

## News from WEF

Report from the National President

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President, WEF (Australia)*

As this is the last refereed volume of *New Horizons in Education*, it is fitting that we pay tribute to the outstanding contribution to the work of WEF made by the editors and editorial boards of the Journal. In particular, we would want to acknowledge the professionalism and devotion to duty of our editor, Margaret Kiley and the contributions made by Margaret Henry as Associate Editor and Anne Feeney as Business Manager—they have worked tirelessly to promote the vision and objectives of WEF through the *New Horizons in Education*. We hope that each Section will now ensure that the WEF website and Newsletter assume the key functions of ensuring WEF Members are kept informed of major events in the State Sections, and by providing ready access to keynote speeches and articles that contribute to our efforts to establish a world community through education.

At the last Annual General Meeting of WEF Australia in January 2006, the State Sections discussed how WEF might improve its efforts to further international understanding by strengthening its ties with UNESCO and ensuring the functions and purposes of WEF better reflect its international character. WEF Australia is consulting with other national Sections seeking their comments and support for the following proposals:

- i. That the sections of WEF internationally be brought together in regions, similar to the UNESCO regional networks, to (a) improve and strengthen our Non-government status and ties with UNESCO, and (b) provide new structures for WEF with the purpose of renewing and activating its purposes and functions.
- ii. That the WEF Guiding Committee be restructured to be fully representational of WEF Regions and conduct meetings via emails and conference calls in between international conferences.
- iii. Given support from elsewhere, it is intended to present the proposals to the 43<sup>rd</sup> WEF International Conference being held in Sofia, Bulgaria from 27 August to 1 September, 2006. The theme of the Conference is *Education for Full Humanity in a Technological and e-learning society* (see [www.wef-gb.org.uk](http://www.wef-gb.org.uk) for details).

The Conference will explore the issue of whether we should see technology as a threat—an obstacle to personal relationships, a filter through which our contact with the world is distorted, and a buffer that cuts us off from our roots—or if we should see it as an opportunity—opening up new ways of creating works of art, offering chances to communicate with people around the globe, and providing a material base upon which values of democracy and creativity should flourish. In the end, I suspect that the answer lies in the extent to which, on the one hand, both education and the technology are “owned” by the community (local, regional and global) and serve the common good, or on the other, they are controlled by, and serve the vested interests of, elites. This brings us back to the role of WEF as an a-political, non-government organization seeking to promote greater social justice and equality by working together to improve the education available to all worldwide.

Historically, WEF has differed from most non-government organizations working in education in that it does not represent a particular professional group. It seeks to bring all citizens

(educators, parents, students, employers...) concerned about quality and equity in education together, and to encourage cooperative community involvement in clarifying educational goals and undertaking educational programs. WEF is also about building a global community, the subject of a book hot off the press and deriving from the global project undertaken on behalf of WEF by the late Jack Campbell and finalised by Nick Baikaloff and myself. Entitled *Towards a Global Community: Education for Tomorrow's World* and published by Springer (see [www.springerlink.com](http://www.springerlink.com)), the first part of the book provides a picture of the type of community that leaders from a diversity of nations and cultures see as 'preferred global futures' and the attributes that need to be developed through education 'to empower young people to live well both as individuals with unique potentials worthy of fulfilment, and as responsible members in a very diverse and restless global community.' In the second part of the book, the focus shifts to ways in which education can contribute to the development of the attributes deemed to be essential to the realisation of the type of community sought by participants in the WEF global study. Chapters include several by prominent WEF members on issues like basic education for all (Colin Power), early childhood (Margaret Henry), sustainable development (Richard Baldwin), living values (Judith Lawley), conflict resolution (David Woolman), world citizenship (Rob Gilbert, Joe Le Bianco). As such, the book elaborates the central themes of both the WEF and UNESCO (particularly, the Delors Report, UNESCO, 1996).

After a decade of research on the relationship between the public and education, the Kettering Foundation (Matthews, 1996) has documented a deteriorating relationship between communities and schools, and the weakening of the historic commitment to public education in countries like the USA and Australia. The Foundation argues that we need to concentrate more on the community and its concerns, and that it is unlikely that schools and colleges will change unless the capacity of citizens to band together and act together improves. Putnam's research (1993) on the civil society in Northern Italy also suggests that the vitality of Northern Italy relates to the strength of the civil society. The networks of civic associations, norms of reciprocity and social trust that characterise communes in the region create high levels of voluntary co-operation and a "public" that owns the community's civic projects, including schooling. Improving education-community partnerships is not just about improving schools and universities—it must be about building a strong civil society, healthy communities. To the degree that each WEF Section captures the concerns of its community and provides an avenue for citizens to engage in dialogue and action, WEF can contribute to building a strong, healthy civil society, something very much needed in an age in which the fundamental principles of participatory democracy seem to be under threat.

#### References

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- Matthews, D. (1996) *Is there a Public for Public Schools?* Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Putnam, R.D. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- UNESCO (1996) *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Paris: UNESCO