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Jennifer Buckingham walks the talk at school

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Jennifer Buckingham is a prominent advocate of school choice. She's middle class and strongly believes parents should be able to choose where they send their children to school. So which primary school did she choose for her two daughters? Raymond Terrace Public School, located in the low-income town of the same name, just north of Newcastle in NSW.

More than half its students are from the bottom quartile of socio-economic rankings and about a fifth are indigenous, both indicators that are statistically linked to lower academic outcomes. Buckingham says that when her eldest daughter, who has just graduated from year six, started at Raymond Terrace in kindergarten it was perceived by many in the town "as a school people wouldn't deliberately send their children to".

What makes her choice of school all the more interesting is that Buckingham is an education policy specialist and research fellow at a right-wing think tank, the Centre of Independent Studies (CIS). From her perch at the CIS, Buckingham is a strong advocate of private schools and their role in providing wider choice to parents.

Yet she chose a struggling public primary school for her daughters. Why? "I could see the potential at Raymond Terrace Public School, and thought that I had something to contribute," she says.

Buckingham and her husband, Scott Chapman, both grew up in Raymond Terrace, which sits on the banks of the Hunter River half an hour north of Newcastle, and it's where they now live. Chapman actually attended Raymond Terrace Public School, but both the school and the town were then quite different. In the years since, there's been an influx of public housing and the level of wealth has fallen. "None of my old friends sent their children there," Buckingham says.

For the first year or two after her eldest daughter started kindergarten in 2008, she didn't dare reveal to school principal John Picton that she worked as a think tank expert in education policy.

"Working with the CIS, you don't necessarily know how sympathetic a school principal is going to be," says Buckingham now.

For his part, Picton says he had no idea that one of his school mothers was a well-known education policy specialist and was shocked when he found out. He knew Jennifer, at that time, not as Buckingham but by her married name.

"At kindy orientation, I wasn't introduced to this educational researcher," Picton says.

Parental involvement

But along with the right to choose, another part of Buckingham's education credo is that parents should be able to be influential in their children's schools – and that is exactly what she has done.

With Picton at the helm, and plenty of input from Buckingham, Raymond Terrace has seen a remarkable lift in performance. In 2008, Raymond Terrace's Naplan results were level-pegging with similar schools in the area. The latest available 2013 figures show it is significantly ahead of its peers. It is also well ahead of the three other primary schools in the town – two public, one Catholic.

At a time when Australia's schools are seen to be failing – with literacy and numeracy standards falling against comparable countries, and a sharp ideological divide over the Gonski funding scheme and the national curriculum – Raymond Terrace stands out as an example of what can be achieved in an individual school by a committed principal who has solid support.

The Raymond Terrace story is also notable on another level. Buckingham is an education commentator who walked the talk and enrolled her own children in a failing school she intended to help improve.

What were the secrets to lifting the school's performance?

For Picton, the discovery that he had a school parent who was not only a respected education researcher but also wanted to be more involved with the school came at the right time. He had spent most of his teaching career in low-socio-economic-status schools, and when he arrived at Raymond Terrace nine years ago there were many problems. "The place didn't have good results and the staff were negative about what the expectations could be of the kids," Picton says. "That was the pedagogy that they were introduced to and were using."

Once he knew Buckingham's background, the pair started talking about how to improve things.

"I realised that John was interested in what I had to say and vice-versa," she says. "My getting involved in the school didn't necessarily send it on a different path. It was already on that path. All I was able to do was, with my contacts and connections, provide some extra support and external guidance than might have been available otherwise."

One key development was a visit from noted educational reformer John Fleming in 2010. Fleming's 10 years in charge of Bellfield Primary School in Melbourne is one of the celebrated success stories of turning around a failing school, and last year Fleming was appointed by federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne to be deputy chair of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership. Fleming came to Raymond Terrace to offer his advice.

It was a turning point in Picton's willingness to engage with Buckingham.

"Had John Fleming been a waste of time, I probably wouldn't be here talking to Jennifer today," says Picton.

It led to three "pillars" – principles set then which the school still operates by.

One is explicit teaching, where the key skills of reading, writing and maths are taught explicitly and directly to students and then practised repeatedly until testing shows they have got it. This is in contrast to still-popular education theories in which children are expected to master these fundamental building blocks of knowledge by exploring for themselves.

Another is building a relationship with the children, and expecting teachers to get to know each child well and understand what they are capable of, with the aim of boosting self-esteem.

Last, there is creating high expectations, in which children and parents are encouraged to aim for the best.

Literacy early intervention

Buckingham was also instrumental in bringing to the school an early-intervention reading program for children whose literacy was lagging. She had heard of the

work that Macquarie University's Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman had done in developing a phonics-based instruction in which children systematically learn the sounds for each letter and how to join the sounds into words. They turned their work into two programs for schools to help struggling readers – MultiLit and MiniLit.

When Buckingham discovered that Wheldall was looking to do research in a school, she seized the opportunity. "I thought, that's a way of tapping into this - program which has been getting such great results," she says.

The result was that MultiLit, MiniLit and a bevy of researchers came to Raymond Terrace to work with the children who were falling behind. Buckingham joined in, deciding to do a PhD on literacy and social disadvantage with Macquarie University, drawing her research data from the school. She completed the doctorate last year.

At this point, there was another positive development for the school – more money. Five years ago, it was given \$400,000 extra annual funding for four years under the federal government's then national partnerships program. Picton says when he heard the news, he went straight to Buckingham and said: "We've got \$400,000. What would you do with it?"

Drawing on Buckingham's advice, Picton decided to spend half the money on a mentoring scheme. He employed two new teachers so that two of the school's - experienced teachers could become full-time mentors.

It was a risk, says Picton. "We thought that staff might have been quite reluctant to open themselves up to observation and demonstration of lessons. But because of the credibility of these particular teachers, it was taken on board early," he says.

The intense mentoring of teachers was the key to embedding Picton's "three pillars" across the school. When a child moves up a year, they are taught in the same way using the same terminology. "You can go into your next class and roll on with it using the same language," says Picton.

Based on his experience, Picton firmly believes that low-income children are not condemned to perform poorly at school. It's all about expectations, he says. "If you set high expectations, if you build relationships with your kids, if you trust in their ability to be able to learn, you will get the results from them. There's no reason why they can't."

"If you listen and observe the dialogue and interaction of the kids in our school compared to five years ago, it's amazing," Picton says.

Naplan scores bear this out. In 2008, Raymond Terrace was in the middle of the pack of schools from similar socio-economic areas for numeracy, reading, writing, spelling and grammar plus punctuation. In 2013, Raymond Terrace is either at the top or close to it for all five skills in both years three and five.

Nationwide, more and more students are being withheld from Naplan, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that some schools keep poorly performing students out of the tests in order to improve their results. But that's not how it is at Raymond Terrace. "Every child is encouraged to participate," says Buckingham. "It's a really big thing not to game the scores. It's important for every child who can do the test to do the test."

That includes children in the school's classes that cater to special needs – Down syndrome, autism and hearing problems.

"It does have an influence on our scores," says Picton. But he says Naplan is an important diagnostic instrument. It tells teachers how students are performing and whether they need special attention.

Extra funding no longer available

Picton's problem now is to ensure that the programs can continue even though less funding is available.

The \$400,000-a-year the school was getting from the national partnerships program has ended. The Gillard government was going to replace it with the Gonski funding reforms, which would have made extra money available to disadvantaged schools like Raymond Terrace. Picton's school would have benefited on at least four counts – being regional, a high number of poor families, a larger percentage of indigenous students, and disabled students.

The Abbott government has not gone ahead with the expanded Gonski funding, which would have kicked in from 2017. Would Picton like to see the Gonski scheme go ahead as originally planned? "Definitely," he says.

Buckingham understands why Picton, as a school principal who is delivering results, wants the Gonski money. But she says money is only beneficial if spent wisely.

In a report she wrote last year for the CIS, School Funding on a Budget, she points out that government funding for schools has more than doubled in real terms in the past 25 years, while numbers of students only increased by 18 per cent. And, in spite of the massive increase, school performance declined.

Picton, too, admits that success at Raymond Terrace depended on spending the extra money well. He says the school was very fortunate with the people and resources it was able to use. "We could also have had the \$400,000 and wasted it," he says.

Buckingham has been an influential voice in school education since 1999 when her first report for the CIS was published documenting the decline in boys' education results, which eventually led to a parliamentary inquiry. She was also a strong advocate of public access to school performance data. And she championed explicit instruction – including using phonics to teach reading – which now has backing from Education Minister Pyne.

But Buckingham says her involvement in the Raymond Terrace school has influenced her. She says she has seen from the ground up how schools operate – how hard teachers work and how seriously they take their jobs. It's also helped her change her thinking on some issues.

She knows that, given her background, people assume she would support performance pay for teachers based on their classroom results. But she doesn't.

"Having spent a lot of time in a school, I can see it's not a one teacher/one student situation," she says. "You can't even isolate the effect of one teacher on a class. There are so many different factors which feed into that and the teachers all work together."

Buckingham's overall input

For his part, Picton believes he's been very fortunate to have had Buckingham involved in the school. "She has a lot to offer and she's offered a lot," he says.

Her contribution has not been limited to helping only the teaching side. As a parent, Buckingham is very active in the school's P&C. She and her family turn up at working bees. She has boosted the school music program, and has helped co-ordinate the building of a new deck and barbecue area. Its uses include showing kids how food moves from garden to plate, using ingredients grown in the school vegie plot.

The day after her interview with *AFR Weekend* is school presentation day, at which Buckingham's eldest daughter will graduate from year six. Buckingham sees the humour of it. She will be there early putting jam and cream on scones. Then she will sit among the VIPs in the hall. But the minute it's over, she will "duck out around the side" to help serve morning tea.

"I've got skin in the game, my own kids are here," she says. Her other daughter has three more years at the school.

"So if the things I had suggested to John and the programs that I have been involved in had crashed and burned, then it's not as though I can skip back to my own school. I'm here."

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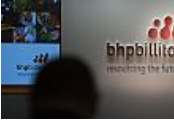
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