



**SWITCHED ON:** Northfield Primary students Cassie and Jared talk to Jerry Piasecki from the UN about children's rights.

# Virtual classrooms net great rewards

**CLARE PEDDIE**

COMPUTERS are creating new learning experiences for students in virtual classrooms, challenging the fundamentals of the education system.

Kadina Primary School principal Mark Sparvell has worked with schools across Australia to create online learning environments that provide access "24/7" to resources and discussion forums.

"Concepts of what is a learner, what is a classroom and what are school hours are being challenged as we increase our ability to learn anywhere, any time and from anyone," he said.

"The educator's role is and will continue to be critical in ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved in shaping and structuring the opportunities, connecting learners to experts and framing the questions required for deep, reflective thinking."

Mr Sparvell, who was named Australia's most innovative teacher by Microsoft this year, was among the first teachers to be trained in the Department of Education and Children's Services' "eTeacher" project.

Project officer Kay Clifford said the idea was to show teachers what they could do for their students in an online world.

"At the moment I think we're really doing

a disservice to our students if we don't take this on board," she said.

Ms Clifford said the inquiry-based learning experiences used innovative technology to support and extend learning for schoolchildren of all ages.

This year there are 24 DECS eTeachers in SA schools. Ms Clifford said each spent the equivalent of one day a week developing "rich online learning experiences" that "complement and enrich" classroom activities.

"We do go from early years right through to senior secondary," she said.

"There is a strong sense of DECS priorities, like maths and science, literacy and numeracy, and the senior secondary influence with SACE, but (the learning experience) can vary on topics and content.

"It can be delivered online in real time, synchronously, or asynchronously through a learning management system."

She said DECS also offered courses for teachers at sites across the state or online, to help them take advantage of the learning experiences.

During Term 2, Northfield Primary School eTeacher Jennifer Rossiter launched her website on child rights called "It's my right... It's my responsibility".

The students from Northfield connected

with their peers at other United Nations Peace Schools and learnt about the experiences of child soldiers in Africa.

Year 7 student Cassie, 12, helped facilitate a web conference with the founder of the peace schools program, Jerry Piasecki.

"It's really exciting, because it's an experience you don't want to miss, knowing that we're doing all we can to protect the children and the soldiers and knowing that every child gets their right to do what they want when they want, if you know what I mean," Cassie said.

"It was really fun, too, because you could hear all the other kids' questions and it's fun to learn how to use new things."

Ms Rossiter said the resources were available for learning "any time, anywhere", courtesy of the eTeacher program.

"So even though Jerry has already given a web conference, we've recorded that, so any other school that wants to learn about child rights can actually go on to that site and listen," she said.

"And there's a whole moodle - an online learning environment - teachers can tap into at any time."

## School of thought is spreading

**MARIA MOSCARITULO**  
EDUCATIONNOW EDITOR

TEACHING of innovative "thinking skills" in the classroom may become common pedagogical practice as more schools adopt these strategies to develop deeper reasoning, logic and creative analysis in students.

In the past few years, the implementation of methods - such as Bloom's Taxonomy (which structures teaching into six levels required for effective learning), Edward de Bono's now familiar Six Thinking Hats and Tony Ryan's Thinkers Keys - to underpin teaching and learning has snowballed in SA.

"It is a good way to not just teach to the average; to look at ways we can get students to think more deeply," said Wendy Teasdale-Smith, state president of the College of Educators.

Ms Teasdale-Smith - who writes further on the topic on Page 69 of EducationNow - said the strategies were underpinned by sound research on brain development and she envisaged it could become standard teaching practice.

"Some things do catch on and then become just what we do - a normal part of how we structure our curriculum - and I think this has potential because it is so broad... it has got more resonance than a variety of other things that come and go," she said.

Schools from Ingle Farm Primary School to Wilderness School have adopted variously named "habits of mind" or "community of inquiry" across their curriculums.

When done well - and inevitably this comes down to an individual teacher's skill and the resources a school can put into professional development - the skills employed ideally stimulate more creative approaches to learning and problem solving.

Torrenville Primary is one of a number of schools which has incorporated thinking skills across the curriculum. It began using the methods about a decade ago after implementing them for their "Students of High Intellectual Potential" gifted program.

It was one of a cluster of schools in the area to do so, generating interest in its work from interstate and overseas.

Assistant principal (primary years) Kym Meredith said there was "a continuum of skills going across the school".

"The little kids, for example, will start out looking at simple things like de Bono's Six Hats and so on, and gradually through the years more complex things are introduced," he said.

"The tools that they use are to assist their thinking processes, particularly around learning... (and) pursue a particular learning task they're interested in. This is the hope, that it would affect the way they actually operate as a person.

"We're always encouraging the kids to act on their learning... we hope they don't just talk the talk but walk the walk when they go out there and vote and think and consume."

Mr Meredith said it was difficult to quantify how the practice changed outcomes, but said students anecdotally volunteered their opinion and that it helped them "unpack" their thoughts and deepen their learning.

He rejected the idea that tools like alphabet cues and structured discussion could regiment thinking.

"We're very confident our IB (International Baccalaureate) kids are doing well and the other thing for us is - particularly for middle schools kids, young adolescents - we find that the behaviour management is a lot easier when the kids are engaged in their learning, and they really are engaged in their learning here."

# Parents back minimum hours

**LAUREN NOVAK**  
EDUCATION REPORTER

PARENTS hope new minimum teaching times for maths, English and science in South Australian primary schools will bring Australia in line with top-performing countries and lift student test scores.

Figures reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show Australia lags behind countries such as the Netherlands, France, Mexico, the UK and the Czech Republic in teaching time committed to core subjects.

On average, students in the 30 countries in the OECD spend 50 per cent of class time on reading, writing, maths and science, compared with 24 per cent in Australia. In

contrast, Australian teachers have the flexibility to dictate what is taught in 59 per cent of class time, compared with just 4 per cent of flexible time as the OECD average.

Earlier this month, *The Advertiser* revealed the State Government would, from 2012, require primary teachers to provide five hours each of tuition in numeracy and literacy and up to two hours in science to students each week.

Crafters of the new national curriculum are considering time allocations for science teaching of between one and four hours a week but none for literacy or numeracy.

A federal Education Department statement said the designers would "draw upon exemplary curriculum materials from the states".

State Education Minister Jane Lomax-

Smith said she would present SA's policy for consideration at the next national meeting of education ministers.

SA Association of State School Organisations director David Knuckey, who represents the parents of state school students, said the new requirements in SA were "welcome" but "overdue".

"As we see in the (OECD) figures, we're ranking dead last in the amount of time we spend on the basics," he said.

Mr Knuckey said he had been surprised by the Government's announcement after earlier comments by the state Education Department that students were performing satisfactorily in literacy and numeracy testing.