By MICHAEL COUTTS-TROTTER

John Vaughan OAM, one of the legends of NSW public education, passed away on Wednesday, November 5 at the age of 91. I had the privilege of meeting Dr Vaughan and his lovely wife, Maise, who died only a few months before him, earlier this year. His mind was as sharp as a tack. His ideas about and commitment to public education were powerful. He had been generous with his time and expertise in providing advice to John Hughes and Paul Brock in their research on the history of NSW Public Education, 1905 – 1995. Their forthcoming book, Reform and Resistance in NSW Public Education, will be dedicated to Dr Vaughan.

Dr Vaughan began his highly successful teaching career in 1938. After teaching in a number of small country towns, he became principal of Cobar Intermediate High School and then district inspector of schools. During this time he graduated in economics at Sydney University, in education at Melbourne University, and won an Imperial Relations Trust Fellowship to the University of London where he was awarded a PhD in education.

Dr Vaughan was appointed NSW director of studies and executive member of the two secondary studies boards which, in those days, were situated within the education department. For nine years he was a member of the council of Macquarie University. He retired from the position of assistant director-general in our department in 1979. Two pivotal policies written elegantly, succinctly, and powerfully by Dr Vaughan retain their salience three decades later: The Aims of Secondary Education and The Aims of Primary Education. Each of the reports advocated much greater involvement of teachers and schools in the curriculum development process.

Towards the end of his departmental career Dr Vaughan wrote that he had based all his work “on the concept that education is for all children, whatever their abilities, inclinations or circumstances”. Dr Vaughan made a huge contribution to the establishment, development, and extraordinary expansion of the Primary English Teaching Association (PETA) of Australia as president, vice-president, publications director, a member of the board, and as an education consultant. Even at the age of 90, he was continuing to provide support for PETA.

On June 9 this year, Dr Vaughan was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for service to education through PETA, contributions to curriculum development and public administration. As an indication of the esteem in which he was held, on October 3 Her Excellency the Governor of NSW, Marie Bashir, conducted a small ceremony at the Lady Gowrie Nursing Home (where Dr Vaughan was then residing) to invest him personally with his OAM because he had been unable to attend the formal ceremony.

All of us in this department, whether or not we knew or remembered Dr Vaughan, should be proud of him and grateful for his magnificent contribution to public education in NSW. His legacy continues in our ongoing commitment to providing quality public education “for all children, whatever their abilities, inclinations or circumstances”.

Michael Couts-Trotter is the department’s director-general.