The education system I'd like to see

by Rowan Cahill

Life is about more than staying alive; it is about thinking, questioning, creating, loving. At its heart is the eternal quest of philosophers and theologians, the struggle to find a meaning for existence. Students are individuals in their own right, not consumer items to be manufactured for a system; indeed, systems and technology should be shaped by the human being, and not become the new masters shaping the human being and culture.

In writing about the schooling system I would like to see I have no chapter and verse alternative, merely thoughts. My starting points are above. I reject the contemporary thrust of education which seems increasingly to be about redressing the trade imbalance, defeating Japan with a race of technologically smart students, and the equation human being equals job holder and servant.

Respect and professionalism. My ideal assumes that schooling has the support of the home and parents; it is regarded as valued to society; no expense is spared funding it. Teachers are respected as valuable people, financially rewarded accordingly, and not the subject of constant media and political sniping.

Respect for teachers is something few countries have achieved. In rural China, for instance, before 1949, teachers were part of the Red Army; respect for education came from the barrel of a gun. But as I write, I read of three teachers killed and thirteen injured in rural areas by "a section of cadres and the masses who look down on learning".

When I trained as a teacher in the late sixties, a British psychologist warned that disrespect for teachers was par for the course, a lifelong hazard, an untreatable social illness.

Recent American thinking on education is moving in a commonsense direction; an emphasis on research and strategies that strengthen bonds between home and school; the home as the most influential classroom, parents the most influential teachers; without students coming to school respecting education, there is little point; education is everyone's responsibility.

In my schooling ideal teachers are skilled and trained professionals; they are not regarded as performing seals. Gone is the current presumption of incompetence and ignorance, that teachers need to be constantly in-serviced, workshopped, brain
stormed, butchers' papered with the latest fads and "wisdom", so they implement what the latest push of experts, careerists, politicians decide is necessary for them.

Professionals make decisions about what they do and don't know, what they can and cannot do. They are trusted. Today the number of teachers who voluntarily attend courses and conferences in their own time, engage in tertiary studies after school hours and in holidays, at their own initiative and expense, is significant. They do not need special training programs. They could, however, do with professional time and space; relief from face to face teaching on the lines of paid sabbatical leave, the options of half-time or part-time teaching, to give them more time to think about their work and performance, to reduce stress levels, to develop contacts with other colleagues, methods, ideas and systems, and to compare notes.

Professional pay for face to face teaching, professional time and space, and society's respect would attract to teaching people who wanted to teach, and not the present base — people who regard the classroom as a stepping stone to careers in power away from the classroom.

**Administration.** The last thing I want in schools is an hierarchical system of administration and power. If the emphasis was on community, communication, sharing, and if conflict was accepted as normal, vital, creative part of being human (and not something to be feared or ashamed of) then decision making could more readily be a collective experience and responsibility.

I like the questions Paul Goodman asked of universities in the 1960s: "What are administrators doing there? how did they get in?"

If there have to be administrators and teachers, then I want to see regular job switching between the two, so the problems of each are mutually understood and administrators are never able to distance themselves from the experiences of teaching and being a teacher.

Problems of managing an education institution would be alleviated if the trend to mega institutions, amalgamated campuses and schools, was reversed. There is enough research to validate the "small is beautiful" concept in education. And remember, when we talk of the great education institutions of the past we are often dealing with small communities, some no bigger than 100 people.

Administration generally would be reduced if teachers were regarded as professionals, and administrators did not function as funnels for fads, seal trainers, and check-list thought police.

**Curriculum.** I envisage an ideas and coherence centre curriculum, with an emphasis on unity and interconnectedness, one that joins the sciences with the arts and humanities, the past with the present, and recognises, echoing the works of my teacher James Bowen, the totality of mankind as part of nature.

At present, after primary school, subjects tend to exist as separate worlds at war with one another. If the problems facing humanity are to be solved then the relationships between the traditional subject/discipline areas have to be recognised, and thinking encouraged in interdisciplinary ways.

Comparative religion would be part of the curriculum; so too would philosophy or thinking (refer to the work of the Centre of Philosophy for Children, in Australia, and the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, in the U.S.)

Two quotes from recent reading appeal. Neil Postman: "... perhaps the most important contribution schools can make is to provide young people with a sense of purpose, of meaning, and of the interconnectedness of what they learn". James Moffett: "... youngers need to experience all kinds of discourse and all kinds of voices and viewpoints and styles — hear out the world. Our heritage, OK, but we need to encompass all heritages, cross cultures, raise consciousness enough to peer over the social perimeters that act as parameters of knowledge".

Regarding knowledge, an open mind would be encouraged. In Maths and Science, for example, students would not leave believing they had learned the final, material facts. Modern maths is turning back to metaphysics where it came, something Einstein came to realise, and where Stephen Hawking is headed. Newtonian certainty in science is gradually being challenged by the philosophical implications of quantum physics.

What has to be done is to teach as though things were closed but with the understanding there is room for doubt and there will be change, as Garth Boomer recently put it, "teachers strong enough to doubt their own validity even as they assert it".

**Teacher training.** I visualise teachers capable of engaging students in the world of ideas, of fostering individuality, creativity, and independence of thought. As well as having specialist expertise and being able to work with students, they would have broad understandings of history, philosophy, psychology, and the theories and history of education. These latter would be integral parts of teacher training, and not tacked onto training programs.

All teachers would have broad understandings of the humanities and the sciences so they did not become narrow specialists pushing an area of expertise isolated from other areas of human endeavour.

A heavy training program; maybe five years with another two of classroom internship. But worth it; the job would be personally and financially rewarding, and have high social status.

Teaching is an art, not a science. The ridiculous current notion teaching methods can be standardised and that what works for one person, or in one area, necessarily works for another person or elsewhere, would be missing from my system.

The recruitment of trainees straight from school would be discouraged. Less substitution of a school bag for a brief case, and more encouragement of people to work, travel, think, mature, and engage in the world beyond education institutions before returning to the classroom as teachers.