From all sides podcast transcript

Episode 22, Stephen Gniel, CEO at Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)

Speaker Key:

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Transcript:

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nothing I've seen is saying to me, don't worry, soon it'll slow down. It'll be like it was 30 years ago. So, I think it's incumbent upon us, particularly as leaders of large systems to accept that that's the case.

IV Our guest today is Stephen Gniel. Stephen is the CEO of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment  
Authority. The VCAA and its partners in the Victorian education system are currently doing a major reform of senior school education. It's billed as one of the biggest changes since the introduction of the VCE.

It follows the Firth review, which was handed down in 2019. Stephen is going to talk to us not only about that reform, but also about the task of leading major, complex and multifaceted, even once in a generation reforms, and what leaders can learn about that process and how we set up our systems to adapt into the future. Stephen, thanks so much for being a part of this conversation.

IE Great to be here Tom. Thank you.

IV We want to focus our conversation today on the large reform program that you're leading  
together with others in the education system focused on senior secondary schooling. It's been described as the biggest change since the commencement of VCE. Can you tell us a bit about that reform, for those of us who don't know a whole lot about senior school education, since we went through it ourselves, tell us tell us a bit about the reforms that you're pursuing.

IE It is a once in a generation opportunity. And it’s certainly something that I'm really excited about  
as both an educator. My background is a teacher and school principal. But also, education system leadership, and how we how we change things in response to contextual changes. We've all seen that through the last couple of years, definitely in a more exponential fashion. But technology changes, work changes all kinds of things.

It's fantastic for me to be involved in such a huge shift in education in Victoria, where we're really  
changing fairly dramatically, our Senior Secondary Certificate, that doesn't happen often. And the reason for that is that, people need to know what they're doing, when they're going through school, not just the students but their parents and the broader community rely a lot on what we do throughout the years of schooling.

And really importantly, how we finish it, what that looks like in those last couple of years of senior  
secondary. The Victorian Certificate of Education has been in place for a long, long time, in fact. The single Higher School Certificate goes back to the 70s, VCE pilot in the late 80s and the introduction of the VCE in 1991. We've been running like this for three decades. To be someone that's been in education for a long period of time now for 25 odd years, to have the opportunity to have a leadership role in this level of reform is pretty unique and fantastic.

IV Part of the backstory is about the divide between vocational education and training and other  
pathways through senior education. Tell us a bit about that divide and how that's created problems.

IE It's an interesting one, Tom because that single certificate came in really early on. What they  
found though, is that that worked for a whole heap of kids. It was really a great thing. There were some students who was were missing out. It wasn't working for everyone. So, VCAL, the Vocational Certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, is the acronym stands for, came from that need.

This need to engage all students, not just those that saw themselves on a purely University type  
pathway. And many years ago, that was the preference, the pathway through university was a thing that everyone talked about. Certainly, through my schooling, that was the thing that people were sort of aiming for is through the university.

There was this divide. We had the VCE, the Certificate of Education. Then we had the Certificate  
Applied Learning that was created. We had the two streams, and that worked really well, in some instances but it didn't get the whole way, if we put it that way. And it created this divide between what people saw as an academic pathway through the VCE, and an applied learning pathway through VCAL. And created what's in the Firth review, which is this false dichotomy. It's not that you only do academic and never apply it. I don't know what job that is but it sounds interesting.

I don't know any applied work, where you don't have to have some academic knowledge and  
some thinking that's the behind that. You think of all the trades and I certainly hope my electrician has some academic qualifications before they start playing with the electricity around my house. And that goes for all of those applied learning, traditional apprenticeship pathways. And those indeed into work, direct from school.

There was this false dichotomy. There was the sense of a second tier for VCAL when the reality is, that does not apply whether it ever applied is probably a question, but it certainly doesn't apply.  
You think of what the work environment looks like, we need those people with those skills that we may term applied learning, but actually are really highly academic knowledge-based skill-based areas that contribute to our economy, along with those professional services that might go through a more traditional university pathway.

IV You mentioned too, the length of time that's passed between the creation of the VCE, just the  
changes in the economy, and what drives our success over that period is enormous. It seems to hit right at that point that you were describing. People needing people with both excellent applied skills and academic knowledge. Those two things going hand in hand, it's how we how we innovate, isn't it? It's how we create new ways of doing things that drive our economy forward. Now, it's clearly not a time for that stark dichotomy between two different types of learning.

IE It’s really important that education has an outward view, that we're not just insular about, this is  
the way we like to teach, or we like students to learn. What we have to actually do is be preparing them for their future. So, that's the now and the future. And the context that our students are now leaving in, is vastly different to 1987 or 20 years ago, when VCAL was first put in place as well.

The world is changing so quickly. And I think that something is part of this, and a part of any other  
reforms we've got to think about is, the set and forget after a big reform is not really a way that we can continue in the future. I don't see that we'll do this work over the next couple of years and then think, thank goodness, we've done all that. Wipe the brow, sweat away. Think it's another 30 years before we need to do that again.

I think we've actually got to set these things up so that they can be more agile. The word of 2021, I think it was, so that they can respond more quickly to changes in the economy, in research innovation. What we need to provide in terms of a workforce, as well as what social skills and other things we want all of our children to have as they come through to participating in broader society. It's not just about workforce, it's also about each of those individuals contributing. And that goes to valuing, valuing what all of those students bring, and what they then contribute throughout their lives.

IV You mentioned in your introduction, this idea of the vocational pathway being seen as lesser for  
some, and perhaps an undesired pathway. And how add a step that is with the types of skills and abilities that we need in our economy. Is part of that story the way the community view education, and we view different educational pathways. And I suppose looking forward, in a forward looking way, looking at your reforms, trying to break down that dichotomy in those ways of thinking, how much is the community a part of that and how much are you thinking about sort of messaging and engaging with the community to break down that problematic way of thinking about education?

IE That was a big part of John Firth’s review. He really looked at those unfavourable perceptions  
around VCAL, and the applied learning pathway at large. And was really clear that, we needed to A, have a really high-quality product, no point trying to dress something up that's not high quality. So, that was the first thing is you've got to have something that people see as high-quality. People have got to be able to access those sort of things. We've also then, got to also try and give that language to the broader community.

One of the things John Firth in his recommendations talked about was that, we would need a   
wide-ranging media strategy. So, alongside these changes to the actual certificate, the nuts and bolts, there's a media campaign going on right now called Many Talents One VCE which really tries to say, we need all of these things. These are all equally valid and really important roads.

I think, Tom, and this is probably going back to more my schooling and those times. I think we  
always heard that a way to earn higher incomes and have better lives was through university pathway. And I think, the parents of today are the people that heard that, that grew up with that. That's, of course not actually the case now. There's a whole heap of people whose incomes are a lot higher through applied learning pathways than necessarily that traditional road through university.

So, there is a perception that needs to change there. I think the more that we celebrate the   
success of those people who have gone into some of these other industries, and who may have a great income, but also a really fulfilling life, work life. I always think of people that are doing fly in fly out, on the mines. When that started happening and you looked up, how much he got paid to drive one of those big rigs around the Kalgoorlie mines, I think it blew most of our minds.

These weren't people that were necessarily university trained. We've got tunnel builders. We've got all kinds of sort of jobs happening right now, give people that job satisfaction, because it's probably what they're more interested in. But it's also rewarded in terms of the income some of those people might aspire to. So, I think those things are changing. The more we celebrate the success and break down those barriers that reinforce what is not the reality, it is not the reality anymore, that that is the only pathway.

There are huge numbers of pathways that students will find, even those that might start at university can end up doing something different. Those that start in an applied learning pathway, in inverted commas may end up at university. One of my good mates start as a boilermaker, and now he's an engineer. There's a whole heap of different ways to contribute to the economy. But also, to find that sort of satisfaction in yourself of something you like doing.

IV There is an alignment to that story, isn’t there? You mentioned you started with an ad campaign  
and some of the communications that you're doing. But implicit in what you're saying, too is the importance of an alignment between those messaging, what we're also saying and seeing and celebrating in people's successes across the course of their lives. Then also what we're setting up and what we're actually delivering, you mentioned a quality product. And it sounds like an alignment between those things is really important to achieving some sort of change in people's perception rather than selling something that doesn't stack up in terms of what you're actually delivering.

IE We get one chance at it. The promise has to be matched by what we deliver. Otherwise, very  
quickly, people revert to what they've always known. I think rightly so, there's some good pressure on us for the delivery of these reforms. I quite often talk to my team and others about this reform is a jigsaw. It's not just the one thing. There were 38 recommendations in the Firth review, all of which were approved and supported by government.

And if one of them is missing, it is like missing a piece in the puzzle, the picture is not there. It's not complete. They are as far ranging, as you’ve said about ad campaigns and changes to certificates. But also, the provision of vocational and applied learning. How do we make sure that students have access to those things? If we're saying they're that good, then they've got to be able to access it.

So, each of those recommendations in itself is a reform, when they're packaged together, they're a transformation, a significant change. But it can't be done with just one piece at the time. You’re trying to push them all at the same point, and make sure they're all humming along together, because one falling down can really collapse that whole transformational approach that we're trying to undertake. One of those pieces fails, it can mean the end to the big reform, to the whole thing. And that's where this coordination, and how do you make sure all of those things are on track?

IV Let's turn to those reforms themselves, the delivery of your significant large jigsaw puzzle. Why  
don't you tell us a bit about how you and your partners across the education system, how you're organising yourselves to deliver something as big and complex as that? How have you set yourselves up and how's it going?

IE I think it's going really well, to be honest. And that's thanks to some of the setup. I think it started  
with John's report, so John Firth’s review. And John was formerly the Chief Executive Officer at the VCAA. So, my role that I'm in now and he was in that for a long period of time. He had a good sense of the pieces and where some of those issues were. But John really listened. And he not only gave us a review, he gave us a bit more of a roadmap. These are the things that need to come together to deliver the reform.

But in doing so, that was the challenge that it wasn't just one area that could be solely responsible for driving this through, it had to be a combination of all of those 38 recommendations and all of those pieces. So, I've been fortunate enough to be in this role now, for a couple of years. I was formerly a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Education and worked really closely with our secretary in her role, obviously. And she and I really would, talking about how to best set up for this reform so that the governance and the way in which we oversaw it meant that we could pull those things together.

So very early on, the Secretary set up a joint project board, where she and I chair. So, the VCAA as the authority with the curriculum, the assessment for senior secondary. But the Department of Education with a lot of those levers around the provision of vocational learning, funding of schools. All of the other pieces that need to come together to make the thing fit together. So, having a having a jointly-chaired board like that was something that's quite different.

I haven't known of that to occur where a secretary and an authority CEO have jointly chaired something like this, and Jenny and I do that together. So, that was sort of at a governance point. And that includes those deputy secretaries across and those sort of roles that really need to help us drive this whole thing. The other thing that was put in place, the creation of a taskforce within the Department of Education.

And as well as combining those things, the governance operation were combined as well. So, pulling together some of the disparate parts that needed to be working together to transform this. And so, we have an assistant deputy secretary who heads up that taskforce. They bought together some of the pieces that we've been working on for many years. So, all of the career’s work is within that area, for instance, that really is a big part of this change of culture. How do we look at these different pathways as being valued and supported?

And so, a taskforce within the department with pulling those things together, overseeing all of the bits, the 38 recommendations, all of the subparts of that, and working with the board has seen, I think so far, try and hold that picture together. I think one of the big risks is, when you have something that has so many workstreams. And you have to break it down to get your head around it.

The risk is that you might deliver each of the pieces, but you've lost the whole. You've lost what you're trying to actually achieve. I think that's the layer of governance that keeps us accountable to that bigger picture here. Yes, these pieces are going along. But is this going to make this better? The reform has to be about improvement. Otherwise, it’s not reform. It's probably more a disaster, I would think. You want to make sure that this is successful. More students are completing school. More students are successful in their transitions to their future pathways.

IV And I mean that's common across all these sort of larger forms of which there are many at the  
moment, that risk of losing sight of the story, the picture, the goal that you have in mind, in an effort to deliver 38 really big things each and of themselves. I wonder if you could speak to a next level of complexity as well. What you've just described is complex enough.

I know in preparing for this conversation you and I, we talked about the jigsaw analogy and how  
many pieces there are. Then where that falls down is that jigsaws are stationary, and there's nothing else going on. Whereas you were working with the Victorian school system, which is always changing, is coming out of perhaps the biggest disruption in living memory through COVID-19.

And then, of course, is adapting in other ways. And I've used the example of creating a new cog  
for a machine that's still working. Do you want to just describe a little bit what you meant by that analogy, which I think is really helpful as well. And then, let's talk about how you deliver such a profound change to something that's actually still needs to keep running day to day while you're doing that change.

IE It's something that's been on my mind for many years. As a school principal, kids keep turning up.  
The bell rings, students are there, and they're ready. You don't get a term where students aren't turning up, and you get a chance to do your strategic planning and your thinking and rebuild the machine, as you say. The machine has got to keep working, and keep doing the best that it can.

So, in my mind, it's always juggling two things. It's making sure that, that machine that's in place is really working well. It's well oiled. It's taken care of. So, those incremental improvements you can make, while the machine is running are always made. But there does come a time when you need to really take some of that cog out. For this, it's the senior secondary and build a new one. Start from what are we trying to achieve here? And how do we do that, while this machine over here is still running and operating?

That's really that's really tough, because the expertise is the people that run the machine. You can't ask them to do 10 different jobs. In fact, we often do but that becomes really challenging. You do need to say, let's build it over here. And let's build it with the people who understand it. So, that when we put it back into the machine, the thing still runs. The teeth align, the whole thing still moves and functions really well.

Part of that has to do with just the thinking of it. It's accepting that that's reality. The reality is the machine is still going, so that's just a given. And then really addressing that through a response that is fit for purpose that, you’re building it outside, knowing it's got to go back in. And that's what we've been doing over the last couple of years.

And of course, the machine has changed or had to adjust, because we transitioned a million kids within a couple of weeks, from home-based learning to hybrid learning or more online. And shout out to the teachers and the principals and the support staff that that achieved that. I mean, that was, if someone had said, in a year's time, you're going to transition a million kids to being online full time, I think people would have had heart attacks all over the place. It would have been incredibly difficult. And yet, it just happened. So, it can happen. It can be done. This is another one where we need to reform. We're doing that in the context of what we hope is the tail end of a pandemic.

IV Part of that story, too is who you've staffed that taskforce with. I take it you've brought in folk that are very closely familiar with the machine to do that design work. Is that part of that story, too?

IE Yes, you're right. The taskforce has part of those cogs already in there. And they've been bought together to make sure that they are working well together, that that the cogs are aligned, and all those sort of things. There's the taskforce base of this within the authority. In the VCAA, we've also set up our own reformed division, essentially. We're really fortunate we put together in that a very experienced secondary school principal, who was also then the head of our Secondary Principals Association.

A lot of the government's understanding as well and systems understanding. And really fortunate to have Dr Kelly Jarvis, who was one of the key people that worked on the review itself. So, we've got this bringing together of existing knowledge and understanding to really pull together, how can this work? How can we make this work and deliver a better system with a lot of money, by the way, Tom. I haven’t mentioned that, but this isn't a cheap thing to do. Maybe that's why it is only every 30 years. But it needs the support of the government, which it’s had. And it’s had through the government response to the review, but also through subsequent budgets.

IE A big reform program always brings a lot of disruption for people. and I know for people in the education system, it's well known for being passionate about their vocation. They’re already no doubt working on things that were important and pressing challenges that they were already dealing with. And now coming into this big reform process, what's it been like for your people and how do you keep people sort of motivated, engaged both those within the crux of this reform program, but also those who are still working on other really important things that maybe aren't in the limelight right now? How are you about balancing that tension and what's that experience like for your teams?

IV I think, and you mentioned. You're always dealing with people who are passionate, when you're in education. People are really passionate. They want to make a difference. They want to know that their work is contributing to good outcomes for students. It’s generally why people have gone into education in the first place. I think you can always go back to that as your base. If you're having disagreements about how, if you come back to, we're all here, with the same value in this, that we want to make things better. We want to improve the way in which we support children and young people in Victoria and their communities. Then you have a good place to start.

I always see that as the base. It doesn't mean that it's without its challenges, once you get into the how. One of the things about an authority is generally people are looking for stability with authorities. Keep things stable. Keep them high quality. Lower the risk. People know what we do, and we do it really well. And that's just the expectation of it.

When you say, I now want you to take a risk, and I want you to think about how we could do this differently, it does go against everything that authorities are generally set up to do. If an authority is set up to make incremental adjustments and improve all the time, which I think the VCAA has done for many, many years, that's one thing. But to say actually, we're really going to change this. We're going to combine these two certificates, it can make people's head explode Tom, to be quite frank again.

Talking through that and making sure that we listen to some of those concerns. But we're also not stopping reform because it's different. We're adjusting because it might be better served if we listen. We're not just going to throw it out because it's challenging some of our preconceptions and the things that we hold dear.

IV I’d been preparing for this conversation, and you also talked a bit about the challenge of bringing different people into someone else's reform program, if you like. Something that’s come from somewhere else and others are delivering. Tell us about that experience and how you get people to come on board with something perhaps new, something they didn't potentially choose, but to be able to see their own success and an opportunity within someone else's agenda to use that language?

IE I would say that that's unfinished business to start with Tom because it's that age old saying, the proof is in the pudding. Not until it's out there and it's working do people then really, who are potentially not on board with it, reflect and say, maybe this is okay. Some people may never get to that point. But again, I think going back to what we're trying to achieve through the reform can help that journey for people of, this is what we're doing. We are reforming. And there's really strong reasons for that.

We've had someone, through the review process who went out and spoke to literally hundreds, thousands of people to get a sense of where the good things were, that's really important, too. This isn't just about completely creating something new; it's actually based on where people were doing really good work. A lot of it is about systematising, making sure it doesn't rely on the one teacher or the one school that was doing it really well. But ensuring that all students have access to that level of quality.

I think that's central to the leadership challenge is being able to bring people along with those reforms in those directions. It's accepting that not everyone will stay on the bus, if you use that. Some people see where it's going and say, this isn't for me. And I think, being able to support those people in those decisions is really important, and support them into roles that may better align with where they think things should be and where their passions are.

I think, people who are genuinely interested in making things better, if they're convinced by the argument of what's been put forward, then they're generally pretty quick to jump on and say, let's use this as an opportunity to do some of the things maybe I've been thinking about for years, that I've seen as areas of improvement that we haven't had time or resources or whatever it might be.

Getting those people on board means that you're building something that's going to be even better. You might have a roadmap; I think we had that. But it wasn't a complete recipe, it didn't have every piece that we needed to bring together. Some of that is as you're building is improving, and addressing some of the things you might not have thought of. Unintended consequences are always in my mind. We're doing it because we're trying to fix this thing. It's got to not stuff that thing up. Technical terms there, Tom.

IV We’re just about out of time. I want to finish with a comment you made earlier about once in a  
generation reform. We live in a time of once in a generation reforms with royal commissions and largescale reforms, both at the state and Commonwealth level, right around the country. They're obviously tackling long standing problems. So often, they're very welcome. You made a great point about not wanting to hang up our boots after this and think, that's the job done for the next 30 years.

How do you think about creating a more agile and more adaptive system, while you're delivering a  
once in a generation change, a large-scale change? What do you think we can be thinking about, those of us that are working on these really profound reforms. What can we be thinking about to create systems that don't need these very irregular, enormous changes, but learn them as we go?

IE I think the first part is just to recognise it. I think we have to recognise that mentality of, we're  
going to set something up, and it's going to then last for years, decades, at times, before we do a big change. I think that approach is dead. I think we have to think about how we build that into the systems that we're creating. For the senior secondary reform, for example. We have to build a system that can evolve as things change. So, who would have known that a number of years ago, we would have needed some tunnel builders or level crossing removal experts, that sort of thing.

We have to be able to be, to adjust the system to respond to the context more quickly. In this  
reform, we have to be able to have curriculum and pathways that can be built within the system, rather than changing the whole system again. As an example, I think things like packaging up. We've heard all this discussion about micro credentialing and the packaging up of skills.

I do think that, if we're able to work with large companies or large other departments and those  
things and say, we're going to need a whole heap of people who are going to be good at this. There's no reason why we can't package up some of the pieces of the curriculum in senior secondary, and create majors in the same way we might do it at university.

We're going to need a whole lot more engineers. Why don't we work with people who run  
engineering higher education and training sector engineering, and work out what's the best pathway through senior secondary. So, you need to do maths and other things as part of that. So, that we're being responsive without saying, we’ve got to redesign the whole certificate.

I think that kind of reform is not responsive to our context. It’s not going to slow down. I don't  
know about you, but I've seen nothing telling me that the change being brought about by technologies and other drivers. Nothing I've seen is saying to me, don't worry. Soon, it'll slow down and it'll be like it was 30 years ago. It's just going to continue to be exponentially changing. And so, I think it's incumbent upon us, particularly as leaders of large systems, to future proof that, to accept that that's the case. And to build things that can be adjusted more readily and made more context specific.

IV Our guest today, Stephen Gniel from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.  
Stephen, thanks so much for being a part of this conversation.

IE Pleasure Tom, anytime. It was great to chat, thanks.

IV Thank you for listening to From all sides. If you'd like to know more, please visit our website  
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