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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Sue French and Natalie Pierson

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teacher Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. I'm talking today with Sue French and Natalie Pierson about *Leading Aboriginal Education in your school* and we're going to begin with an *Acknowledgement of Country* and then Natalie and Sue will introduce themselves as well.

Natalie Pierson:

Hi, my name is Natalie Pierson and I am a proud Aboriginal woman from the La Perouse area. *I would like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to our Elders both past and present and can I extend that to every listener that's listening here today.*

Sue French:

I'm Sue French and I am a proud Birpai woman from the mid-North Coast of New South Wales. *I acknowledge the First Australians as the traditional custodians of the continent whose cultures are among the oldest living cultures in human history. I acknowledge that we are on the traditional country of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay respects to Elders past and present and to other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people present and listening today. I recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land which continue to be important today. I recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of Gadigal people in this land.*

Today we stand in footsteps millennia old, may we acknowledge the traditional owners whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since men and women awoke from the great dream. We honour the presence of these Ancestors who reside in the imagination of this land and whose irrepressible spirituality flows through all creation. Always was, Always will be Aboriginal Land.

Carly Boreland:

Thank you! Welcome to our studio and to this podcast. It's really our pleasure to have you here today. So, we want to talk about lots of things to do with Aboriginal Education today and I think a nice place to start might be following on from that *Acknowledgement* and the significance of where you come from and to explain a little bit for our listeners about why Aboriginal Education is a priority for *all* schools, regardless of their student population or their location?



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

Sue French:

I think that Aboriginal Education is in two parts. One part of it is about Aboriginal People and making sure that all Aboriginal People have all of the opportunities that every other Australian has, particularly as the First People of this land. But it's also about building understanding and knowledge throughout the entire community, and I believe, that until we build understanding, knowledge and respect throughout the wider community, long term the outcomes for Aboriginal people won't fundamentally change. I think we will struggle and struggle and struggle until this lovely land of ours is free of fear and racism.

Carly Boreland:

So Sue, could you tell me about the schools that you've worked in and the experiences you've had in trying to lead Aboriginal Education? The different settings you've tried to work through?

Sue French:

I've been lucky enough to have a 38 year career in the Department of Education. From classroom teacher in places like Dover Heights & Parkes to Deputy Principal and Principal of two high schools, one in the ACT and one here in NSW. For me, personally, the really important work that I did was in the 1990s both within the (NSW) Teachers Federation and within the Department of Education at large. At that time, in the Teachers Federation, we had already established already the *Aboriginal Education Coordinator's* position as well as an Executive position for an Aboriginal person and we certainly led the country in doing those things. And of course the Teachers Federation, and the work of the Teachers Federation, underpinned our first Aboriginal Education policies and framed those first policies and I was lucky enough to be there for that and to participate in the building of the professional learning for teachers in those days.

Natalie Pierson:

I've worked with the Department for 20 years, so coming up to 20 years this October and my first experience in a school was my first appointment at Darlington Public School and that was back in 1996. It was a fantastic opportunity to work in a school that was seen as an Aboriginal priority school. We had a number of Aboriginal staff that were there. My mum, at the time, was also the *Aboriginal Coordinator* for the (NSW) Teachers Federation. So I felt really supported going into a school for my first year; really supported in Aboriginal Education were the people that were around me and also having my mum in the background. So going into Darlington I guess I didn't lead to start with but I had some great mentors around me that sort of helped build me up to get me to where I needed to be. And then I found, towards being there for maybe 10-11 years, I started to lead a lot of what was happening in the school with other people as well. From that I applied for other jobs and worked in Aboriginal Education in South-Western Sydney and have had a fantastic, I guess, 8-9 years of Leading Aboriginal Education for our area. It's been amazing! Amazing opportunity to work with teachers who are passionate about our kids - passionate about Aboriginal Education; to work with our students who



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

are just amazing; and also to work with our community. So, it's been fantastic, it's been an honour to work in Aboriginal Education.

Sue French:

One of the things that I observed. You see right back at the beginning of my career which is in the 1970s (we'll just whisper that) Aboriginal People and Aboriginal knowledge was hardly noticed. It was; it simply was the noble savage history finished in 1788 really. As more awareness happened in the early 1990s, one of the things that happened for teachers who identified as Aboriginal teachers was that if you were into a school and there weren't any (you might be only one) all of a sudden there was an expectation that you knew *everything* and still that happens. It's really confronting for young teachers, I think, when they go to a school and they are the only Aboriginal person on the teaching staff because their colleagues want to know things but they don't necessarily know. I mean I would say I know nothing now after all these years really. I know bits and pieces but I would never consider myself an Elder, for example. But I think that for young teachers that's one of the issues. Did you experience that sort of thing at all Natalie?

Natalie Pierson:

Not so much for me I think going into a school and having the amount of support I think we had four other Aboriginal staff members. We also had an AEO, so I already had that depth of experience and knowledge in those people. So it wasn't put onto me to lead. But I know now, with our newly appointed teachers (that we're mentoring, that we run professional learning for in my current role), that's one thing I will say to them when we have that session is "focus on your craft and have a look at the things you need to do to get better at teaching. It's your first year of teaching: really concentrate on classroom management; concentrate on your programming; and concentrate on making the year a successful first year for you." And I've had a few that have already called me and they're like, "I'm really passionate about this" and I would say "if you've got the time and you feel like it's not taking too much off your classroom practice have a go, do something small but don't take on too much in your first few years". Because they do get asked: "You've been appointed here as the Aboriginal teacher what can you do for us? What groups are you going to run? Are you going to run the Committee? What else can you do?" And I've said to them that shouldn't be an expectation of the school and if it is then I am more than happy to have a yarn with them about that. But I feel that our beginning teachers just need to focus on their craft and get really good at what they do and have that really strong pedagogy.

Carly Boreland:

I think that's really insightful for teachers - all teachers to remember that there's an individual responsibility at a school but you're still part of a big system. So, could we talk a bit then at that sort of system and whole school level then; what should we be starting with if we're looking to plan for effective Aboriginal Education in our schools? What are some of the starting points do you think?



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

Natalie Pierson:

Some of the things we do, we sort of developed a framework a few years ago around unpacking policy and current strategies and having a look at what's mandated, what's mandatory, what's important for Aboriginal Education in schools. We really came down to looking at staff and staff's knowledge. What does staff know about Aboriginal Education from the Principal down? Look at all students in our school and what do we need to teach them around Aboriginal history and culture? And then look at Aboriginal students and what do we need to improve educational outcomes for them at any level whether they're needing huge growth or whether they're working beyond?

And so, we looked at that and unpacked those three areas and then we talked to the school Executive around - how do we start that in this school? What does the staff already know? So we did a bit of backward mapping. What does the staff already know around Aboriginal Education and what's happening for all students? And we developed a bit of a plan - and it may go over three years - it could be part of your Three Year School Plan. It doesn't all have to happen at once but I guess every school is different, every school has done different professional learning, participated in a number of things, or they may already have committees. So I think it's really important to do a little bit of an audit of what's already happening in your school. What's already working, what's already great and then where do we need to go from there. And then I would suggest, if the school didn't have a committee, to start with an Aboriginal Education Committee and that would probably be the place that you would start unpack that and do a bit of an audit of what's working and where to from there.

Carly Boreland:

And what kinds of resources are available for a school to find out how to do the audit? How do you best form a committee? I imagine there must be a wealth of resources online or humans hopefully that you could speak to as well.

Natalie Pierson:

Within the Department of Education we've got the *Aboriginal and Education and Community Engagement* website and a lot of the policies and the documents are sitting in that space as well so we make sure that teachers know they're there. When we deliver professional learning we make sure that all our teachers have those resources. So for example the *Aboriginal Education & Training Policy* is a great place to start. It's a mandated document: so what's happening within our school and what to do we need to do to adhere to the actions of the policy?

We've got the 25 year approach- *The NSW Teachers Federation 25 Year Approach: The Way Forward* which has got a number of things that teachers could have a look at. A list of things around where to start: how to move forward; what are you already doing? It is a bit of a checklist but it's also something you can look at, and go - "what are we doing? What are we not doing? How can we move forward?"

There's a national strategy; *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy* that came out in 2015 which has seven areas - priority areas - that schools can have a look at around, I guess, progressing Aboriginal



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

students and moving them from where they are to beyond. And those seven areas - that document highlights those seven areas - and teachers can have a look at that and, I guess, assess their Aboriginal students in their schools and see what areas they need to focus on to improve educational outcomes.

Carly Boreland:

And just starting there could be a good use of school professional learning funds to get some people together to sit down and have a read of those resources because that sounds like a lot.

Natalie Pierson:

There are so many resources you can tap into like *The School Excellence Framework*.

Sue French:

Well I'm thinking all of the Syllabuses. Every Syllabus has content and skills related to understanding about Aboriginal Australia from whatever perspective. That's *not* optional. This is core work that we're talking about. So when we talk about those two levels; it's *not* optional any longer. You might not do something for *NAIDOC* Week or for *Reconciliation Week* or for *Sorry Day* although I would hope you would – I would hope you would take those opportunities to highlight various things. But, in your everyday teaching, in every Syllabus, there is a requirement and that might mean that teachers have got to go and do some research but, that's your professional responsibility. In the beginning it'll be harder to find the resources but as we get more and more and more used to it the resources will become more available, they'll be more accessible and we'll understand better how to use them. And I think that that's going to be really helpful.

Natalie Pierson:

I know in our operational directorate, within the Aboriginal Education team, we've put together a resource pack. So we've gone through and had a look at a number of resources sort of State wide, and even Australia wide, and put together a resource pack that actually comes in under each KLA. So looking at each Syllabus and finding those resources so teachers actually have links that they can go to.

Carly Boreland:

And is that available online through that same website?

Natalie Pierson:

No, it's not on their website. But we could probably ask to have it put up otherwise people can contact us and we're more than happy to share any of the resources that we have, because that's part of our team working in Educational Services to develop the resources because teachers are always looking for new and better ways to do business.



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

Sue French:

And I also think that there are simple things you could do: flying the flag; having the partnership statement up in the foyer of the school; having the ‘*Stolen Generation*’ speech by Kevin Rudd up in the foyer of the school. They’re simple things, that can be done really quickly. But they send a really powerful message and that powerful message is terrifically important.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT:

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Carly Boreland:

And so often in a school, the school’s front office can set the scene for what matters *in this place*. You can really set the tone or it can reveal the tone of a whole school can’t it?

Sue French:

Exactly! A friend of mine said you can tell ten steps inside the gate what’s going on in a school. And I think that’s the other thing we’ve got to keep in mind. But I do think making sure that you *Acknowledge Country* is really important. How do you select appropriate resources? And I think that what we would say is that the most appropriate resources to use in your school have their roots in whatever local community you’re in. So, if you’re in *Gadigal* country then as much as you can you should try to use *Gadigal* materials. If you’ve got to do something other than that, in order to explain or fulfill a particular need, then you have to be very deliberate about it. And very often you need to make sure that you’re on the right track and you might have to consult people either through *AECG (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group)* or through the *Land Council* which is the easiest way to find people who are of that place and that’s terrifically important. Because, all those different Aboriginal nations: they were different nations; they had different languages; they had different traditions, - some of them were similar but as different as going from Austria to Italy if you like.

Natalie Pierson:

As well as consulting with your local community. So everything that we do in Aboriginal Education should have a parent *buy in*. We should have Aboriginal Community around the table in sharing what it is that we want to do and to get their feedback. I guess their *buy in* as well. A lot of our parents have fantastic knowledge, and are able to share a lot, but until we actually bring them to the table and ask for that we don’t get it. So I think we need to give them also the opportunity to participate in anything that we do, at a school level, that is for their kids.

Carly Boreland:

Could you give us some ideas of ways that you can facilitate that kind of connections – some good ways to try and then try again - and how to keep building those relationships?



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

Natalie Pierson:

One thing that worked at Darlington for me was just being present and I learnt that off my principal. She was very present: always on the playground in the morning; always on the playground in the afternoon; even recess and lunch. She was always there. And I used to think that was strange, like “why are you always on the playground? Principals should be in their office.”

She said, “no I need to be visible: the students need to know that I’m here for them; the parents need to know that I’m here for them.” And so I learnt that very quickly, in my teaching career, that it’s important to be at work early and to be ready for class but it’s also just as important to be available for any parents that might actually come through the front, or the back, gate (because we had two ends of school). And so I did that every morning and some days you’d get parents that who would come up and they might walk straight past you. But a “hello” – “hello” and you start to slowly connect and slowly engage. And it might take a whole term: but after that you find that they’re starting to knock on your door and come in and ask those they might be hard questions for them to come through and ask but they start to do that. I think it’s just finding a connection and building that relationship with them so that they know that they matter and their kids matter.

Another thing I did in my early career (before I had my own kids) is I used to go to the local football game at Redfern. I grew up watching all my uncles play football at La Perouse. So I knew that was important: and I knew that’s where the kids would be hanging out; and I knew that’s where they played on a Saturday. So to engage with the students on a Monday and they can share, “Miss was at the footy and she got to see me score a try”. I’d then meet the uncle and then aunty and it was just beautiful because you start building those relationships. They’re not forced, it’s just something that happens and they see that you care and you’re taking an interest in them. I think once you build the relationship I never had an issue getting a parent come up to do anything. So I think it really comes to making that connection for them to feel safe and it takes a while to build that especially coming from a different community. It didn’t matter that I was Aboriginal in a school with Aboriginal students I still needed to develop and build a relationship with those families and build that trust.

Carly Boreland:

Can I ask about high schools Sue? I can imagine, in a primary setting, there are parents often coming to school: dropping of kids; picking up kids. What about in a high school situation - are there ways you can create opportunities that are welcoming to parents?

Sue French:

Very often you’ll have parents who will say, “well, my children needed me when they were in primary school but now they’re in high school they don’t need my presence as much”. Sometimes you have parents who say, “well now my kids are in high school I can go back to work.” And so, I think it would be fair to say that, the engagement of parents in high schools is really hard to get in the way that a primary school would have it. The sort of things that we really promoted, particularly in my last school, was inviting parents to participate in conversations. We gave them a safe space to be in. We were very,



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

very keen about students having Individual Education Plans so that we could make sure that we were doing the right thing. Not only for Aboriginal kids but, certainly, we made sure that every Aboriginal student had an Individual Education Plan. The beauty of a Individual Plan is that it's not a deficit model and ,the way we did it, required us to meet with the child and their parents twice a term. So at the beginning of the term or early in the term and then [again] at the end of the term to try and keep an eye on where we were up to. The first time you ask the parents to come - maybe they won't, and the second time -maybe they won't because they don't really know that you're all that serious about it. So you really, really have to persist and keep inviting them and inviting them. Finding places where you can talk to them if you don't want them to come to school. "Perhaps we can come around to your house. If you don't want us to do that well, maybe, we can meet you in a coffee shop; my shout." It doesn't really matter because in the end the most important thing is them being present for their children. The really important thing for any child is for their parents to be there with them and schools, in my opinion, should do whatever it takes to make that happen.

Carly Boreland:

How many years can it take to build these kinds of strong relationships? I imagine it must take a while to keep at it and for parents to know that you're going to be there next year and the year after?

Sue French:

It never stops; because there is always somebody new.

Natalie Pierson:

And sometimes you have to explain to them – “ no, this is what it's about” because often their experiences of coming up to the school may have always been negative. So when they get an invitation to the school they start to panic and think - ‘what has he done wrong now? Or what has she done wrong now?’” So often we also say to teachers “if little Johnny has done something amazing and you usually have a bit of trouble with him during the day, ring home and say ‘look, Mum I just want to let you know he's just done x, y & z and it's been fantastic and we're really proud of him’” Because it just builds that positivity and the parents they do start to then answer the phone. Often they'll see the school number and they'll hang up because what if it's negative. But once it starts to become positive and the only way to build that is by tapping in on some of the things that are positive because positive things happen all the time and sometimes we just focus on the negative.

Carly Boreland:

Speaking of positivity and I think, separately ,probably coming to the end of our recording here, would you take us through some of the positive achievements that we could say are happening in education? It just struck me when you were saying “positive” – there are probably lots of positive achievements to celebrate so far.



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Sue French:

I reckon there are, and Natalie would have a better take on the most recent annual reports around Aboriginal students. In my career we've gone from Arthur Phillip and no understanding of Aboriginal people or Aboriginality and no desire really to a position where every one of our Syllabuses, specifically and explicitly, has an expectation around learning about Aboriginal Australia - that's a great achievement. We have the partnerships with AECGs all over the country but mostly in this state - that's a great achievement. I think we heard a statistic today of 1200 Aboriginal teachers in NSW now.

When I was a principal, I was one of 5 principals; there are more Aboriginal principals now. Have we won? No, but I reckon that we're really well on a pathway to great change. And I think we should all be proud of that. But none of us can rest because we're not there yet and it will be well after my life has ended before we actually get to *there* but it is a journey worth taking.

Natalie Pierson:

I think teachers genuinely want to do better in Aboriginal Education. We have a lot of teachers that come to our professional learning sessions and they're genuinely there because they care and they want to make a difference. I very rarely find people that are coming just because they're trying to get their accreditation. I do find because I have conversations with teachers in our professional learning and a lot of them are there for the right reasons and they are there to improve their pedagogy and their practice, in the classroom, - and that's been exciting. We have conferences every year and we get over 200 hundred people and we have to stop the enrollment numbers because we can't fit them into the room. We get people that are coming from outside of Ultimo that want to participate in some of our programs so I think that people genuinely wanting to make a difference. Often teachers will say to me, "I don't know where to start" or "I don't know where the safe place is" but they come and they ask those questions. And I think we give them a platform where they feel safe to ask those questions and I always say "no question is a silly question". I always keep my presentations as informal as possible so that people can just feel free to chime in if they need to or have a conversation. But some of the really successful things - every year we have state Nanga Mai Awards and I know that every year in our area: we have principals getting awards; we have schools getting awards; students getting awards. And that's, probably, a really huge highlight because, I know, I guess the applications that come through I get to cull at my level and some of the applications are outstanding. You think "Wow how are they going to choose one person?" Every year it's quite exciting to hear the stories. They read out each student's bit of a rap on why they got their award and I think that's really exciting -just to watch our students blossom and grow.

Sue French:

We're really good at identifying the negatives always and, I think, if ten things happen and eight of them are good, let me tell you mostly we'll be talking about the two that weren't so good. You know, if you get an evaluation, one evaluation that is negative; that's the one that you're worried about not the ninety-nine that were fantastic. So I think that sometimes when we talk about gain we do focus more



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

than I would like to see on the negatives. They have to be acknowledged; but I think that we should be sitting next to those negatives the real positive stuff that going on.

Natalie Pierson:

Yes, I agree. I was just thinking like, even with our newly appointed teachers that are coming into our classrooms, a lot of them are priority placements so they are placed into schools as an Aboriginal priority teacher. So a lot of them also face a little bit of negativity, from some of the other staff who are not permanent, and who are wondering “how did you get this permanent job?” So in coming into a school with a permanent job there is also this expectation that - “So you are the Aboriginal teacher, you have received a priority placement in this school, so what are you going to do in Aboriginal Education because that’s how you got your job?”

I had it happen to me, as well, when I started teaching, actually when I left the last school I was working at before I got my fulltime position. They sort of said “where are you going? How did you get that?” When you say that you’re an Aboriginal priority placed teacher they kind of just – “yeah...” It’s not a nice experience and a lot of our first year out teachers face that as well. So they have that pressure that “I’m new in the school and I’ve got this job because I’m Aboriginal” which is not why they got the job but they then have this expectation of “now I need to lead everything in Aboriginal Education because everybody’s looking at me and the pressure is on me to deliver.”

Carly Boreland:

And an important message that comes through in a lot of our podcasts is that it takes a really long time to get really good at teaching. Just hours on the job is not going to do it you have to spend many hours and reflecting on that and concentrating on improving your teaching practice. Everybody needs the opportunity to become a great teacher before they take on all these other big and important roles perhaps.

Natalie Pierson:

And to be a role model it doesn’t take on too much for our teachers to be that role model for the first few years while they’re developing their craft and becoming a great teacher. It’s not hard to be that role model and to be the teacher that the students can look up to; to be the teacher that the parents might feel comfortable talking to. I don’t think there’s huge responsibility but I think a great place some of Aboriginal teachers can start.

Carly Boreland:

Natalie and Sue it’s been my pleasure learning from you today. Thank you very much for chatting with me.

Natalie Pierson:

You’re welcome.



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CPL Podcast: Leading Aboriginal Education K-12

Sue French:

Thank you for having us.

Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the NSW Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the Editor of the JPL and I've been speaking with Natalie Pierson and Sue French. To find out more and to listen to further podcasts you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Natalie Pierson is a proud Koori woman from La Perouse, Sydney. She is currently an Aboriginal and Education and Wellbeing Advisor for Department of Education and has been working in an advisory capacity for 10 years. Prior to this position Natalie was a classroom teacher at Darlington PS for 12 years. In line with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (2015) Natalie is responsible for leading the development, implementation and evaluation of an extensive range of educational programs for Aboriginal students, their families and communities and their teachers. Ongoing professional development is provided to Directors, Principals, Teachers and Community. Natalie is a passionate advocate for Aboriginal Education. She has a strong focus on improving the outcomes of Aboriginal Students as well as educating all students and educators about Aboriginal history and culture.

Sue French is descended from Hannah Waurrie from Coolongolook, a Birpai woman. She began teaching in 1979 as a Science teacher specialising in chemistry and physics and has worked at a number of city and country high schools. She has been a Principal since 2002. She has experience as a State coordinator for a joint Department/ NSW Teachers Federation initiative: The National Schools Network. She is also a Life Member of the NSW Teachers Federation.

In addition, Sue has been:

- Federation Representative at Parkes, Peakhurst and Ashfield Boys High Schools
- Federation Executive member and Vice president from 1985 – 2000
- Federation Councillor 1982 - 2002
- President of Parkes, St George and Inner West Teachers Associations from 1982 – 2002
- Board member Teachers Federation Health 1986 – 2002 and Chair from 1996 – 2002
- Numerous committee memberships with NSW TF including finance committee, post schools committee, grievance committee
- Science syllabus committee 1983-2002



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- Vice President AEU ACT 2002 -2008
- President High School Principals Association ACT
- Advisor to the Minister (ACT)
- NSW Aboriginal Education Reference Group
- Secretary's Aboriginal Education Advisory Group
- State Assembly member, Secondary Principals Association