

A while ago I watched 'Grumpy Old Men' on the ABC and I winced several times throughout the episode as I realised that I, too, have become a grumpy old man. The articles I write reflect this. In fact, I think I have created a new writing genre – 'Grumpy'.

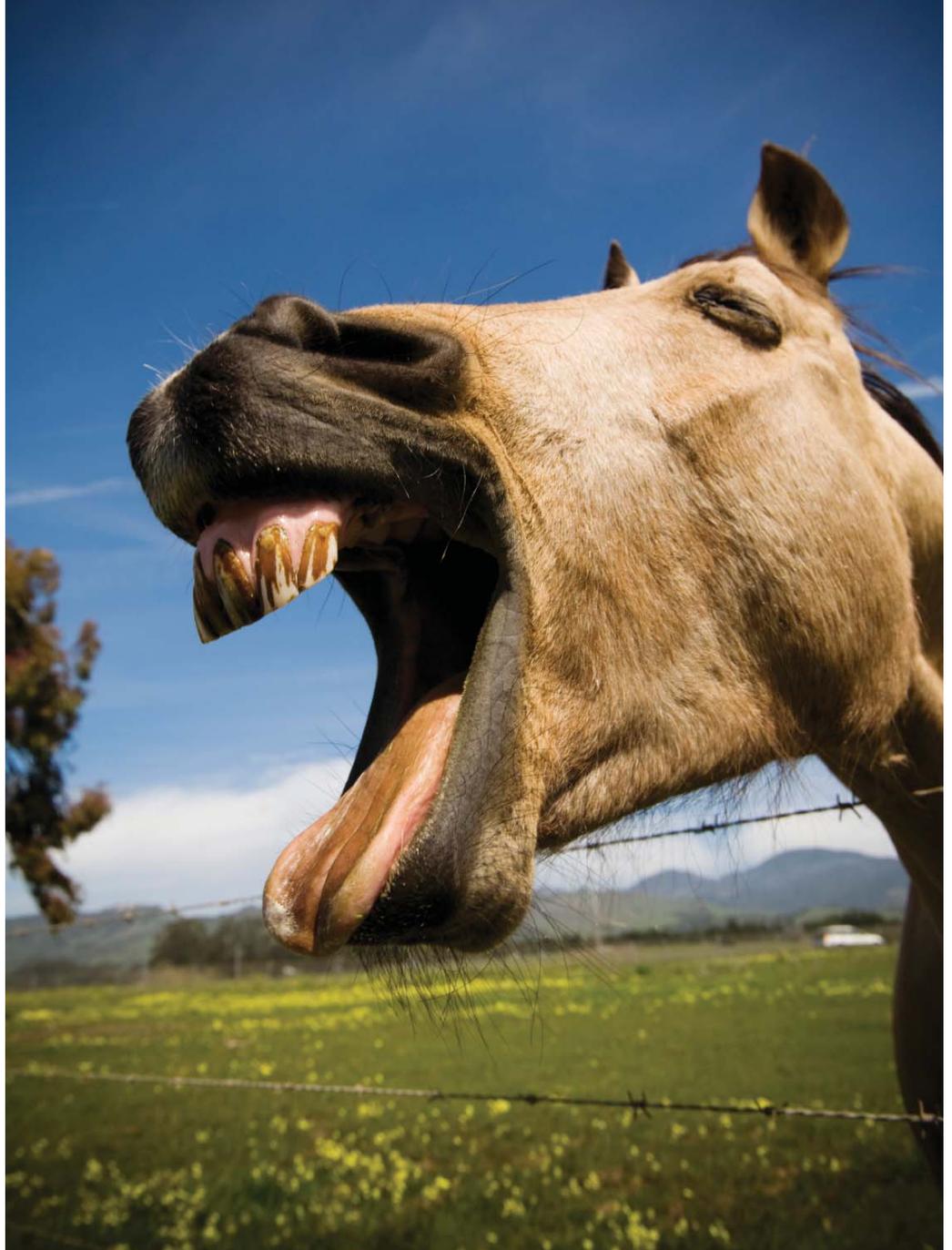
This time I'm grumpy about the obscene amount of money that is squandered in education. Recently the government gave out millions of dollars to schools as part of the stimulus package. We received \$2,000,000. It certainly created employment for many tradesmen. We now have a massive hall. So too do all the other schools in the area. Adelaide may be the city of churches, but my suburb is the 'Bay of Halls'. The architect took \$200,000 of this and the engineers, council and other fees took close to another \$100,000, leaving us with \$1.7 million.

A free hall is great and, as you saw in the feature article last term with me on the cover, I am extremely grateful and proud of our new hall. However, we were given this huge amount of money and a very short time frame (only weeks) to consult with the community, put out tenders, apply to the local council, etc. To say that the whole process was rushed is an understatement.

As a consequence of this gift we discovered that the running and maintenance costs of a hall are well beyond the budget of a small school like ours. It will require substantial air-conditioning in summer, especially here in Queensland. It will need cleaning, curtains, seating and so on. Eventually it will need maintenance such as painting, re-flooring, etc.

The biggest cost was one we didn't see coming – security. We had over \$200,000 worth of vandalism done to the new hall during and after construction. As a result, after consultation with the police, we had to erect a fence at a cost of \$40,000. Quite simply, we can't afford to keep this hall unless the government follows up with ongoing maintenance grants.

It's like being given a new Ferrari. I'd love one, but I couldn't afford the insurance and running costs. The rental income from our hall is insufficient to pay for these costs, especially when you consider that every other school in the area has a hall for rent. Without continued funding this hall will lead to financial strain in our community. Imagine what else I could have done with \$2 million! I could have hired more teachers! The architect's fee alone would have paid for four graduate teachers!



Looking a gift horse in the mouth

Miro Martin

A similar situation occurred recently when the government gave a laptop to each secondary student. Computers need hardware and software and they are totally useless unless you provide training and an infrastructure for upgrade and maintenance, as well as technical support. Some schools cannot afford this.

We are a small primary school with around 60 computers for 240 students – which isn't too shabby, but we paid for these ourselves and we also pay a

My suburb is the 'Bay of Halls'

technician to maintain our network. This costs around \$350 a week. They're not cheap. How naïve was the government: "We'll give all students a laptop and their learning will be transformed." If this was the case, we could simply train our trades people by sitting them in Bunnings amongst the tools for a few weeks and skipping TAFE colleges altogether.

My school has been identified as being in one of the poorest areas in the land. As a result we have been included in the National Schools Partnership

Programme. This means we will receive \$118,000 a year over the next four years to improve our NAPLAN scores. This is truly a sizable sum of money. It does come with strings attached and we do have to jump through hoops to get it. The main one is that we have to raise the NAPLAN scores of our students.

There are many reasons for the poor performance of students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and I contend that poor teaching and lack of resources, although highly significant, are not the only factors. There are social, cultural and pastoral care issues to be considered.

It is offensive to me and my staff to say, "You are in a low socio-economic area and your students are performing poorly therefore we will give you money to improve the situation."

We already have a large amount of government funding due to our high numbers of students who are verified as having special learning needs. We have many specialists already working with the students. Giving us more money and more specialists won't make a significant difference to us (we actually perform quite well in NAPLAN). As I have said before, literacy and numeracy are important, but in low SES communities such as mine there are other important issues such as employment, family structure and low income.

Some children in low socio-economic areas do not have very pleasant lives (I suspect the same applies to all areas). Put literacy and numeracy into the perspective of children who witness violence, drug and alcohol abuse or physical abuse or who come to school without lunch because their parents are broke. The teachers of such children spend a lot of their energy just trying to get these children to comply with instructions or prevent them from harming each other. If they get them to read, it's a bonus.

I know the stereotypical school is a place of learning, but for the children I mention above, school is often the only safe and stable environment they experience. You cannot teach a child to read if he comes to school after being beaten by an abusive parent or who is poorly fed and without a good night's sleep because mum and dad have been fighting or on drugs.

Education may help to alleviate poverty, but it isn't a magic pill. It won't work in isolation. We have to address the complex social and demographic issues of poorer communities in conjunction with their education. I remember taking an old car to an honest mechanic. It needed a new clutch. The mechanic said he would be happy to put a new clutch in for me, but there were so many other things wrong with the car that it would be a waste of time. The other problems had to be sorted as well if the car was to run properly.

I wrote in a past article that the government was extremely naïve if they believed that literacy and numeracy were the 'be all and end all';



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there are many other aspects to consider when looking at making a school more effective. Throwing bucket loads of money at schools to improve NAPLAN scores is frustratingly futile.

I recently attended a lecture by Steve Dinham. He reported on substantial research carried out looking at just what factors are effective in a child's education. The most effective factor was the quality of teaching. Demographics and social background of students had little effect compared with the quality of teaching. It would make more sense to spend a few million dollars on improving teacher training, especially in the area of self-reflective practice. As I mentioned in my last article, too many teachers find excuses with the child (they don't pay attention, they are disruptive, they have ADHD, the parents don't support us at home, etc.) and they don't concede that the learning problems may be due to their own poor teaching.

Steve Dinham also spoke about the National Partnership Program which targets low SES schools. One of the conditions for getting the grant is that you have to have strategies for attracting high performing principals and teachers. I had the opportunity to ask him a question in front of all the other Brisbane Catholic principals. I asked him to give me examples of where this has happened. He could only give me one example of a principal being 'parachuted' into a school in Victoria.

The infrastructures of both Catholic and state schools don't allow us to offer more pay or other incentives to attract staff. In fact, until recently in Brisbane, we didn't even get to appoint staff at

all. It's done by head office. I wish I could attach the electrodes of knowledge to the nipples of ignorance of our politicians who control the purse strings. They have absolutely no idea how schools work.

I realise that the economic stimulus package was not meant to improve student learning. It was meant to provide employment but, with a bit more thought, it may have been possible to achieve both – employment and positive education outcomes.

I am extremely sceptical about great sums of money improving education outcomes or that placing an 'A Team' of educators into a low SES school without the back-up of social workers and counsellors, would have much of an impact on student learning. After 30 years experience and a great deal of grumpiness I am convinced that we should be spending the money on creating a workforce of top quality teachers. Don't tinker at the edges. Go straight to the heart of the matter. Attract the best by offering decent salaries and raising the profile of the teaching profession. Instead of educationally unqualified politicians deciding how schools should spend their money, allow the people who know best, the teachers, to have a bigger say in how this money is spent.

Since writing this article, Miro Martin has been appointed Principal of All Saints Catholic Primary School in Albany Creek, Brisbane. ET looks forward to publishing his articles in future issues.



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to *Education Today*.