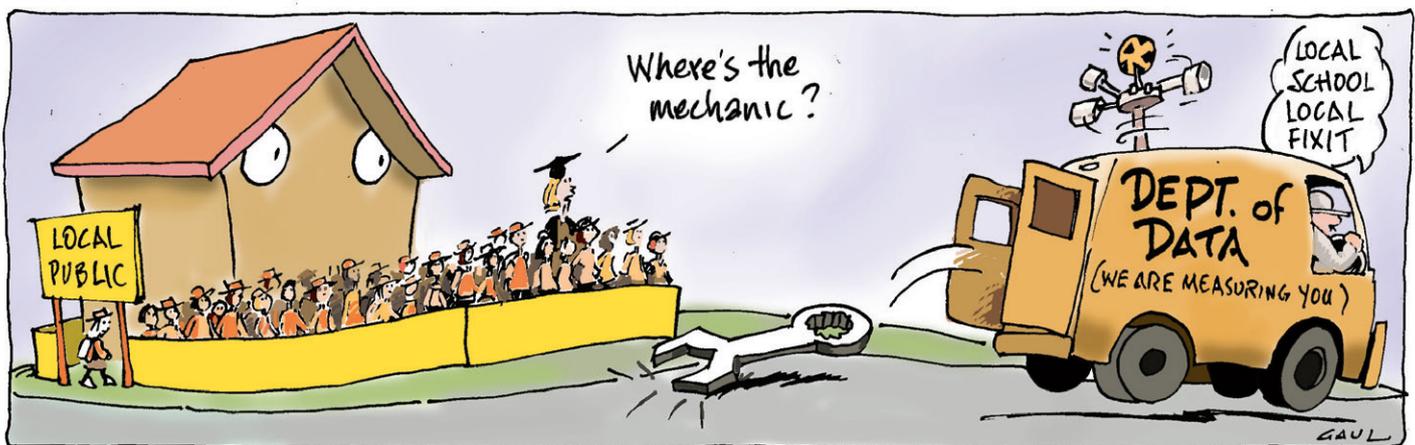


PRESIDENT WRITES

CAN SOMEONE HAND ME THAT SPANNER?

MAURIE MULHERON



Does the Department of Education have anything much to do with education any more? Is it even still a department or is it more of a secretariat? These are crucial questions.

We are a large system that is growing: 790,000 students are enrolled and educated in over 2200 schools across the state. There is a large teaching and support staff workforce. Yet, in spite of this, the Department is shrinking. Its capacity to support schools is diminishing.

But it is not just the declining capacity of the Department that concerns the profession: it is the change in the functions of the Department. Where is the centrality of "education" in the Department of Education?

Between 2012-2015, the number of teachers grew by 1610 and the number of school administrative staff by 587, a total of an additional 2197 positions. Yet, in the same period, the number of educational support staff and officers in Department offices, both centrally and in regions, was reduced by 698 fulltime positions, an enormous hit.

This was the reality of Local Schools, Local Decisions, a deceitful ploy marketed as "school autonomy" but designed to disguise the head office cuts caused by the 1.5 per cent funding that the Department has to return to the Treasury each year.

So, what replaced the people, the public servants and non-school-based officers? In most instances, nothing, as the work was forced onto schools. The Staffing Unit phone rings out because there are much fewer people working there now.

So, instead of personnel the approach has been to provide schools, principals and teachers, with "tools", presumably to put into "toolkits".

How often do you hear someone get up at a conference or a meeting to launch the latest tool? It is as though they think the use of an industrial metaphor will make everyone think something useful has been provided. It is no accidental use of language.

Schools do not need more

tools. The toolkits are jam-packed. They need people. Extra pairs of hands. Educators employed by the Department who can work in and between schools. People with curriculum, pedagogical and assessment expertise to hand teachers and principals the proverbial spanners.

Yet, the release of the Department's contact details for school operations lists one officer with responsibility for primary education and one for secondary. Two people, 2200 schools. Think about it.

Compare that with the Department's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), one area of the Department that is fond of forging tools. It grows in size each month. There are estimates of up to 80 people working in that section with these kinds of roles:

- Business Analyst
- Business Intelligence Specialist
- Business Intelligence Microsoft
- Data Scientist
- Senior Data Scientist
- Solutions Architech (sic)
- Master Data Manager

- System and Data Management Coordinator
- Business Intelligence Tech Lead
- Data Quality.

On it goes. We would be hard-pressed to find a Dip Ed among the lot of them yet their influence on what and how our teachers teach and our students learn is growing exponentially.

There's one certainty. These statisticians and psychometricians are not generating data to support teaching and learning in schools. Instead, the data is used to create accountability mechanisms, artificial political targets such as those found in the Bump it Up Strategy, and mind-numbing busy work.

Things have to change. We need to rebuild the Department of Education's capacity to support schools in real and meaningful ways that go to teaching and learning. By that, I certainly do not mean increasing the number of Directors who, in too many instances, often act as though they are members of some praetorian guard.

We now have a Department with no capacity to provide professional development. No capacity to support teaching and learning. No curriculum expertise. No capacity to develop leadership. And no

capacity to deliver systemic improvements. All that responsibility has been heaped onto schools.

Instead, we see an unhealthy obsession with data masquerading as evidence that is used

to create punitive, burdensome and irrelevant accountability processes that are affecting the health and wellbeing of so many of our colleagues.

In short, after years of the undermining of its educational

functions by the government, with the most radical being Local Schools, Local Decisions, the Department of Education is morphing into a Department of Data.