Young readers, writers 'just make grade'

By Education Writer
STEPHANIE RAETHEL

School students have received a mixed report card for reading and writing skills in a new South Australian report.

The final report of the Writing Reading Assessment Program shows skills in two of the three Rs, reading and writing, are only just making the grade in some areas.

On the plus side, students obtained the image of a generation, of poor spellers by returning a 96 per cent accuracy rate for spelling in Year 6 and a 98 per cent rate in Year 10.

In the reading section, Street Machine and Dolly magazines topped the list of favorite book, magazine or comic for Year 10 students.

These were followed by the popular thriller Flowers in the Attic by Virginia Andrews, Forever by Judy Blume and the classic The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton.

Among the top 10 authors chosen by students for recreational reading were Virginia Andrews, romance novelist Danielle Steel and Stephen King.

Favorites by J.R.R. Tolkien, of Lord of the Rings fame, and Agatha Christie also made the list.

More than 50 per cent of students said they found the texts they chose very easy or easy.

The three-year assessment of Year 6 and Year 10 students from 61 SA primary and secondary schools shows girls read more than boys and perform better in writing tasks.

During the four-week survey girls averaged more than 406 pages of fiction, compared with an average of 242 pages for boys.

The report found financially disadvantaged students and those from non-English speaking backgrounds read less and had a higher proportion in the lowest two groups for most writing tasks.

The report sounds alarm bells on the high proportion of work copied from blackboard notes or textbooks and warns that the small amount of original work being done should be investigated.

There also is concern about the length of work, with about 50 per cent of writing tasks in Year 10 coming in at less than one page in length.

In Year 6 the average length of writing tasks was half a page.

Students' handwriting was judged as "generally legible" and more than half was in print rather than linked script or cursive writing.

This is despite the introduction of SA Modern Cursive into schools in the past decade to help students write more efficiently.

Year 10 students excelled at writing tasks summarising material, with 66 per cent of students taking out top marks for these tasks.

Science report writing was the weakest area for both years, with 21 per cent of Year 6 students and 35 per cent of Year 10 students scoring in the lowest group.

Program co-ordinator Mr Alan Lastett said most students handled the conventions of reading and writing well.

But he said more work needed to be done on tasks involving the organisation of ideas and information.

Literacy test attacked as a publicity stunt anyone can pass

A senior English teacher has dismissed a Year 11 literacy assessment program as a "publicity stunt".

The teacher, who did not want to be named, said the South Australian Certificate of Education literacy assessment would not improve writing standards because "basically anyone can pass it".

Students doing Stage 1 SACE studies (Year 11) have to submit four 250-word written English pieces in categories such as humanities and mathematics.

The teacher said the SACE test was a "political exercise to justify more education cuts.

"The Senior Secondary Assessment Board of SA wants most of the students to get through," he said. The teacher gave *The Advertiser* samples of work approved as satisfactory by SSABSA.

One sentence read: "Sonals is the area of investigation which I'm investigating in."

Another read: "I learn't new machining costs."

The teacher said: "There are real literacy problems which are embarrassing to teachers."

But he said the SACE test was not the answer because by Year 11 students' bad habits were already too deeply ingrained. He suggested spending more money on training children while they were still in primary school.

— Johan Revalk

Watchdog slams SA home fees

By NADINE WILLIAMS

South Australians selling houses worth $150,000 pay the highest fees to real estate agents in Australia — almost $6000.

And the Real Estate Institute of SA has come under fire from the Prices Surveillance Authority for its charging methods and "anti-competitive" agreements between institute members.

The maximum amount of $5940 set by the REISA is $2300 more than the $3660 charged by Victorian agents to sell a house with the same price tag of $150,000. This represents a 62 per cent increase in fees over Victoria.

The price "overcharge" is disclosed in an interim report by the PSA following its investigation of the REISA's practices and tradition of setting maximum fee scales.

It finds SA's fee scale is "too high" and the PSA chairman, Dr David Cousins, says he has "no hesitation" in saying some vendors were being overcharged.

"We have not seen any justification for the existing level of fee scales in SA," Dr Cousins says.

"It is clearly anti-competitive ... we are pointing to the negative impact we believe this fee scale has on competition."

The report, released yesterday, follows a two-month investigation into fees charged by Australia's estimated 30,000 real estate agents on residential transactions.

Fees make up one-third to a half of total transaction costs incurred in buying and selling a house and vary from State to State.

The report recommends maximum fees on the sale of houses Australia-wide be dropped and prefers a fee structure relative to the work done by the agent.

"Our main aim in examining proposals for reform is to achieve an efficient and competitive real estate industry," Dr Cousins says.

In other recommendations, the authority finds the real estate industry Australia-wide is overregulated and lacks competition in several key areas.

It says licensing standards for real estate agents can be lowered.

Barriers to entry in the real estate industry are anti-competitive. Such restrictions are not in the interests of home buyers and sellers.

Dr Cousins says real estate agents are "a protected species" and requirements for them to complete a three-year part-time course and have two years experience in the industry "may be excessive".

He welcomes a recent decision by the Trades Practices Commission to review its authorisation of the RA Institute's set fee structure.

"The institute may lose its right to set fees," he says.

Maximum fees are designed to protect consumers, but Dr Cousins says they have failed because agents almost always charge the maximum.

He condemns any moves by the institute to "co-regulate" with the State Government the granting of licences to agents.

"At the moment, the licensing system in SA is in the hands of the Government and a commission tribunal, which grants licences," he says.

"The REISA has proposed co-regulation to enable them to operate the licensing system themselves.

"We are highly sceptical of that sort of proposal, which is likely to perpetuate the high costs of the licensing system and unlikely to operate in the interests of the public."

The REISA was unavailable for comment yesterday.

But Real Estate Institute of Australia chief executive officer Mr Phil Roberts said it was "somewhat hypocritical" of government to be so concerned about the real estate industry and how agents' fees contributed to housing sales transaction costs.

"After all, the use of an agent is voluntary, while the major slice of transaction costs is the entirely unavoidable levy of government fees and charges," he said.

Cheryl's life all stitched up

The eyes have it for Cheryl Bridgart's unusual works of art. Picture: RUSSELL MILLARD

Cheryl Bridgart's life changed forever when she decided she loved Adelaide more than her job.

She was working happily at Para Hills High School as an art teacher in 1988 when the Education Department announced it was her turn for a stint in the country.

If Cheryl refused to transfer to Penola in the State's South-East she would either have to resign or take four years' leave without pay.

"I like it here and decided to take the leave," Cheryl said from her home in Clearview.

Faced with years of nothing to do, she sat in front of her beloved sewing machine and started making art with a needle and thread.

Her dramatic, unique embroidery has now stitched her a reputation in Australia's art world.

Cheryl works with a good-model electric sewing machine, heavy cotton material and ordinary thread. She has removed her sewing machine's foot — the strip of metal holding the needle in place — so the needle can be moved in any direction.

She sketches a design on a piece of paper, hangs it on a wall and then copies it.

"Sewing a picture on a scrunched-up piece of material isn't easy," she said. "I sew in exactly the same direction as I would draw.

"It's a tremendous challenge and I like to think I've taken embroidery from a craft to an art. I certainly think of myself as an artist."

Cheryl obviously can't mix colors but gets the same effect by heavily overlaying different colored threads. "People often think my works are paintings *until they get close up," she said.*

Cheryl is the only artist in Australia specialising in this type of embroidery and concentrates on human faces with dramatic eyes.

"I love eyes and unusual expressions," she said.

She frames much of her art but also works it on to clothes, particularly jackets and waistcoats. Pieces take from 100 to 500 hours to finish and she often works 12 hours a day.

Cheryl has had exhibitions throughout Australia but is having trouble getting one in her home town.

"Putting on an exhibition is a big risk for a gallery and costs a lot of money," she said. "I may have to wait until the recession is over."

Newsmakers

Rapper Ruxton to sing for the Shrine

★ BRUCE RUXTON, who thought rap was a prison sentence, is about to break into the cut-throat music business with his own rap single. A leather-jacketed Bruce with black sunglasses and ghetto blaster has agreed to put out his own CD single next month, with video, to help pay a $1.5 million restoration bill for the weatherbeaten 58-year-old Shrine of Remembrance. The Bruce Ruxton Rap SOS (Save Our Shrine) was conceived after the Australian Tax Office refused tax deductibility for the appeal earlier this year. Mr Ruxton, who is Victorian RSL State secretary, was unavailable for comment yesterday but project co-ordinator Mr Colin Dix said three of the song's 16 verses were about Prime Minister Mr Keating and others would be on the flag and Australia's future as a monarchy.

Bob 'n' Hazel show to hit the airwaves

★ BOB and HAZEL HAWKE will team up on one of Perth's top-rating morning programs for a couple of days next month. Mr and Mrs Hawke will compere radio 6PR's Batter Fits on August 13 and 14, conducting interviews and taking talk-back calls. The station's general manager Ms Cheri Gardner said negotiations with Mr Hawke began soon after he was dumped as prime minister last year, but were delayed when Mrs Hawke entered hospital for surgery. "Mr Hawke has already prepared a list of people both he and Mrs Hawke would like to talk to on air, as well as a variety of topics for discussion," Ms Gardner said. Financial details of the couple's appearance will not be released, but rival radio personality Dennis Commetti recently told listeners he had tried to get Mr Hawke on his show, but had drawn the line at the $1000-a-minute fee requested.

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Defence sets war crimes trial scene

By DAVID BEVAN

Ivan Polyukhovich's bid to avoid a Supreme Court trial on war crimes charges could start in November, his defence lawyers said yesterday.

But if that fails the trial probably would be set down to start early next year.

Polyukhovich made his first appearance in the Supreme Court yesterday after Justice Duggan decided he could be arraigned — notwithstanding the defence challenges to the prosecution.

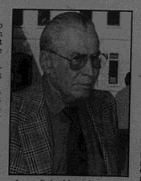
The 76-year-old pensioner then made his way into the Samuel Way court complex and, more than 2½ years after he was arrested, uttered his first response to the charges.

Polyukhovich pleaded not guilty to having murdered eight people and to being involved in the murder of about 850 people from the Jewish ghetto in Sernki.

All of the offences are alleged to have occurred in German-occupied Ukraine in 1942, in pursuance of a German policy of racial and/or political persecution.

The defence has lodged an affidavit with the court asking for the charges to be quashed or the prosecution permanently stayed.

The affidavit claims Polyukhovich will be prejudiced in trying to defend himself because 50 years have passed since the alleged events. It says "by reason of the passage of time, (Polyukhovich) is unable to locate or produce witnesses and documents in his defence".



Ivan Polyukhovich enters court yesterday.

It says the defence has statements from people who were present at the relevant times but who have died or become too ill to travel to Australia since giving those statements.

Other potential witnesses are unable to recollect events due to the years. The affidavit claims the evidence produced against Polyukhovich has been contaminated by several things, including "the local environment and culture of the witnesses" and Soviet investigative measures.

The defence will argue the court also should take into account Polyukhovich's age, that it was unfair to lay charges against him directly in the Supreme Court and that potential jurors could have been contaminated by publicity given to the court case.

In a brief in-chambers hearing before Justice Duggan, senior defence lawyer Mr Michael David, QC, said the defence would be ready to put its arguments by November and he estimated a week should be set aside.

If the defence failed the trial could start early next year. If all the charges were heard he expected the trial would take two or three months but Mr David indicated the defence would apply for some of the charges to be tried separately.

He told the judge Polyukhovich would not be applying for trial by judge alone. Mr David also indicated the defence might apply for the court to go on a "view", which would mean taking a jury to Ukraine.

Toddler drowns in covered pool

A 20-month-old baby has drowned in a fenced and covered pool at Oaklands Park.

The baby boy crawled through a gate and under the cover on Sunday before falling into the pool.

His body was discovered by his parents.

Despite efforts by ambulance officers who tried to resuscitate the boy at the scene and on the way to hospital, he was declared dead on arrival at the Flinders Medical Centre.

Police have revealed little about the tragedy, although a spokesman said the boy's parents were extremely distressed.

A report is being prepared for the coroner.

The law in South Australia requires properties which contain a pool to be fenced but the actual pool is not required to have a security fence.

It is late in several other States for a fence to be erected around the immediate area of a pool regardless of whether the property is fenced.

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