide wraparound support to assistant teachers, language and culture educators, pre-service teachers, qualified teachers and existing education leaders.

New pathway into teaching

One of the hub's key initiatives is a first-of-its-kind associate degree in First Nations Cultural and Language Education.

The new two-year degree was created in close collaboration with First Nations Elders, educators and communities to address significant gaps in the qualification system.

For First Nations educators with experience working in language, culture and community contexts, the degree provides a pathway to have that knowledge and practical experience recognised within a formal qualification.

CDU senior lecturer in education and hub director Larissa Pickalla says the degree brings together education, linguistics, Indigenous knowledge and the creative arts.

"It develops students' capability to design and deliver language and culture programs, work in culturally responsive learning environments and connect community knowledge with education and curriculum requirements," she says.

"Before this degree was built, there was nothing for us to build our capacity within the Western qualification framework that recognises the strengths we have as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to be able to formally teach our culture, language and story."

Strengths-based approach

The course is offered as an undergraduate associate degree. It is recognised at Level 6 or 7 of the Australian Qualifications Framework and is structured around two key streams.

The first stream, First Nations language and culture education, aims to establish a pathway to a Bachelor of Education (Secondary).

The second stream focuses on early childhood and primary education, preparing students to progress to a Bachelor of Education in either of these specialisations.

The aim of the course is to recognise the strengths that students already bring and to support the development of their professional capabilities.

It also creates opportunities for cultural authority, community knowledge, curriculum, and teaching practice to come together in authentic, real-world contexts.

"Students can enter at different points, gain qualifications along the way and continue towards a teaching degree," Pickalla says.

"We take a strengths-based approach that recognises what they already know and do, while supporting them to build a formal qualification around that expertise."

The hub provides flexible entry points, supported online learning, face-to-face intensives, recognition of prior learning and professional experience, and ongoing academic and student support.

Representation matters

Teachers play an important role in shaping how students see themselves, their communities and their place in the education system.

Pickalla says the hub matters because representation matters.

"When First Nations children see educators who share their culture, language and experiences, they can see that they belong in education and that education belongs to them," she says.

"The hub has already demonstrated strong demand, with 87 First Nations people currently participating across the two streams."

Feedback from students so far has been positive.

Pickalla says they can see themselves, their knowledge and their communities reflected in the learning.

"Students are telling us this is different from being asked to fit into a university system that does not recognise their lives or strengths," she says.

More investment needed

The launch of the hub is an opportunity to connect aspiring teachers, universities, schools, communities and First Nations organisations, by creating accessible, culturally safe and relevant pathways.

For teachers and educators, this system is more than a qualification.

Pickalla says it is about redesigning education systems so First Nations people can access quality initial teacher education, study on Country, participate, belong and succeed without having to leave their identity, language, family or community at the door.

"This is our heart work," she says. "Every First Nations educator we support has the potential to influence students, families, schools and communities for generations."





First Nations Training and Teacher Education Hub director Larissa Pickalla says the centre aims to develop First Nations education professionals throughout their careers.



> "Our union strongly supports the delivery of First Nations language and culture programs in schools and wants to ensure viable career pathways for staff undertaking this work."

Pickalla says growing and sustaining the First Nations teaching workforce is a shared national responsibility.

"Short-term, project-based funding cannot solve a workforce challenge that has developed over generations," she says.

"This work should not sit with one university or government alone – the aspiration, capability and workforce already exist.

"What is needed now is sustained investment from state, territory and Commonwealth governments to build the systems around people and enable work to continue, grow and reach more communities across Australia."

Closing the industrial gap

IEU-QNT Branch Secretary Terry Burke says our union welcomes the launch of the hub, which fulfils an important role in supporting viable career pathways and professional recognition for First Nations education workers.

"Aspects of critical work performed by First Nations teachers and other school staff have gone unrecognised for too long," he says.

"Our union strongly supports the delivery of First Nations language and culture programs in schools and wants to ensure viable career pathways for staff undertaking this work."

Burke agreed with Pickalla's comments that growing the First Nations education workforce and improving reconciliation in schools was a shared national responsibility.

"Unions have a key role to play in ensuring that the contributions of First Nations education workers are recognised through appropriate, professional pay and conditions, which reflect their crucial contribution to students' understanding of Australia's rich and diverse histories and cultures," he says.

It is why IEU-QNT continues its Close the Industrial Gap campaign, which involves collaborating with other unions and education stakeholders to create landmark industrial guidelines establishing just and fair benchmarks for the employment of First Nations education workers.

Such measures are essential to ensure that education systems recognise broader criteria of 'success' that reflect First Nations' frames of reference rather than expecting First Nations peoples to conform to norms derived from colonial constructs.

Additionally, the IEU-QNT and Queensland Teachers' Union continue to advocate to the Queensland College of Teachers for a unique, prestigious, and fit-for-purpose system for the professional recognition of these workers instead of Permission to Teach, which is commonly used.

More information

- Learn more about CDU's First Nations Training and Teacher Education Hub: bit.ly/468cCMV
- Read the landmark industrial guidelines: bit.ly/4qu6wQj

Write stuff

The pen is mightier than the screen

Schools are switching off devices and asking students to use pen and paper to enhance their learning, writes Andrew Taylor.

Australian students are among the world's biggest users of laptops and other digital devices in the classroom.

But concerns about the impact of technology on learning have prompted schools such as Our Lady of Mercy Catholic College, Burraneer, in Sydney's south, to reduce reliance on screens in favour of pen and paper.

The school's principal, Christine Harding, says handwriting is vital for students to embed knowledge in their long-term memory and to improve spelling without the use of spell check.

"We need to look carefully at what age students start using screens in class, the impact it has on academic growth, their attention span, social skills and their wellbeing," she told *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Greater use of pen and paper in schools is also being contemplated after the latest round of NAPLAN testing showed a decline in literacy and reading results.

"Some of the writing results today make me wonder whether young people today are spending so much time writing texts, short messages rather than long form paragraphs that it's having an impact on their writing," federal Education Minister Jason Clare said.

Students in NSW public schools will be limited to as little as 15 minutes of screen time a day, the NSW government announced in September.

"We want to make sure that at school it's not the default, that the default is pen and paper," said NSW Education Minister Prue Car.

Improves memory

Handwriting seems like a relic of the past, but 2025 research published in the scientific journal *Life* shows its importance to learning by comparing the effects of handwriting and typing on a person's brain.

Griffith University education professor Beryl Exley says the study found handwriting engaged a greater part of the brain, improving memory retention and learning.

"Typing, though faster and more efficient, tends to encourage verbatim transcription and engages fewer neural circuits, resulting in shallower processing," she says.

"This aligns with wider neuro-imaging research showing that handwriting involves motor planning, visual-spatial integration





Griffith University professor Beryl Exley says handwriting is still vital to learning.

> "Handwriting imposes a pace that encourages people to process ideas rather than simply record them."

and higher order cognition, while typing remains more uniform and repetitive."

Earlier studies show students are better at answering analytical questions if they take notes by hand, and retain information written by hand longer than if typed on a keyboard.

Slow down thinking

Exley resorts to pen and paper when she wants to slow her thoughts, organise ideas or create space for reflection.

"The physical act of forming words helps me regulate the pace of my thinking," she says.

"When I need to share or refine that work, I switch to word processing because it's cleaner, more adaptable and easier to share across virtual spaces."

Exley says slowing down your thoughts by writing changes the quality of thinking.

"Handwriting imposes a pace that encourages people to process ideas rather than simply record them, and that slower rhythm gives the brain time to organise, connect and evaluate information," she says.

"When we type, our fingers often move faster than our thoughts, which makes it easy to capture words without fully engaging with their meaning."

Strengthens learning

Exley says handwriting strengthens learning because it combines visual attention with precise movement.

The physical act of forming letters also develops the fine motor skills and coordination needed to control precise movements.

"These physical acts continuously interact with higher order cognitive processes such as language formulation, working memory and executive planning," Exley says.

"Together, these systems operate in real time to produce legible, fluent written output.

"Continual exposure to these interconnected processes strengthens neural efficiency."

A 2024 study by FR van der Weel and Audrey van der Meer from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology shows that forming letters by hand generates neural connectivity across parts of the brain that are crucial for building and storing new memories.

"The visual tracking of shapes, the feel of the pen, and the controlled motor sequences all work together to anchor information more deeply than typing," Exley says. "Typing relies on repetitive, uniform keystrokes."

CQUniversity adjunct education lecturer Dr Ragnar Purje says the way children learn to write can have a significant impact on the development of thinking skills.

"Handwriting isn't just about neat letters," Purje told *The Educator Online*. "It's a brain-building exercise. When children learn to write by hand using the correct technique, they're wiring their brains for creativity, critical thinking and communication."

Important skill

Exley says handwriting was a "copybook activity" back when her grandmother was a child.

"Whilst it was a precise activity, it wasn't a particularly thoughtful activity," she says.

"Handwriting had its own subheading on the school report card, probably because it was viewed as an indicator of effort, discipline, and readiness for learning."

Despite the use of devices, handwriting is an important skill for students to develop in the Australian Curriculum, which describes how a student develops a fluent, legible handwriting style, beginning with unjoined letters.

"Now the focus is on an efficient mechanical production rather than precise letter formation, uniform slant and disciplined penmanship routines," Exley says.

Impact on teachers

The decline of handwriting has had an impact on classroom practice.

"Without the slower pace and physical engagement of handwriting, students often race through tasks without processing ideas deeply, forcing teachers to spend more time teaching summarisation, organisation and reflection," Exley says.

"Many teachers are now reintroducing handwriting in targeted ways for brainstorming, problem solving and memory-heavy tasks."

Exley says a return to handwriting does not indicate that technology is detrimental to learning.

"Rather, it reflects a recognition that handwriting and digital tools serve different functions in the learning process," she says.

"Contemporary research in neuroscience shows that handwriting activates fine motor, visual, linguistic and memory systems in ways that typing does not, supporting deeper conceptual understanding and long-term retention."

At the same time, Exley says digital technologies offer powerful advantages such as instant feedback, accessibility, collaboration and preparation for a digitally mediated world.

"Excessive digital exposure can fragment attention and reduce information retention," she says.

"Ultimately, effective education requires confidence and competence with handwriting and using technology for writing."

School libraries

Pushing back against role creep

Employers risk student learning and staff wellbeing when they ignore the importance of qualified library staff, writes Ella Doyle.

Library technician Karen Flynn is proud of her work at her Queensland school and attributes part of her love for the job to the role clarity she and her fellow library staff enjoy.

"Each person understands their role, and our team leader gives us the trust and autonomy to do our jobs well," she says.

"That combination of clear responsibilities, independence and collaboration results in a strong team and a smoothly run library that I am incredibly proud to be part of," she says.

Profession at risk

Unfortunately, Flynn's experiences are not the norm for school libraries.

A 2025 global survey of library professionals revealed that two-thirds had concerns about the future of school libraries and the professional status of library staff.

Their fears are well-founded. At the time of writing, the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch was demanding answers from Catholic Schools Maitland-Newcastle after it announced plans to abolish teacher-librarian roles in primary schools.

Flynn attributes these concerns to several causes, including understaffing and inadequate budgets, which are challenges in most schools.

"For libraries, however, the most significant professional issue is often a limited understanding of the specialised roles and responsibilities essential for a library to function effectively as an information centre," she says.

"When school leaders view the library as little more than a repository for books, they can overlook the value that qualified library staff bring to the school."

Flynn says qualified library staff support information literacy, resource access and learning across the whole school community.

"Specialist library staff understand the essential work that happens behind the scenes to support educators and students," she says.

"Much of this work is not immediately visible; when it is done well, services operate so seamlessly that their complexity can easily be overlooked."

Concerning trend

A 2022 report from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) found 47 per cent of library assistants perform tasks normally expected of a library technician, library manager, head of library or librarian – with no additional pay.

Flynn says this is "role creep" – where employees take on responsibilities beyond their formal job requirements without recognition from their employer.

This emerging pattern was the inspiration for Flynn's research paper *Empowering library support staff to prevent role creep in school libraries.*

"A few years into my first library technician role, a teacher aide from a nearby large high school called to ask for advice on using the school's library management system," she says.

"I was shocked to learn that the school had made both its teacher-librarian and library technician positions redundant and placed the teacher aide in charge of the library.

The staff member had received no handover or training, and it is not the only story Flynn has heard.

"What concerns me is not only the unreasonable workload placed on these employees, but also the loss of professional knowledge and information literacy services," she says.

"I have seen devalued libraries become little more than repositories for outdated books.

"Passion for reading is important, but staff without appropriate qualifications may not know the full range of services a modern school library can provide," she says.

Psychosocial risk of role creep

Flynn's research is underscored by Greenberg's theory of organisational justice, which discusses the social responsibility organisations have to their employees.

Further research posits that employees actively discern employer decision-making, and when they perceive fairness in recognition, process, and outcomes, they are more likely to respond with higher performance.

However, a breakdown of organisational justice, such as a perceived disconnect between job expectation and recognition, can potentially develop into a psychosocial hazard.

In Australia, employers are responsible for managing psychosocial hazards, such as poor organisational justice, under the Workplace Health and Safety Code of Practice in the federal *Work Health and Safety Act*, as well as relevant state or territory legislation.

Flynn attributes the breakdown of organisational justice in schools to:

- school management that does not understand differing library roles
- broad or poorly defined job titles
- expectations on term-time staff to cover the work of a teacher-librarian, often due to economic pressure
- extra tasks taken on voluntarily being assumed into regular job expectations.

Consequences for students

A 2020 Australian Council for Educational Research study, reported in *Teacher Magazine*, found literacy levels during years three, five, seven and nine were "significantly associated with the qualification-level of the person who manages the library".

Australian literacy rates are declining, with data from the Grattan Institute showing one in three students unable to read proficiently.

Flynn says this is the most visible and measurable academic consequence of under-resourcing school libraries.

> "Specialist library staff understand the essential work that happens behind the scenes to support educators and students."



Library technician Karen Flynn says qualified library staff and well-resourced libraries are indispensable to student learning.

"What is not so obvious is that frequent readers tend to have greater empathy, a wider worldview [and] are sympathetic to diverse perspectives; [they have] stronger critical thinking skills and better wellbeing outcomes," she says.

"These qualities are essential for the next generation in an increasingly globalised world.

As under-qualified staffing becomes more prevalent in school libraries, Flynn says the focus is shifting towards supervision and duty of care.

"A school may identify literacy as a core priority and devote time to NAPLAN-style reading and comprehension activities," she says.

"Yet leaders do not always connect stronger literacy outcomes with a vibrant, well-resourced school library staffed by professionals, despite empirical evidence supporting the connection."

Pushing back

In a world of information overload and rapidly developing artificial intelligence, Flynn says information literacy is more important than ever.

"Qualified library staff and well-resourced libraries help students evaluate information, conduct effective research and become confident, discerning learners," she says.

Flynn's research suggests several solutions to help address role creep:

- training for school management, human resources and library staff on job responsibilities, library qualifications and salary scales
- increased awareness around job scope, role creep and service reductions
- increased visibility of existing education frameworks from ALIA and the Australian School Library Association
- rejection of role creep by asserting employers' legal obligation to mitigate psychosocial hazards.

Supporting well-resourced libraries

Our union has long recognised the importance of well-resourced libraries to thriving school communities.

IEU-QNT created the Rate your School Library Tool as part of the *2022 Strong Libraries = Strong Schools* campaign.

Chapters are encouraged to use the self-assessment tool to evaluate their school library's staffing, resources and funding.

The outcome of the library assessment can then be used to inform a discussion with school administrators when seeking a commitment to staffing, funding and resourcing consistent with high-quality library services and resources.

Membership matters

Flynn says she has seen the value of union membership and encourages other library staff to join the IEU.

"Government funding is earmarked for schools to employ qualified teacher-librarians, but individual schools have discretion over how that funding is used," she says.

"When qualified library staff are made redundant, support staff may be expected to take on duties beyond their qualifications."

Flynn says role creep can create excessive workloads and associated psychosocial hazards.

"Decisions that shift specialised responsibilities onto untrained or underqualified employees constitute poor organisational justice," she says.

"By joining the IEU and organising collectively, library staff can advocate for appropriate staffing, clearer role boundaries and stronger protections against unsafe work practices."

More information

- Read Flynn's study: bit.ly/3SDjhvC
- Rate your School Library Tool: bit.ly/4xvMVSM



Learning interrupted

Devices should help not hinder teaching

Harnessing technology's benefits in education requires support for teachers and students, writes Will Brodie.

In recent years, schools around Australia have introduced smartphone restrictions to reduce cyberbullying and distractions in class. Now that approach is being extended to other digital devices.

In Victoria, for example, all government secondary schools from next year must include "planned device-free learning time" and schools with a Bring Your Own Device program "must specify a device that costs no more than $980".

These measures reflect concerns about the impact that digital devices have on students' attention, engagement, learning and wellbeing, and highlight the balancing act schools face in ensuring technology supports rather than hinders learning.

Fewer distractions

IEU member Rahul Gill, a secondary teacher at Australian Christian College in Melbourne's outer south-east, has observed "a decrease in distractions and less off-task behaviour, especially during explicit teaching and independent work" since his school introduced a phone ban.

"I have also observed a decline in behavioural incidents and social media-related conflicts, and lower student anxiety," he says.

Gill believes technology should have a defined role in the classroom.

Allowing personal devices, he says, "negates the phone ban to a degree as most things that can be done on a phone can also be done on a laptop".

"I am slowly shifting back to a more traditional pen-and-paper method, especially for the main learning, practice and writing tasks," he says.

"I think we should only use technology when it really helps students learn, and is needed for a specific activity, not just because it is there."

Technology should reduce workload

The IEUA's 2025 submission to the Productivity Commission's *Building a Skilled and Adaptable Workforce* interim report argues that technology should support learning and reduce workload, rather than create more work, distraction or inequality.

It calls for new artificial intelligence (AI) and edtech to be properly tested and supported by professional development. The submission also calls for equity through sustained investment in infrastructure and internet access, particularly in regional, remote and disadvantaged communities.

The union argues that teachers need the time, resources and professional support to determine when technology adds value – and when it does not.

'Swiss army knife'

Psychologist and digital wellbeing expert Jocelyn Brewer says we must "get much more prescriptive and clear about where the risks and benefits actually sit" with student device use.

"A smartphone is a bit like a Swiss army knife: there are tools on it that are genuinely useful depending on the key learning area you're teaching, and there are platforms on it that arrive with distraction built into the design," she says.

"Those are two different things; lumping them together makes it harder to have a useful conversation about either.

> Teachers need the time, resources and professional support to determine when technology adds value – and when it does not.

"The real work is giving students opportunities to participate in online spaces after they've had the lessons that help them understand and drive devices safely and effectively."

Brewer says a ban "can buy back attention" in a lesson, but it "does not teach anything by itself", so schools need to be clear about how they use "the quiet" they have created.

Brewer says it is important to recognise that digital devices "are engineered by very well-resourced teams to capture attention".

"When a 14-year-old loses a battle with that design, it's not a character flaw, and framing it as one tends to shut down the conversation you actually want to have," she says.

Digital diets

Brewer suggests "blending offline and online activities with clear lesson planning and learning intentions", recognising that modern minds "have grown up on very different digital diets to the ones that millennials were raised on".

"Students don't wake up one day and think 'oh, I might self-regulate during maths today'," she says.

Brewer says students require regular opportunities to "rehearse and practise those skills across different contexts".

"We learn through practice, and through feeling safe enough to try things, get them wrong and try again," she says.

"Let students use a device for a task, then ask them what pulled them off course, what they noticed in their body, what they'd do differently next time. That reflection is where the skill actually forms.

Brewer also says the language around excessive screen use is "worth watching".

"Talking about 'good' and 'bad' screen time tends to drive behaviour underground, in much the same way that moralising about food does," she says.

"What we want is students who can name what they're consuming, why, and how it leaves them feeling."



IEU member Rahul Gill says technology should have a limited role in the classroom.

Teachers must be consulted

Associate professor of education at the University of Wollongong Keith Heggart points out that distraction in the classroom is "hardly anything new".

"What is new is the nature of the distraction, and how closely it has become intertwined with tools and devices we use for learning," he says.

Heggart says teachers need to "make careful decisions about how, when and for what purpose technology is used in the classroom – and when you are not intentionally using it, remove it altogether".

Teachers need "a very good 'bullshit meter'" to identify items unlikely to improve learning.

"The technology in and of itself will not improve student learning," he says.

"The careful use of technology by expert teachers might do that – but any use of apps should be carefully managed to fit the context in which the students are learning."

Heggart says because teachers understand what can be managed at schools they "can't be the last people consulted" by governments and employers making decisions about technology in the classroom.

Using AI safely

Senior lecturer in Information Systems at the University of Melbourne Tanya Linden says "one size fits all" policies governing device use "will not work".

For Linden, the bigger challenge is making lessons engaging, particularly for teenagers who are struggling to keep up. Teachers are already overworked and often lack resources to provide individual support.

For some students experiencing difficulties outside the classroom, Linden says devices can be a coping mechanism, so parting with their phone "feels like a catastrophe".

Students also need to learn "how to take AI output mindfully", use it safely and avoid uploading sensitive information. Educating students about AI while restricting social media is challenging, Linden says, but achievable.

Linden suggests tablets, laptops and computers should have only pre-approved apps, with no permission to install others, and social media should be blocked on school networks.

Social media ban
Research backs moderate use

A year after Australia's social media ban for under-16s was implemented, research finds moderate use is good for children, writes Emily Campbell.

While debate rages over whether social media is harmful to children, new research suggests a balanced approach to its use could be beneficial for teenagers.

'Goldilocks scenario'

A team of researchers led by Adelaide University research fellow Dr Ben Singh have found what they describe as a 'sweet spot' for teenagers' use of social media, with patterns of moderate use (up to 12.5 hours per week) linked to more positive wellbeing.

The findings sound like good news for teenagers, but the researchers also say that excessive social media use and abstaining from it are both associated with poorer wellbeing.

Their study, *Social media use and well-being across adolescent development*, analysed data from more than 100,000 Australian children and teenagers in years 4–12 over three years.

It examined how time spent on social media was linked to happiness, life satisfaction, emotional regulation and other key indicators of wellbeing.

"Public debate often frames social media as being harmful to teenagers' wellbeing, but our findings suggest the reality is far more nuanced," Singh says.

"For girls, we found that moderate use of social media was linked to better wellbeing in their middle teenage years (grades 7-9, ages 12-15) and onwards.

"It was the opposite for boys, with those not using social media as they grew older at risk of poorer wellbeing."

For younger children, the researchers found that not using social media had little impact on their wellbeing, noting that children's offline interactions met their social needs.

However, Singh says that by middle adolescence, social media is vital for peer connections, identity expression and belonging, making engagement in this space more important.

"It's a real Goldilocks scenario – not too little and not too much social media is best for teenagers' wellbeing," he says.

Singh says teenagers who report the greatest social media use after school were consistently more likely to experience low wellbeing, reporting higher levels of stress, worry, sadness and difficulty managing emotions.

"Overall, the strongest outcomes were among teenagers who used social media in moderation," he says.

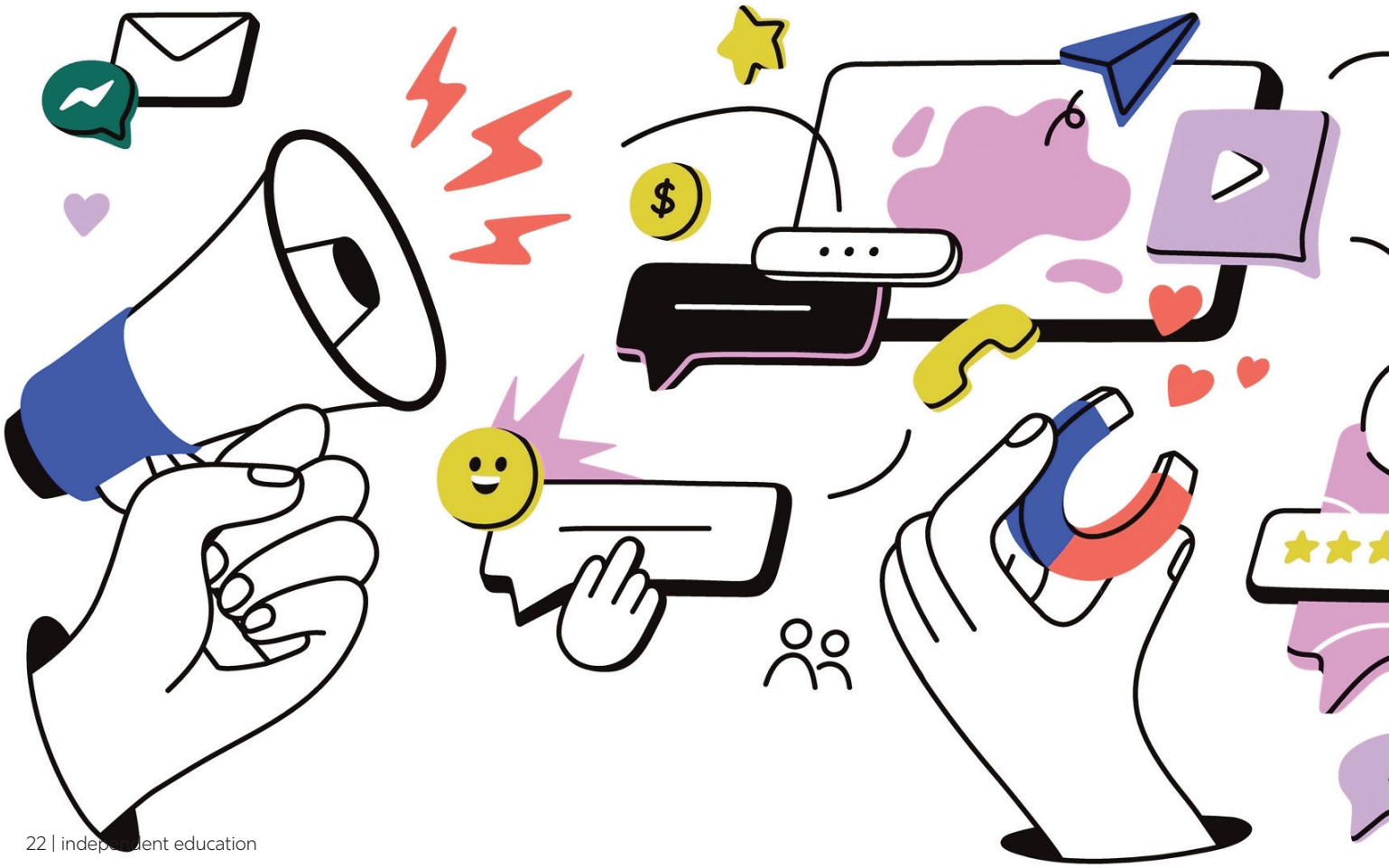
Early impact of ban

Singh's research comes as new data from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner provides insight into the impact of the social media ban.

The eSafety Commissioner's report is based on data collected in March 2026, three months after the social media ban for under-16s took effect in late 2025.

The report is the first wave of findings from a comprehensive two-year longitudinal study tracking more than 4000 Australian children and families.

Alarmingly, it found most under-16s who had social media accounts before commencement were able to retain their existing accounts or create new ones within three months.



Researchers attributed this largely to the failure of social media platforms to implement effective age-assurance measures.

The proportion of under-16s who reported using a social media platform dropped from 85 per cent to 81 per cent at the three-month follow-up.

The proportion of children who reported feeling as though they were missing out by not having social media fell from 42 per cent to 36 per cent.

Most children and parents reported that the age restrictions had not affected them after three months. But a small proportion of children described challenges, including difficulty communicating with friends, feeling less connected to their peers and missing social media.

Others reported positive outcomes, including improved relationships, a greater sense of online safety and reduced pressure to use social media.

Reform takes time

Australia's eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant in July said these early findings suggest the law is beginning to have an effect, but social media platforms were not effectively preventing under-16s from having accounts.

The report did not determine whether any social media platforms have broken the law.

"Our enforcement stance remains firm, and we will continue using every available regulatory tool to gather evidence, hold platforms to account and protect Australian children," Inman Grant said.

"As I have said consistently since the start, complex reform of this nature is unwinding 20 years of social media entrenchment and will therefore take time.

"The impact of the law will not be measured in weeks or months but over generations."

Inman Grant also said it was important to continue open dialogue within families about children's digital engagement and for parents, carers and teachers to use eSafety's online resources.

Harm reduction

Social media has created a range of challenges in schools, including enabling online bullying among students and facilitating the harassment of teachers and staff through technologies such as AI-generated deepfakes.

IEU-QNT Assistant Secretary Nick Sahlqvist says union members would welcome any reduction in harm the ban may facilitate.

"Teachers and school support staff care deeply about students' wellbeing and would welcome a reduction in online bullying and associated harm caused by social media," he says.

"Similarly, some school staff – young women teachers in particular – have been subjected to sexual harassment from students facilitated by social media.

"Regulatory work to stamp out such behaviour must continue.

"The implementation of the social media ban will no doubt bring teething issues and it will take time to observe its broader impact – so it's really a case of 'wait and see'."

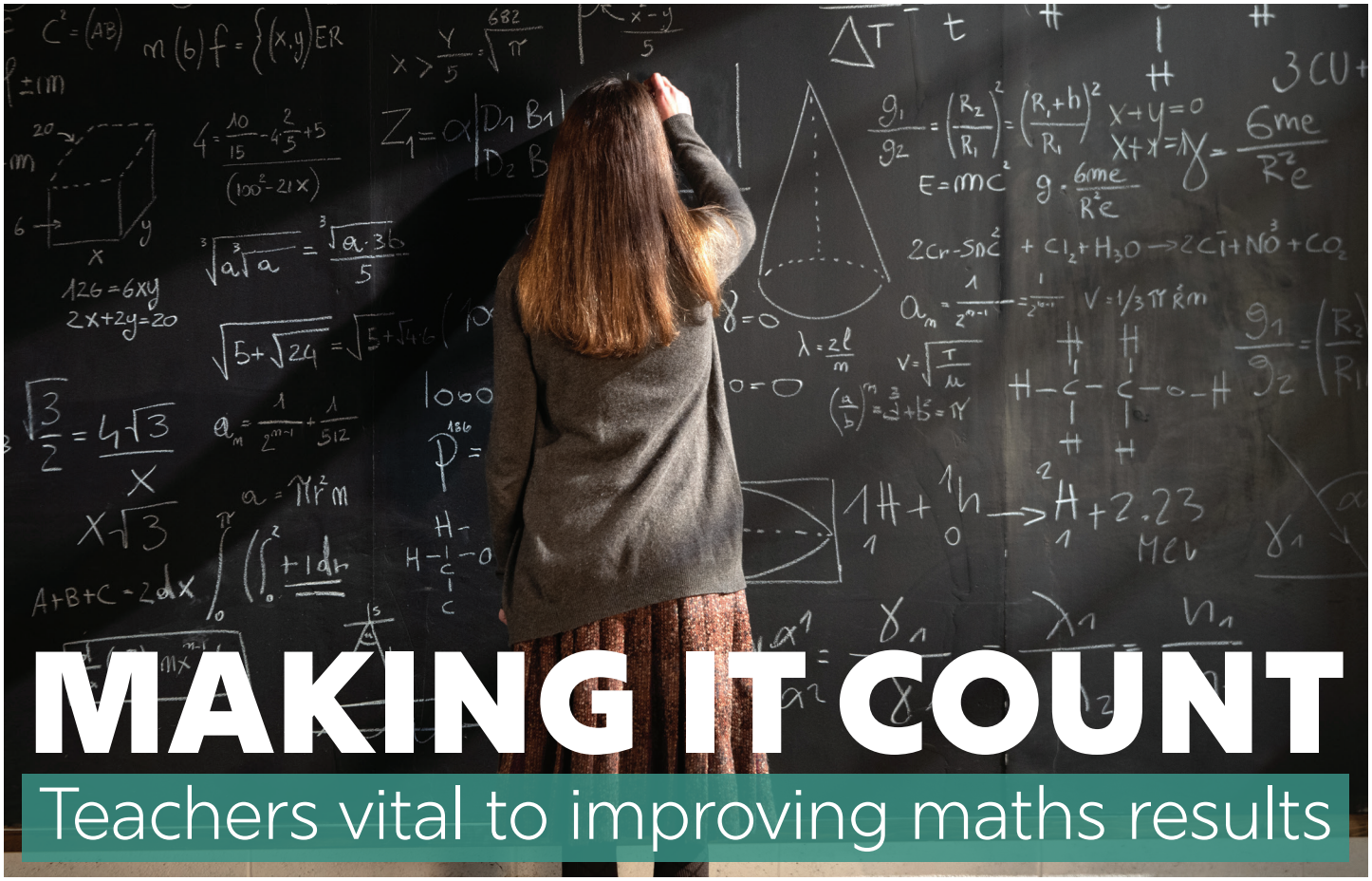
While social media presents complex challenges for schools, IEU members are uniquely positioned to support students in becoming responsible digital citizens and critical consumers of media.

More information

- School staff are not personally responsible for enforcing the social media ban or policing students' use of social media.
- Read more about your rights and responsibilities and what to do if your employer places pressure on you in relation to students' social media use: bit.ly/4wzTgLo
- Youth mental health foundation, Headspace, has tips for starting conversations with a young person about the social media ban: bit.ly/4gDPkVk
- The eSafety Commissioner has published resources about the social media ban for teachers and school staff: bit.ly/3TWjevh
- Kids Helpline has resources and advice for students who are struggling and need extra support: bit.ly/4xahGwn



"It's a real Goldilocks scenario – not too little and not too much social media is best for teenagers' wellbeing."



MAKING IT COUNT

Teachers vital to improving maths results

A new program aims to train teachers to break down mathematical concepts into clear, logical steps to help students struggling with numeracy, writes Andrew Taylor.

The declining performance of Australian students in mathematics has been a longstanding cause for concern.

La Trobe University associate dean of learning and teaching Chrissy Monteleone says NAPLAN results show about one-third of students do not meet expectations for numeracy.

Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment, an international test of 15-year-olds' knowledge and skills conducted every three years, shows a decline in Australian students' performance in maths over the past 20 years.

"It is not that today's students are less capable; it is that evidence-based maths teaching still isn't reaching classrooms consistently enough," Monteleone says.

Reversing this trend is the aim of La Trobe's Science of Mathematics Education Lab, which Monteleone co-directs with University of Winnipeg mathematics professor Anna Stokke.

"We translate the evidence on how children best learn mathematics to make it accessible for teachers," Stokke says.

"We offer master classes and short courses that cover research on things like explicit teaching in mathematics, structured practice, building fluency before complexity and worked examples – and we translate it into practical tools teachers can use."

Stokke, who hosts the *Chalk and Talk podcast,* says the lab offers tips on how to make mathematics instruction interactive and effective: "The aim is to give teachers both an education in the research base and practical advice on how to implement it."

Explicit instruction

Stokke is a proponent of explicit or teacher-led instruction that incorporates clear explanations, worked examples, teacher feedback and plenty of practice.

"It involves teaching maths in manageable steps, focusing on critical content and gradually fading instructional support as students begin to show mastery," she says.

"It means ensuring students are fluent with foundational skills, such as multiplication tables and basic arithmetic operations so that they're better prepared to tackle later mathematics."

Stokke says studies consistently show that explicit instruction is more effective than other forms of maths teaching such as inquiry-based or discovery-based approaches, collaborative problem solving or using open-ended tasks.

"These approaches tend to encourage student exploration with minimal direct instruction from the teacher," she says.

"However, students are not likely to be successful in solving complex problems until they have acquired mathematical knowledge and fluency with procedures."

Stokke says mathematics is extremely hierarchical, "meaning each concept builds on the last".

To learn algebra, students need to be fluent with fractions, and to properly learn fractions students must be fluent with addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

"When students don't receive clear, systematic instruction and when they don't get enough practice, gaps can quickly compound and students fall further behind," she says.

Stokke says inquiry-based methods of teaching may work with students who have acquired foundational maths skills.

"When students are fluent with a topic (for example, if they can add fractions fluently), they may no longer need explicit instruction and can benefit from engaging with more challenging problems," she says.

"But to build fluency in the first place, the majority of students need explicit instruction."

Building teachers' confidence

A 2025 Grattan report found 28 per cent of primary school teachers did not feel confident teaching maths at a Year 6 level.

Research co-authored by Monteleone shows some secondary teachers feel unprepared to teach maths.

"If a teacher isn't confident with the content itself, it's very hard to teach it well," she says. "This is a structural gap in preparation, not a reflection on individual teachers.

> "Teachers need both external support and the time and resources to build their own confidence and practice."

"Even when teachers do know the mathematics, if they haven't been taught effective methods to teach it, they can struggle to be effective in the classroom."

Staff shortages also impact maths teaching, Monteleone says. "Shortages mean more out-of-field teaching, where staff without a strong maths background are asked to teach it, which compounds the confidence issue."

A lack of staff also reduces the time available for collaborative planning and mentoring that helps less experienced or less confident teachers develop their practice, "so the people who'd benefit most from support often get the least of it", she says.

What teachers need

Stokke says maths teachers need to understand their subject beyond the grade level they are teaching to assist them to "know what topics are most important to emphasise so that students will be successful in later mathematics".

Stokke also says a teacher can have strong content knowledge "but not know what effective instruction in maths looks like".

"That's where strong preparation in teacher education programs and evidence-based teacher professional development become extremely important," she says.

Professional learning grounded in evidence and peer observation is vital for teachers – along with coaching in a collaborative and supportive setting.

Well-sequenced, evidence-based curriculum resources are imperative so that teachers aren't building resources from scratch or working from resources that aren't effective, Monteleone says.

Early career teachers require more support through mentoring and protected time for collaborative planning, focusing on mathematics content and teaching techniques.

"Teachers need both external support and the time and resources to build their own confidence and practice," Monteleone says.

Fashion crime: **T-shirt provokes backlash**

Australian fashion label Lioness attracted condemnation earlier this year with its t-shirt bearing the slogan "I'm too pretty to do math".

Women in STEMM Australia co-founder Dr Marguerite Evans-Galea said the t-shirt's slogan was outdated and discouraged young girls from pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine.

"Promoting outdated stereotypes actively discourages girls from gaining the skills they'll need in their future careers," she told *The Age*.

Australia's national science agency CSIRO on social media said: "This t-shirt has us questioning why outdated stereotypes are still making it onto shop floors."

It also posted alternative versions of the t-shirt with slogans including "Keep calm and carry the one" and "Does my IQ look big in this".

Outdated stereotypes

Sydney University senior lecturer in mathematics education Bronwyn Reid O'Connor says the t-shirt attracted criticism for perpetuating harmful stereotypes that maths "isn't for girls".

In *'Too pretty to do math'? Here's the real reason girls aren't choosing to study maths*, Reid O'Connor and Sydney University colleague Ben Zunica outline research that suggests girls receive signals from family and the community that it is OK not to be "a maths person".

"Boys are more likely to have their mathematical potential recognised and encouraged," they wrote in *The Conversation*.

Reid O'Connor says the t-shirt adds to social commentary that maths is not for girls.

"We already know that girls suffer from low confidence in maths, despite similar achievement to boys," she says.

What teachers can do

Teachers play a vital role in countering stereotypes that lead to the maths gender gap.

"By holding high expectations for all students and actively encouraging girls to take on mathematical challenges, teachers can help create a more equitable learning environment," Reid O'Connor says.

"By remaining mindful of unconscious biases in feedback and subject recommendations, they can ensure that ability, not stereotypes, determines students' opportunities."

Reid O'Connor also recommends a new approach to what is valued in maths beyond just speed and accuracy.

"Maths is also about collaborating, persisting through challenges, thinking creatively and solving real problems that matter for real people," she says.

"These are all things that are often meaningful for lots of girls, and it is important we foreground these skills and celebrate their importance."



One of CSIRO's humorous responses to the offending 'I'm too pretty to do math' t-shirt.

Classroom disruption

Teaching students how to behave

Harsh punishments rarely lead to better student behaviour, writes Andrew Taylor.

Erin Leif's interest in classroom behaviour is deeply personal.

Leif, an associate professor in Monash University's School of Educational Psychology and Counselling, says she "never really felt like I belonged at school".

"I struggled academically from an early age, and as I fell further behind, I developed a great deal of anxiety and began avoiding school," she says.

"I wasn't the student disrupting the class. I was the quiet student who withdrew."

Leif's difficulties largely went unnoticed, and at the age of 14 she had dropped out of school.

Happily, her parents found an alternative school where Leif says: "I felt understood, supported and capable of succeeding. That experience changed the trajectory of my life."

Growing complexity

Classrooms are becoming more complex, with teachers and support staff managing diverse learning needs, behavioural challenges and student wellbeing.

Many schools are also grappling with teacher shortages, larger class sizes and limited access to specialist support.

"Large class sizes and staff shortages don't cause challenging behaviour," Leif says.

"But they make it much harder for teachers to do the things we know prevent behaviour difficulties in the first place."

A 2023 Senate inquiry into increasing disruption in Australian classrooms suggested students needed specific lessons in how to behave.

The inquiry heard Australia's classrooms are among the world's most unruly, with a growing proportion of teachers reportedly feeling unsafe at work.

IEU members report spending less time teaching, as they face growing demands to respond to a complex combination of behavioural, cultural, language, medical and learning needs.

"When staff are not provided with adequate support, classroom complexity significantly increases workload pressures and contributes to burnout and ongoing workforce retention challenges," says IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes.

Behaviour education

When students struggle academically, Leif says it often affects their confidence, wellbeing and behaviour.

"Likewise, when students are anxious, disengaged or overwhelmed, learning becomes much harder," she says.

Leif supports inclusive education but says it requires "investment in teacher capability, multidisciplinary support and evidence-based systems that help



> "When staff are not provided with adequate support, classroom complexity significantly increases workload pressures and contributes to burnout and ongoing workforce retention challenges."

schools respond to increasingly complex student needs".

When it comes to classroom disruption, Leif says the emphasis should be on behaviour education – not management.

"We would never expect students to know how to read without explicit teaching, practice and support," she says.

"In the same way, we shouldn't expect them to automatically know how to regulate emotions, solve conflicts, ask for help appropriately or work collaboratively. These are skills that need to be taught."

Low-level disruption

A 2025 survey of more than 700 teachers and support staff in Victoria found they were more concerned about the constant stream of low-level disruption throughout the day, rather than the occasional serious incident.

Teachers also reported incidents involving aggression or violence that affected the safety and wellbeing of staff and students.

But Leif says the yet-to-be-published research suggests the greatest day-to-day strain on teachers comes from ongoing low-level disruptive behaviours.

"Teachers told us that behaviours such as talking out of turn, calling out, refusing instructions, leaving seats, disengaging from learning and interrupting others happen repeatedly across the school day," she says.

These behaviours seem relatively minor but, Leif says, they can have a cumulative impact.

"They interrupt teaching, reduce learning time, make it harder for teachers to maintain lesson momentum, and leave educators feeling mentally exhausted by the end of the day," she says.

Misogyny in school

IEU members have also raised concerns about increasing rates of violence and harassment directed towards female students and staff by mostly male students, including primary school students.

"We shouldn't dismiss sexist comments or behaviours as simply 'kids being kids' or assume that students will grow out of them," Leif says.

"Left unaddressed, these attitudes can become normalised and create learning environments where female students and teachers feel less safe, less respected and less able to participate."

However, Leif does not believe harsh punishments are the solution.

"These are learning issues as much as they are disciplinary issues," she says. "Schools have a critical role in explicitly teaching respectful relationships, empathy, consent, perspective-taking and responsible digital citizenship."

Effective classrooms

Leif says classrooms should have clear expectations that are explicitly taught, predictable routines, engaging instruction, positive teacher-student relationships and consistent acknowledgement of appropriate behaviour.

"Teachers also benefit from using data to identify patterns and understanding why behaviour is occurring before deciding how to respond," she says.

When additional support is needed – small-group social skills instruction or check-in systems – these interventions should become more intensive in a tiered way.

"What tends not to work is relying primarily on punishment after behaviour has occurred," Leif says.

"Consequences certainly have a place, particularly when safety is involved, but consequences alone rarely teach students what they should do instead."

"If we want behaviour to change, we need to teach replacement skills, provide opportunities to practise them and create classroom environments where students can be successful."

Strict discipline

Geelong Grammar was heavily criticised by parents earlier this year after it used isolation to discipline a group of Year 9 boarding students who snuck away to a nearby pub at night.

A brief, supervised break may help a young person calm down, but Leif says there is little evidence that prolonged exclusion or isolation improves behaviour.

"Instead, it can increase distress, damage relationships with trusted adults and reduce opportunities for students to learn more appropriate ways of responding in similar situations," she wrote in *The Conversation*.

Other forms of strict discipline such as suspension or expulsion may have a role when there are immediate safety concerns but rarely teach students the skills they need to behave differently when they return.

"When students are excluded from school, they lose valuable learning time and become further disconnected from teachers, peers and the routines that support engagement," Leif says.

"Some students spend that time unsupervised, increasing the risk that they become involved with peers or activities that place them at greater risk outside school."

Research also shows that exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects students with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and young people in out-of-home care.

Supporting teachers

The IEU has consistently called for more support and resources for teachers and school staff in the form of adequate staffing, specialist support, time and training to manage classrooms.

"One of the most valuable investments would be a dedicated behaviour support lead in every school," Leif says.

This should be a staff member with expertise in evidence-based behaviour support who has the time to work with teachers in classrooms, coach staff, help analyse behaviour data, support problem-solving and coordinate more intensive interventions when needed.

"Too often, teachers attend professional development and are then expected to implement complex practices on their own," she says.

"Sustainable change happens when expertise is embedded within schools and teachers receive ongoing coaching and support."

Leif is also an advocate of multi-tiered systems of support, which provide a framework for organising how schools deliver high-quality teaching, wellbeing and behaviour support in a coordinated way.

Leif says implementation matters just as much as the intervention itself.

"We already know a great deal about the practices that improve student behaviour," she says. "The challenge is supporting schools to implement those practices consistently over time.

"That requires leadership, dedicated implementation support, ongoing coaching and opportunities for staff to collaborate – not simply asking teachers to do more."



Listen up

Fresh approaches to teaching history

Two innovative podcasts provide engaging ideas and practical strategies for history teachers, writes Will Brodie.

After listening to the *Hey History!* podcast for a few seconds, it strikes you: every voice belongs to a child.

The host is 14 years old, most other participants are younger, and when adults are heard, they are interviewed by children.

Hey History!, the first history podcast designed specifically for primary students, uses children's voices and questions to inspire curiosity in young listeners.

Practical teaching resource

University of Technology Sydney history professor Anna Clark developed *Hey History!* with fellow history professor Clare Wright from La Trobe University (profiled in IE#3, 2022).

Clark says the aim of the podcast was to create a resource that teachers "could simply press play to immediately begin a conversation or a lesson".

The goal was to translate decades of research into "something that was really practical, accessible and easy for students and teachers to use".

Since it was launched in 2024, *Hey History!* has been embraced by teachers across Australia.

It has earned thousands of classroom downloads, topped Apple podcasts' Australian education charts, attracted international awards and spawned a second series, *Hey History Teacher!*

Clark says she created the podcasts because primary teachers are expected to teach complex topics such as colonisation and First Nations histories, despite receiving limited training in Australian history.

"I'm a real advocate for history's complexity," she says. "It's not just about memorising dates. Obviously, you need content and knowledge, but it's also not about telling students how they should feel about something.

"It's about giving students access to information so they can come to their own informed opinions.

"Sometimes we disagree about the past, and that's also part of history."

In her experience of interviewing secondary students, Clark says part of what they enjoy about history is that "it's kind of up for grabs".

"I don't think primary students are too young to understand some of that complexity, so we were very conscious of bringing it into the podcast," she says.

"You can't have history that's simply names, dates, facts and winners. Equally, you can't have history without evidence that's just based on hunches or imagination.

"But you do need a leap of imagination to think about what life might have been like."

Essential research skills

Clark's companion podcast, *Hey History Teacher!*, includes experienced teachers, historians and education researchers sharing evidence-based strategies for teaching history.

The podcast features IEU member Dr Natalie Fong, who is head of secondary humanities at Citipointe Christian College in Carindale and winner of the 2024 Queensland History Teachers' Association Outstanding History Teacher Award.

Fong says history equips students with research skills needed in the age of AI, including verifying the authenticity of sources, researching ethically and communicating research findings to a broad audience.

Fong teaches students not just how to ask good questions, but how to answer them, as if they were presenting at a conference or webinar. Sometimes, asking those questions means venturing beyond the classroom.

When teaching Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, Fong took students to a local Vietnamese restaurant run by a family who fled Vietnam after the war.

The family shared their experience of living near the Australian base at Vũng Tàu and their perilous escape to Australia in a seven-metre boat carrying 22 people.



History professor and podcaster Anna Clark.



IEU member Natalie Fong.



Consultant Ben Lawless.

> "In an age of AI, the ability to interpret information and be sceptical about sources of information and bias is all-important."

"These are people's real lived experiences," Fong says. "And it brings it alive for the students because they can see the emotional impact."

Engaging content

Ben Lawless runs education consultancy Lawless Learning and has taught pre-service Masters students at the University of Melbourne.

He was a long-term IEU member while a classroom teacher and head of humanities at Aitken College in Greenvale until 2025.

Lawless became a *Hey History Teacher!* contributor after meeting Clark at a History Teachers' Association of Victoria conference. He has been a "big fan" since reading Clark's book, *Making Australian History*.

"The more knowledge you have about history, the more you will understand the endless references to it in things you read, see or hear," he says.

"Without knowledge of history, a lot of things will go over a person's head. It's like not knowing the 'in-joke'."

Lawless previously collaborated with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image to develop lesson plans for Years 7 and 8 students using the video game *Assassin's Creed*.

He says the game featured historically accurate "worlds" based on the ancient civilisations of Rome, Egypt and Greece.

"They go mad for it," Lawless told *The Australian* in 2022. "One modern challenge for teachers is that students have such a strong audiovisual diet in their spare time. It's harder to engage students if you don't bring that to the classroom, particularly lower-literacy boys."

Lawless says history is "the story of people", and like reading fiction, it can teach us about human nature.

"Everything happening in the current news cycle has hundreds of years of background that helps explain more deeply what is going on," he says.

"We can learn history through stories, and our brains are specifically designed to learn through story."

History also helps make sense of the modern world, Lawless says.

"The more you know of history, the more you will understand today, not just in politics but in how our economy and society have been set up, and why.

"You'll have much better answers to questions like 'Why is our society unequal?' and 'Why is the planet divided up into countries split by imaginary lines called borders?'"

Lawless says history helps students develop a broader range of skills than many technical subjects.

He says employers value graduates who can "ask interesting questions, research to find out answers and integrate, analyse and evaluate the information they get."

"In an age of AI, the ability to interpret information and be sceptical about sources of information and bias is all-important," he says.

"History is full of bias, as is AI. Training in history prepares students for a world of misinformation."

More information

Learn more about the *Hey! History* podcast: heyhistory.net





"There are so many valuable lessons you can learn from stepping outside the classroom, talking to experts and exploring the environment, especially in science."





The conference provided immersive, hands-on experiences, including data collection, top left, nature journalling, bottom right, and observing animals such as echidnas, bottom left.



Hands-on learning

Close encounters of the wild kind

A cast of furry, feathered and spiky critters provided unique professional learning opportunities for members at the IEU NSW/ACT environment conference, writes Andrew Taylor.

Nestled in a blue woollen beanie, Marlow is initially shy as Taronga Zoo education officer Alexandra Heagney introduces him to members at the IEU environment conference.

However, the ring-tailed possum eventually pops his head up and allows Alexandra to unfurl his tail and reveal his opposable thumbs.

Marlow's curly prehensile tail helps him grip and hold onto tree branches.

"The thumbs are not just for playing Minecraft, but for gripping and holding," Alexandra says.

Hands-on experiences

Marlow was one of several zoo residents encountered by members at the conference on 7 August.

He was joined by pythons, pygmy marmosets, a sleepy koala and luminescent scorpion, to name a few.

Billed as a day of "Wild Learning", the conference featured sessions on nature journalling, enrichment design and conducting fieldwork.

Through immersive, hands-on experiences, the professional learning sessions offered members practical teaching tools to take back to their schools and early learning centres.

The sessions also align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

Members such as Karen Chapman and Sandra Frain experienced activities as learners first, before exploring how these approaches could be adapted to different age groups, curriculum requirements and school settings.

An Aboriginal education teacher at St Therese's Primary School in New Lambton, Karen says the conference provided valuable ideas.

"I would love to do animal investigations from an Aboriginal perspective," she says. "I thought this PD would be good to point me in the right direction."

A teacher at Kamaroi Rudolf Steiner School in Belrose, Sandra says she was excited to be at the zoo with experts working with animals.

"To have an opportunity to bring our students, our colleagues, to interface with nature," she says. "It deepens our sense of commitment to making this world a better place for our wild animals and all of nature."

Practical workshops

Alexandra began the session on STEM enrichment design by taking members outside to record observations of the zoo's pygmy marmosets that would inform the design and creation of enrichment objects to stimulate and encourage natural behaviour.

The tiny, furry primates darted along branches high off the ground, ate and gazed intently at their surrounds. Native to the rainforests of South America, they huddled together to ward off the chill of a Sydney winter morning.

Members then observed echidnas Pippa and Gabby before heading back to the classroom to create enrichment items for the animals using everyday materials such as egg cartons, toilet rolls and string.

In the afternoon, members ventured into the zoo for practical workshops on fieldwork and nature journalling.

Alexandra's colleague Ash Mulcahy introduced members to a spider, desert scorpion and spiny leaf insect, which he called the "big juicy chicken nugget of the bush" because of its importance as a food source for other animals.

While the zoo is a rich source of data, Ash says fieldwork can just as easily be done in the grounds of a school or preschool.

Gently shaking a tree or sifting through leaf litter produces data for students to collect and study.

From reproduction to diet and nocturnal habits, the simple activity prompts lively discussion of each invertebrate and their role in the ecosystem.

Supporting members

IEU organiser Richard Ryan says the conference provided practical ideas and activities for members to take back to their classrooms.

"We believe professional development opportunities such as the day of Wild Learning at Taronga Zoo are an important way to support members," he says.

"It's crucial that teachers feel confident to teach about the natural world, including using methods of collecting, recording and interpreting data.

"These sessions at the zoo demonstrate how engaging and fun these learning experiences can be for teachers and students."

Isabella Rendina, a secondary science teacher at Catherine McAuley Catholic College in Medowie, says the conference was an "awesome opportunity" to work with colleagues and share resources at the zoo.

"There are so many valuable lessons you can learn from stepping outside the classroom, talking to experts and exploring the environment, especially in science," she says.

Isabella says the session on fieldwork and collecting data provided ideas and activities she could implement in the classroom.

"It was really cool to step into the shoes of a student and experience the excitement and curiosity of hands-on learning," she says.

Through the looking glass

Empowering children to be critical readers

New research is prompting a rethink of how children engage with books to build critical literacy and understanding of representation, writes Paige Furner.

Research led by Edith Cowan University associate professor Helen Adam adopts a framework that encourages children to view literature through different "mirrors", helping them recognise themselves and others in stories they read.

The approach, outlined in *"This is like a mirror! That's like me!" Differentiated literature mirrors for diverse children*, builds on the concept that books can act as both mirrors and windows.

Mirrors allow children to see aspects of themselves reflected in stories, while windows provide insight into experiences different from their own.

The new framework expands this idea by encouraging children to identify five types of mirrors when reading and analysing literature.

Adam says the framework helps bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice.

"Our framework of differentiated mirrors recognises that mirrors themselves exist on a spectrum of reflective quality," she says.

"Unlike previous frameworks that have treated mirrors and windows as largely separate functions, our approach acknowledges that books frequently serve as both simultaneously.

"By focusing on different types of mirrors based on the physics of actual mirrors, in addition to recognising magic and fairground mirrors, we provide a systematic and accessible framework for both educators and children."

Why representation matters

The research is based on the idea that children engage more deeply with books when they see their own lives, families, cultures and experiences reflected in the stories they read.

When books act as mirrors, they can strengthen children's sense of identity and belonging while boosting motivation and engagement in learning.



> "We hope to empower teachers to create literacy environments where every child feels valued, visible and connected to the broader human experience."

In contrast, children who rarely see themselves represented in classroom texts may experience feelings of invisibility and exclusion that can affect their wellbeing and learning outcomes.

The researchers argue that all children deserve access to books that reflect their lived experiences and broaden their understanding of others' perspectives.

Understanding the five mirrors

The framework identifies five types of mirrors that help children think critically about representation and its impact.

- Plane mirror: A plane mirror reflects a child's experiences directly and familiarly, allowing them to see themselves represented in a clear and authentic way.
- Concave mirror: A concave mirror magnifies aspects of identity and experience, drawing attention to details that may otherwise go unnoticed and encouraging deeper reflection.
- Convex mirror: A convex mirror combines familiar and unfamiliar elements. Children may recognise aspects of themselves while also encountering different cultural, social or personal experiences.
- Magic mirror: The magic mirror requires careful consideration. It presents a distorted version of reality by privileging one culture or perspective while excluding others, reinforcing ideas of superiority and dominance.
- Fairground mirror: Like its real-world counterpart, the fairground mirror distorts reality. It offers exaggerated or inaccurate portrayals of diverse groups and can reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions.

The researchers suggest that understanding these different mirrors helps children draw on existing knowledge while critically examining the messages presented in books.

Cultivating classroom conversations

One of the study's strongest examples comes from a teacher who taught students about mirrors and windows through children's literature.

Rather than simply asking whether students enjoyed a book, the teacher encouraged them to consider what felt familiar, what felt different, and which characters they connected with most strongly.

The researchers argue this approach transformed classroom conversations.

During one lesson, students noticed that a story about basketball featured only boys. Rather than accepting the text at face value, they questioned why girls were absent from the narrative.

According to the researchers, these discussions encourage children to move beyond passive reading and critically examine whose stories are told, whose voices are absent, and the role of representation.

Adam says this language helps children become more thoughtful and critical readers.

"By distinguishing between different qualities of reflection, we can help prevent children from developing a distorted view of themselves and the world, where white culture is often normalised and oversaturated," she says.

"Our goal is to positively influence the way future generations see themselves, those around them and the way they move through the world.

"We hope to empower teachers to create literacy environments where every child feels valued, visible and connected to the broader human experience."

Thoughtful readers

The framework aims to strengthen critical literacy and improve representation in classrooms.

When children are equipped with language to discuss mirrors and windows, teachers can help them identify inclusion, exclusion, bias and stereotypes within texts.

The researchers say this is an important step towards developing critical consciousness, where children become active interpreters of stories rather than passive consumers.

Importantly, they say even young children can engage with these concepts when supported by effective teaching and dialogue.

Practical tool for teachers

The researchers acknowledge that no classroom can provide a perfect mirror for every child.

Instead, they encourage teachers to thoughtfully select a wide range of texts representing diverse experiences both within and across cultural groups.

Children may connect with different aspects of a story in different ways, making diverse collections essential.

The framework is designed to be practical and accessible.

Simple prompts like "What feels familiar?" and "What feels different?" help students explore how books serve as mirrors and windows for different readers.

The researchers caution that monocultural texts and stereotypical portrayals of diverse communities can reinforce exclusion and misconceptions.

Adam says books that serve as windows help children understand and empathise with experiences beyond their own.

"When books serve as windows and aren't limited to reflections of a child's own lived experience, they help disrupt the potential development of prejudice and misunderstanding of others," she says.

"They foster critical consciousness regarding social justice issues."

Looking through a new lens

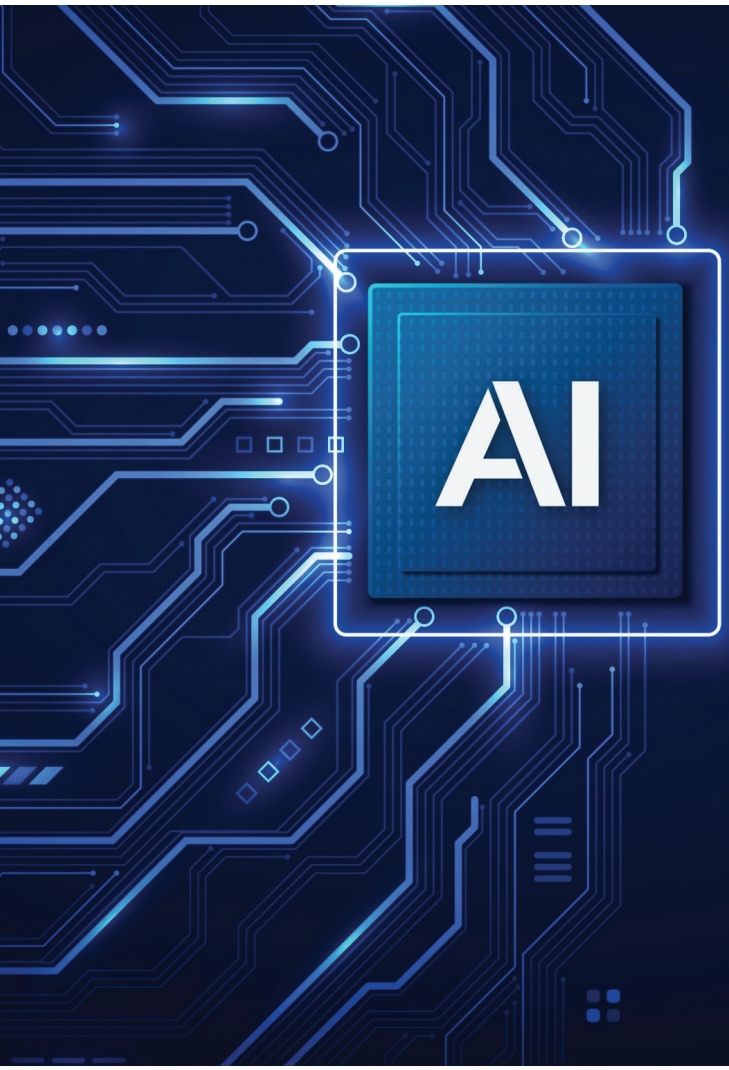
The research delivers a clear message: diverse literature is an essential component of equitable education.

The researchers argue that thoughtfully selected books, combined with explicit discussions about representation, can help create classrooms where every child feels visible, valued and included.

By helping students recognise themselves in stories while learning about the experiences of others, teachers can strengthen individual identity and collective understanding.

Ultimately, the framework aims to help children see themselves, understand others and develop empathy that extends well beyond the classroom.

For teachers, it is a powerful reminder that every book can be a mirror, a window and a doorway to deeper understanding.



A powerful tool for teachers

As schools grapple with the challenges of artificial intelligence, two IEU members discuss how it can support teachers, not replace them, writes Will Brodie.

Charles Neave is the director of innovation at St Leonard's College in Melbourne's south-east. His job title alone reflects how rapidly technology is reshaping education.

Yet despite working at a school that is a leader in the responsible adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), Neave is no uncritical advocate.

"AI is a wonderful opportunity and can truly improve teaching and learning for students," he says.

"But it's not a silver bullet and the old-fashioned skills of critical and creative thinking are now even more important to re-emphasise within all of our practice."

Reduce workload

A senior teacher and long-standing unionist, Neave says AI's greatest promise lies in freeing teachers to focus on teaching.

AI could reduce workload by assisting with routine administrative tasks, he says.

Neave points to drafting parent emails, rephrasing reports and building teacher-specific AI agents that can answer common student questions outside school hours.

Neave says AI can also deepen learning: "It's about teaching students how to use it in a way where it's not giving the answer, where it's actually expanding their thinking."

Neave says many students do not want AI to "do the thinking for them" and recognise the need to question its responses.

"The real skill is the ability to actually critically analyse the responses it's giving," he says.

As AI becomes more sophisticated, Neave says writing prompts will matter less than analysing AI's output.

"Critical and creative thinking are now even more important," he says.

Responsible use of AI

Neave says AI cannot replace what matters most in education.

"AI is very good at giving knowledge but obviously does not have that human nuance and the ability to form relationships," he says.

"The human interaction is actually so much more important than knowledge transference."

When generative AI first emerged, Neave says schools were "scrambling around" for guidance.

Looking for a formal framework that set out "the key things you need to be looking at in terms of governance", Neave turned to the US-based Responsible AI in Learning (RAIL) accreditation.

St Leonard's became the first Australian school to earn the certification.

The RAIL framework is built on three pillars:

- **Literacy** – teaching staff how to use AI effectively.
- **Safety** – protecting student privacy and data.
- **Ethics** – ensuring AI never replaces genuine thinking or teacher judgement.

Neave says prohibiting AI only serves to "push everybody's use underground".

Instead, schools should encourage open discussion and responsible experimentation, allowing teachers to share good practice while providing appropriate oversight.

"That process of allowing people to do stuff, but just keeping an eye on it, it's so much better than banning it," he says.

An opportunity, not problem

Perri Winter is another IEU member who wants teachers to see AI as an opportunity rather than a problem.

"I wouldn't want to see teachers reinventing the wheel and adding more to their workload by having to build all these kinds of things," she says.

> "I definitely want teachers to embed how to use AI well in their pedagogy and in their classroom."



St Leonard's College director of innovation Charles Neave.



Presbyterian Ladies' College art teacher and digital learning coordinator Perri Winter.

"But I definitely want teachers to embed how to use AI well in their pedagogy and in their classroom.

"Teachers don't have to know every single thing about AI, but we absolutely are doing our students a disservice if we stick our heads in the sand and don't teach them how to use it well."

An art teacher and digital learning coordinator at Presbyterian Ladies' College in Melbourne, Winter travelled to Toronto for this year's International Coalition of Girls' Schools (ICGS) Global Forum on Girls' Education.

She paired with psychology teacher Jayne Schinckel from St Hilda's School on the Gold Coast to present the outcome of research supported by a fellowship from the ICGS Global Action Research Collaborative.

Despite teaching different subjects and never having met, the pair shared a goal of creating exam preparation that built "genuine confidence, not just curriculum coverage".

Encouraging deeper thinking

Working with PLC's information and communications technology team, Winter designed Agent Art, an AI tool trained on VCE Art Making and Exhibiting terminology. It also draws on Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority marking guides to help Year 12 students prepare for external examinations.

Rather than providing answers, Agent Art uses questions and feedback to encourage deeper thinking.

"Students engaged with the AI agent because they trusted the teacher who built it," Winter says.

"It gave them a safe, low-stakes space for unlimited practice, while their teacher remained the judgement they valued most.

"Reading the conversation logs gave me a window into student thinking that is usually invisible in class.

"And where AI feedback was generic or wrong, students were explicitly taught to critique it."

Winter says many teachers are "very scared of AI" and view it mainly as a tool for cheating and plagiarism.

"If you're going to bring AI into your classroom, the teacher has to be embedded," she says. "You can't just outsource it to a third-party product."

Empowering staff

Winter says she is no "coding whiz" and wants to show teachers they don't need advanced technical skills to use AI effectively.

"I love the idea of empowering staff and showing them what they can do alongside their IT department," she says.

Winter says AI's strength is its "Socratic type of questioning".

It can test ideas, question assumptions and help you "work through your thinking". She says a colleague uses AI to argue the opposite to his political beliefs to test his reasoning.

Winter wants students to become creators rather than consumers of AI. Her art students build their own AI tutors for specific topics.

"If the student writes, 'I don't know, just tell me the answer,' it says, 'I'm not going to give you the answer, let's go back to the question'," she says.

"I think getting the students to be builders rather than users is a good way forward."

Winter says AI should strengthen, not replace, students' thinking.

"It's about actually showing students, 'Here's how you can use it to become a better learner'," she says.

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