**ADRIAN PICCOLI transcript S1 EP1 .mp3**

**Speaker 1 is Jane** [00:00:10] Hi, and welcome to Talking Teachers. I'm Jane Hunter. This is an Australian Education podcast series wherein each episode will be exploring what is working and what isn't in our schools. We'll be talking to some of the most informed people in the field and asking questions about the big issues in education. We also want to investigate if it's at all possible to find new solutions to the current challenges in school based education. I'm co-hosting this series with my colleague Don Carter, and we're both teacher education academics at UTS.

**Speaker 2 in Don** [00:00:54] Hi, Jane. It's the first episode of our Talking Teachers podcast, and I'm really looking forward to it.

**Speaker 1** [00:01:00] Me too. Don and today's guest will be talking about tackling change in education, which is no easy matter.

**Speaker 2** [00:01:09] For sure, Jane. Dealing with a range of stakeholders and their concerns, plus navigating the education bureaucracy provide unique challenges.

**Speaker 1** [00:01:17] It's complex, Don, as you and I well know. How do you actually balance the lobbying from various interest groups toeing the party line, due process and bureaucratic red tape with your own unique vision of education? Today, we're going to be talking with someone who has faced these realities and much more to achieve major reforms in New South Wales. Education.

**Speaker 2** [00:01:44] Exactly, Jane. Our guest today is Professor Adrian Piccoli, a former New South Wales politician, a serving member of the New South Wales Parliament for 19 years. He was also New South Wales Minister for Education from 2011 to 2017. Adrian led a political campaign to reform school funding in Australia and led initiatives to strengthen the teaching profession in New South Wales, including great teaching inspired learning reforms. Now a particular focus has been the learning needs of disadvantaged children, particularly those living in rural and remote New South Wales. In 2017, Adrian was made Professor of Practice in the School of Education at UNSW and has also been a Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders. Welcome, Adrian.

**Speaker 3 is Adrian** [00:02:32] Thank you very much, Don and Jane. Thanks for having me. It is a fascinating subject. Always has been and I'm sure always will be.

**Speaker 1** [00:02:38] Adrian, I'd like to kick off this very first podcast by asking you a question about your most memorable achievements. But before I do that, I wanted to let you know that a feature of this podcast series is what we call the thirty second rant. At the end of the interview, we're going to give you just 30 seconds where you can talk about any issue you'd like to. Let's get started. What were your most memorable achievements?

**Speaker 3** [00:03:09] I would say three things. Two were reforms. The school funding reform, obviously, I think was significant for New South Wales and significant nationally. And I was really pleased to be able to play, I think, an important part there. It was important reform. It was certainly extra dollars. But even more importantly than the dollars was a focus on equity groups. My particular interest in rural and remote New South Wales, when was first shown the chart about which schools were going to benefit the most from the Gonski school funding reforms, and it showed that as certainly the percentage level, rural and regional were going to benefit the most and then Western Sydney and south western Sydney, and that really convinced me about the importance of that. It was a challenging few years, but fascinating at a policy and at a political level. It was a Labor government in Canberra. We were a conservative or coalition government in New South Wales. It just gave me a lot of satisfaction to be able to be part of achieving a reform that was going to benefit students so much. But also, you know, I think quite sort of nation building in that sense. The second one was around great teaching, inspired learning around this whole issue of around quality teaching. And as the academics and others were saying to me, because I also spent two years as the shadow minister for education. I had a I had a build a lead up time before I became minister, which not everyone gets when they're a minister, but it was really important to it. Even understand the acronyms in education before you start in the job. But everybody talked about the importance of quality teaching, about what did it mean and if you were a government or a system leader, what do you do to support or improve quality teaching? The term quality teaching? What is it? What does it mean? What, what and what can you do to improve it or sustain it? That's when we sent the head of the Board of Studies and the head of the department a way to look at what are the actions you can do to improve it. And you know, again, like most things, not a silver bullet, but a series of reforms. And I think they were important. And then third thing really is the thing that I'm proudest of was the feedback that I got from schools. After a number of years, schools from the catholic, the independent and the government system, certainly while I was minister, and Dr Michelle Bruniges was the Secretary of the NSW Department of Education, we managed to get the whole education system moving in one direction, that, you know, we worked closely between the government system, the independent and catholic systems. We worked with universities and the Board of Studies. We all seemed to be moving in the same direction in education. Hopefully in a positive direction. I think it’s an important achievement when everybody's working together for the benefit of students. And there wasn't any conflict between the sectors. Well, sorry, not no conflict, but there was less conflict between the sectors. Everybody was moving in the same direction.

**Speaker 2** [00:06:14] Why was that, Adrian? Why was there less conflict at that time between the stakeholders?

**Speaker 3** [00:06:20] I think it's because we listened to all of the stakeholders very closely. We did a lot of consultation and a lot of communication. Before we made it, made any announcements about anything, even if we knew stakeholders weren't going to be happy, they didn't learn about it when they read it in the newspaper. I mean, we did things that the unions didn't like. We did things that the non-government sector didn't like. We did things the department didn't like either. But as a government and as a minister in our office, we were always informed. We tried to inform them before it happened. There was a lot of trust and we spent a lot of time building up that trust, as the years went by, we could do things and push the envelope a bit further because the stakeholders trusted that we weren't we weren't doing things for ideological reasons or we weren't doing things for sort of nefarious reasons. Everything we were doing, we were trying to do for the benefit of students so they would trust us to push those things a little bit further.

**Speaker 2** [00:07:18] You've mentioned trust, Adrian. You've mentioned the New South Wales Department of Education. There's the Federal Department, you've mentioned a range of stakeholders, but who holds the power in education?

**Speaker 3** [00:07:28] That's a good question. I think over a long period it's the education bureaucracies that do because they're very big players in education. The Commonwealth Department and State Departments, I mean, you know, have the State Departments run, you know, they run all the schools. They employ all the teachers in public schools. They are the big players. The media has a big impact. Parents and often the media reflect the views of parents, sometimes a microcosm of parents. An outlet like News Ltd, when they're splashing things on the front page of their newspapers, it does have an impact on politics. And this goes to the role of the Minister for Education. And often people say, well, yeah, but you weren't ever a teacher or a principal. I don't think you need to be because it's not your role as a minister to be a representative of teachers, because actually what you are is actually a representative of the community as an elected member. In our Westminster system, ministers are representatives of the community, of voters, of taxpayers, whatever you want to call them. It's the department's job to provide the best advice around what's in the best interest of schools. The minister's job is to take a step back from that and make decisions that are in the best interests of the community more broadly. And that's whether it's education, health, transport, police, whatever other department it might be. That brings the minister sometimes into conflict with their own departments because they are making decisions that are, well, political is the word, but that the political arm of government sees is in the best interests of the community as they see it, not necessarily in the best interests of government departments or schools. That sometimes brings us into a fair bit of conflict. Parents, the media and politics – have a significant influence of what happens in education.

**Speaker 1** [00:09:27] How do we ever get to a stage where teachers believe that their professionalism is listened to – they hold that very close to their hearts. How do you match that? You say that it's not important that you were a principal or a teacher because as a politician you are representing communities. That is a huge tension to me. How do you ever resolve that or is that just how it is? And is it any better now than say, it was when you finished your time serving as minister in 2017?

**Speaker 3** [00:10:08] I think our system works well where you have where you have ministers who are not necessarily from the sector that they're responsible for, That we don't have you know, I think it's important at a political level that you are separated from the sector that you're representing because you can come in with your own biases, having been a teacher or having been a principal, or you don't want to be seen unfavorably with your former colleagues. And that's a challenge as well, because as a minister, you do have to make difficult decisions. You do have to cut budgets. Sometimes you do have to make decisions around changes to the way performance is managed in education. And if you've been there and you've got lots of friends and your former colleagues where your decisions are making an impact, it can be very difficult. We made difficult decisions around some of those things, including budgets, and they just had to be made. And I think sometimes coming from outside the sector makes that a little bit easier.

**Speaker 2** [00:11:09] Adrian, you're a part of a New South Wales Coalition government and you were dealing with a federal Labor government. What was that like?

**Speaker 3** [00:11:17] When I first became a minister, the government in Canberra was a Labor government, Peter Garrett was the Minister, and then Bill Shorten after him. And I found that dealing with the Labor government was in many ways easier than dealing with a Coalition government when the Abbott government was elected, because at a political level and this is the joke in politics too, you know, it's not the people who sit opposite that you should be worried about it’s the people who sit behind you. Important to your opponents and for your opponents to know exactly where you stand. Whereas on your own side, sometimes you don't know exactly who your opponent is. But look, I found that it was very easy to deal with the Labor government, there were professional. I've found sometimes dealing with the Coalition in Canberra was a bit more challenging and sometimes a little bit more superficial. I mean, we dealt with the government, the Labor government, during the whole Gonski thing, so there was a lot of interaction, but I always found it be very professional and we were both trying to achieve a national policy outcome. When the Coalition got elected, there were attempts to unwind Gonski. Maybe that's why it was a bit more challenging because I suppose in Canberra they thought because we're both Coalition governments that we should just do whatever the Coalition in Canberra wanted us to do, and we didn't think that was the right thing for New South Wales.

**Speaker 1** [00:12:40] I think there's a lot of talk around whether or not we should have bipartisan views on education, and you've just touched on the fact that although you were a member of the Coalition, you found very favorable commentary interactions with your Labor counterparts during the time that you were education minister. Do you think that we actually need to move away from the three and four year electoral cycle as far as education goes? I mean, when there's a new state government, when there's a new federal government, we have this big change up and how reform takes so long in education. And I'm sure that most of us who've been in the game for a long time, you know, figures around ten years to make any major sustained changes. Do we need to have a bipartisan agreement around education?

**Speaker 3** [00:13:38] I don't think that's achievable and I don't think it's necessarily a good idea either. The tension of, you know, in politics, when you see it on the news, on the news can look very ugly. The arguments, the debate. But it's actually constructive to have that kind of tension. You do want ideas tested and challenged. I'm not sure that the changes to the Gonski to the school funding might have happened if there wasn't that tension between political parties when Labor wanted to do something that was going to be kind of groundbreaking in that education space. That's why they commissioned David Gonski to do the work and then they put the money forward. I'm not sure that if there had been any sort of peace agreement between the two parties, two parties over education, that that might have even eventuated. It might make things come up, but I don't think it necessarily makes things better. I think you want that tension, but what you need is patience. And political parties don't necessarily have patience and the public doesn't necessarily have patience. And this is where this sort of public and politics comes into play. And I mean, literally, it's I mean, what's in the newspapers or on television, but it's local. It's constituents going into MP offices and going, hey, you know, the school system's no good. You need to do something. You need to change it all radically. You know, that's the pressure that politicians get put under. And that's why sometimes, you know, these changes occur. But you need patience in the same way. And I when the school funding started to change to a post Gonski time, people were saying, oh, look, you know, we've spent this money, there's no change after a year. And I used to say, well, you know, when they built the north west metro train line, it took ten years. But after the first year of building it, people didn't say, well, the metro is no good because there's no passengers on it. Right. It needed the time to be finished before it was actually effective. But they don't have that same patience when it comes to social policy like education, whether it's funding or changes to the curriculum or whatever it is, it takes time and the public need to have patience.

**Speaker 2** [00:15:39] One issue that's been quite big in the media recently is the teacher shortage. Now, this is not just limited to Australia, it's international. Adrian, in your view, what's caused it and what can be done about it?

**Speaker 3** [00:15:52] Yes, no doubt a teacher, teacher shortage and a distribution problem. Some schools don't have any trouble getting applicants for jobs. Other schools have a lot of difficulty. I think there are more schools that have difficulty than maybe even a few years ago. But the other thing to say is there's also shortages in other areas. Right? I nursing, in in lots of in lots of areas. This staff shortage and recruitment problem is not unique to to education. There's no silver bullet, that's for sure. It is around the experience that teachers have in the workplace. And Jane, you mentioned that before. You know, teachers take their professionalism very seriously and they should. But what seems to have happened in recent years is this there are there are more and more constraints on how you can use that professionalism and that just turns people off. And in any job, people want to be able to use their own intuition and their own skills and to do their job. But if you're constantly told you've got to do it this way, you've got to do it that way, you've got to all this reporting, all this admin, etc., it takes the joy out of the the role. Now, I've never been a teacher, but I'm just reflecting what lots and lots of teachers have told me. I think one of the problems here is, you know, this collection of data. Collecting data, this is this problem that collecting data, sometimes you can turn a good idea into a really bad idea when you try and expand on it. Collecting a bit of data is really good and then saying, right, that's really great, it'll be even better if we collect even more data and you reach this kind of ‘tipping point ‘where it becomes a negative. I think those are the kinds of things that now drive teachers nuts. You know, for some the accreditation and some oversight is really good. even more oversight should even better. But it just becomes debilitating - I think that's part of the employee value proposition problem that teaching has.

**Speaker 2** [00:17:45] Adrian, you mentioned the word intuition, and I was really interested to hear you say that because I believe in teaching. There is a lot of intuition on the part of the teacher. This is about relationships in the classroom, etc. and it's complex. And it's not just a numbers game, a data game, as you've pointed out, but when you a minister, wouldn't you the minister who introduced the three-band fives and the net plan requirements from for year 9. How do you reconcile the two?

**Speaker 3** [00:18:14] The two are completely reconcilable in my opinion. I mean, what we were trying to do there is actually motivate students to give that plan some purpose because so much of the political rhetoric is around the PISA and TIMMS results. Part of the problem was students just don't take that plan seriously. Certainly not in year 9 from all of the feedback that I ever had. I mean, we talked to a class of students once about this requirement and a student at the back said all they're trying to do is make us work harder. Yes, that's exactly right. And it didn't interestingly. It jumped the one year it came into effect before my successor got rid of it. And I've spoken to Rob Stokes about this before, but it jumped the Year 9 results by about 25% in one year. Right. Now, did they know more? Probably not, but they just took the test more seriously. Now, again, that that jump nap plan results by 25%. But the ‘Sydney Morning Herald’, etc. couldn't wait - they were just all over it and wanted to get rid of it. Yet a month before they were talking about how poor our NAPLAN results were. You can't have one without the other. But you know, I don't think it affects or it wouldn't affect the intuition or the interpersonal skills that you have as a teacher. I would think most teachers want to have students more motivated. And if that increases the motivation of students, then that's not a bad thing.

**Speaker 1** [00:19:43] A lot of very important points there, Adrian, as teacher education researchers, not only Don and I, but our colleagues who work in the policy space in their research - evidence they gather from teachers, principals, professional associations and so on. It often seems that politicians are not really interested in the research and evidence base. I mean, not unilaterally, but it seems that if it's not in a marginal seat, for example, and the research evidence is saying one thing it will be completely overlooked because it's not in the interests of the marginal seat gain. I've actually seen this from the inside myself/ Why is it that research evidence from teacher education, and ITE academics from our large research associations, like AARE for example, is given such scant regard.

**Speaker 3** [00:20:55] I don't know that that's quite right. I mean, a minister's office should not be a policy generating organization. Ideas can originate from there, but it certainly shouldn't be all driven out of ministers. That's when it gets very dangerous. And I've said before, you know, the press release is the biggest threat to good education policy because, it sounds good. It's in a marginal seat, you know, a bit like let's give everybody a computer, you know, even the BER (Building the Education Revolution). Remember the photo op – it had to be an iconic building because you could go and take a photo in every marginal seat with the new building and the new opening. Yet they wouldn't fix an old toilet because that wasn't iconic enough. You're right at a political level. And the things that get announced in press releases are not the unsexy policy things that researchers might be focused on. My experience with government departments, they do look at the research. When we did the “Great teaching inspired learning”, one of the first things that they produced for the Department and for the minister's office was a literature review around what the evidence was saying. They do use it, but it's not necessarily the subject of things that ministers or premiers or prime ministers might announce, because it's often, especially in social policy, it's not necessarily newsworthy, but it's important policy change.

**Speaker 2** [00:22:15] Speaking of which, in March this year we have a New South Wales election. There might be a change of government. If the current government stays or there is a change? What advice would you give to that minister?

**Speaker 3** [00:22:30] Any minister who would be willing or who has ever been willing to take my advice, I would say, always speak to schools directly. Don't believe everything the Department or stakeholders tell you because sometimes they're wrong and they come from their own perspective. And I'll only speak for my own experience. The best thing I ever did when I was minister was when I used to go and visit schools. When I started, when I said, come and visit schools. The principal would take me for a look around and show me all the new things, I even got shown the little cupboard where they put all the computer cabling in one time. Which was wonderful - they were very proud of their schools. I started to realize that a valuable use of my time and it’s important to still do it. But instead, what I'd ask the Department to do, is get me a dozen principals from the neighboring schools. We might have a look at the school and then spend an hour in the library with a dozen principals. No one from the Department was in the room and we’d ust sit down and listen to what principals are saying. It was invaluable because they would be very frank about what's working, what's not working, what they need, the vibe of education. I learned a lot. I've always said to ministers, you should do it, you should do that, get that direct feedback and triangulate every bit of advice that you get. You know, your partner will give you advice, the catholics, independents will give you advice. You'll hear stuff from the from Treasury. You learn things from everywhere. But you've also got to triangulate it from the coalface as well. Principals always took 5-10 minutes to warm up. But there's also ttrust, because I had the opportunity to be minister for six years -the longer I was there, the more they trusted me and the franker their feedback would be. It reached a point where I would sometimes know more than some people in the Department about what was going on, and I'd be able to give them the feedback.

**Speaker 1** [00:24:18] Oh, to have been a fly on the wall in those conversations. Look, it's that time in the interview and in our exchange and conversation, Adrian, for you to have your rant. You've got the floor now for 30 seconds.

**Speaker 3** [00:24:35] Yeah, nothing works in education unless it works in the classroom. At the moment the pressure that teachers are under - it’s pressure that's been driven by their own bureaucracies, whether they're independent catholic or government schools. It's the pressure driven by schools. You know, for anybody who's a future minister, whether it be New South Wales, Canberra or any other state, they really get to understand what's happening in schools. Try and ignore the pressure from the media and these other voices that are trying to actually make teaching much more difficult because the more a teacher loves their job, the longer they're going to stay, the better job they're going to do. Every student you talk to when you ask them who their favorite teacher is, including my own children, when I ask them, they say it's the teacher who has time for them, who knows their name, who understands them as an individual. They're the best teachers and the most effective teachers. We want to have as many of them working in our schools as possible. Whatever you can do as a minister to facilitate that, work on that, and ignore everything else.

**Speaker 2** [00:25:43] One last question. We talked we asked you about your achievements. You've had a few years since you've been Minister for Education - what would you have liked to have done that you didn't have time to do?

**Speaker 3** [00:25:55] Post my time as minister, I wish that some of the standard setting that we had done, whether it was some of the reforms and “Great teaching, inspired learning”, even the requirement the three-band fives to get into teaching. I wish we'd pushed those a bit harder. I see some of the things that were introduced, and this would be the same for any minister that when it came to be implemented, it got watered down. Some of the stuff got watered down. I wish we'd been a bit stricter there and said, no. No, this is how it's going to be implemented - this is what schools are saying they want. This is what we're going to give them and not allow that inertia within bureaucracies to water documents it down. I wish I'd got more involved in the culture of the bureaucracy and, you know, worked harder at making that work more effectively.

**Speaker 2** [00:26:41] Alright, thanks, Adrian. I hope that doesn't keep you awake at night. This has been really fascinating. Thank you.

**Speaker 1** [00:26:46] Thank you so much, Adrian. Really important insights and we appreciate your time.

**Speaker 3** [00:26:52] My pleasure. My favorite topic to talk about. Always happy to discuss education and our schools.

**Speaker 1** [00:27:05] Don, terrific to have the opportunity to speak to Adrian and especially to hear his reflections five years or more post his time as education minister. And of course, he's worked at the UNSW Gonski Institute where really took up a number of challenges. And I was really interested to hear, what his beliefs are around, ‘inspired teaching’, for example, that policy and his ideas around that – it had very good intentions. And I've actually heard a lot of principals say that in essence it was great policy but watered down in its implementation. Very sad because I think that did make a difference at the time. How do you reflect on his thoughts?

**Speaker 2** [00:28:07] What really struck me, Jane, was the degree of alignment between the New South Wales Coalition government and, say, the Federal Labor government. They had a series of common aims and goals. They talked and consulted with stakeholders so that there was a unified front, which isn't always the case in education. He did make the point that some of the initiatives were watered down in their implementation, which is a real shame.

**Speaker 1** [00:28:37] Yes, look, it's always after the fact and, you know, with a bit of distance, you often perceive things differently, how you would do things another way. But he made a very important contribution. Thanks so much, Don.

**Speaker 2** [00:28:55] Thank you, Jane. Very enjoyable episode.

**Speaker 1** [00:29:04] Thank you for listening to this episode of Talking Teachers. If you'd like to know more about Don and me, you can look at the UTS website, simply Google UTS Teacher Education, where you'll also find show notes for this podcast. The podcast was produced by William Verity for Impact Studios at UTS, which specializes in turning research into quality audio. We wish to acknowledge that the series is being recorded on Gadigal Land of the Aurora Nation. We thank and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.