



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: AIS NSW Institute  
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State: NSW

### Summary

The 21st century demands a deeper vision of educational success. Beyond the instrumental focus on academic measurement a range of student outcomes across the domains of student well-being and non-cognitive skills need to be valued more highly. The Australian Government should play a leadership role in re-articulating this vision together with the school sectors, in the spirit of the Melbourne Declaration. In doing so it must provide schools the autonomy and responsibility to contextualise educational success to realise this vision for their communities.

The use of funding to improve learning should be guided by a vision of educational success, informed by evidence on what works, and contextualised to the needs of students, schools and systems. The Australian Government can also play a key role in ensuring that funding is provided to schools in a transparent manner according to robust educational data.

Schools can draw on an extensive research literature to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that influence student achievement, particularly those that are within the control of the school. These include the importance of teacher capabilities, focusing on student wellbeing, setting high expectations for students, and valuing and promoting parental involvement, to name a few. It is also important that existing institutions and governance arrangements be enabled to promulgate evidence-informed practice.

### Main submission

#### Educational Success

Our submission begins with the end in mind: what is educational success? In Australia, our collective vision for educational success should be both broad and deep while allowing ample space for school level contextualisation. As such, a comprehensive reflection on the purposes of schooling in Australia should precede the instrumental considerations of the Review.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23, states that: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms..." In consultation with the education sector, the Review should revisit the purposes of schooling as a private good and a public benefit. How does school choice and school diversity contribute to both individual and the public good? Visions of educational success are built on the hopes, dreams and values of parents and school communities. This underlies the universal right that "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." (UN Declaration)

For schools in the Independent sector in Australia, purpose has always been central to their practice. All Independent schools are conducted to serve the needs of their diverse student bodies and to fulfil the expectations of parents. Of the OECD countries, Australia has the 8th largest non-government school sector. Government support for educational choice is a long standing political settlement. It is a commitment to freedom and diversity, a commitment that is complementary to an expanding vision for educational success.

In Australia, the Melbourne Declaration of 2008 pronounced two key goals for educational success. The first goal was that schooling should promote equity and excellence. The second goal was that young Australians become: successful learners; confident and creative individuals, and; active and informed citizens. The Melbourne Declaration was a key waypoint in the ongoing conversation around the purpose of education. The 21st century demands a broader vision of educational success beyond a narrow focus on academic assessments. The Melbourne Declaration rightly recognises that schools must be concerned with a gamut of student characteristics:

"Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. Schools share this responsibility with students, parents, carers, families, the community, business and other education and training providers."

This requires a deliberate focus on both cognitive and non-cognitive skills. These include the acquisition of higher order competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration. This points to the need to adopt a broad range of indicators:

"Expanding the definition of success first means that we need to elevate the status of other subjects, abilities, skills and talents to the same level as math and reading..."

(Zhao 2009, pp.183-184)

In their accountability to their governing boards and parent bodies, Independent schools are called to speak to their effectiveness across this broad range of responsibilities. This goes above and beyond examining annual academic

performance. Due to differences across schools and jurisdictions, it is also important to consider the limits of national standardisation in testing and measurement.

The annual NAPLAN testing regime is one such limited though valuable instrument for accountability to governments and school authorities. The usefulness of NAPLAN is constrained by its focus on foundational skills and minimum standards. There are potentially perverse effects of over-emphasising basic skills testing. These include distorting teaching practice, the neglect of creative and analytical skills and the devaluing of high academic achievement. A deepening of the focus on academic achievement should take a positive approach to each child's potential regardless of where they start. Improvement among top performing students must be valued alongside the improvement of lower performing students.

PISA arguably goes more deeply into the assessment of literacies (across the domains of reading, science and maths) than NAPLAN. PISA focuses on the application of student's knowledge and skills to everyday life. The national proficiency standard for science in Australia is PISA level 3, which 61% of Australian students met in 2015. It is described as follows:

"At Level 3, students can draw upon moderately complex content knowledge to identify or construct explanations of familiar phenomena. In less familiar or more complex situations, they can construct explanations with relevant cueing or support. They can draw on elements of procedural or epistemic knowledge to carry out a simple experiment in a constrained context. Level 3 students are able to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific issues and identify the evidence supporting a scientific claim."

Educational success also depends on the distribution of student performance in each country. In 2015, Australia's proportion of students performing at low proficiency levels in PISA was relatively high, at 18% (compared with 8% to 12% for the five top performing nations). In contrast, the proportion of students that are high performing was 15% (compared with 31% to 56% for the five top ranked nations). While Australia need not necessarily be concerned with "beating" other nations, it must be concerned with doing the best for each of its young citizens, whatever their background or personal characteristics.

There is also certainly scope for Australian Governments to consider a broader range of outcomes than simply academic indicators. For example, bullying, school climate, and students' sense of belonging are all measured internationally as part of PISA (which is rightly built around a strong focus on literacy, numeracy and science). In the PISA 2015, Australian sample, 71.9% of students agreed with the statement "I feel like I belong in school", which is slightly lower than the OECD average of 73%. In response to the statement "Even if I am well prepared for a test I feel very anxious", 67.5% of PISA students agreed in Australia, compared to an OECD average of 55.5%.

Australian students were also more likely to report some type of bullying in their schools in the past month (24.2% compared to 18.7%). PISA collects data like this through surveys of students, teachers and parents. A comprehensive range of indicators was published in PISA 2015 volume 3, Student Wellbeing (OECD, 2017).

A substantial research literature attests to the importance of schools having a focus on student wellbeing, fostering values, attitudes and character strengths. These include motivation, resilience, perseverance, and self-control which are at least as important in determining life chances as academic achievement. Some studies rate them as even more important:

"Patterns of habitual behaviour, particularly the extent of conscientiousness or good work habits, developed from birth through to adolescence, in conjunction with the cognitive skills developed alongside these behaviors, determine school success and schooling and occupational attainment. These skills and habits then combine with skills and habits developed on the job to determine employment and earnings success." (Farkas 2003, pp. 556-557)

The evidence on the importance of non-cognitive attributes and qualities for achievement in school and beyond consistently shows that the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of students underpins academic achievement and success in life. Confident, resilient children with a capacity for emotional intelligence perform better academically and are well placed to develop responsible and satisfying lives. Cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes may be tracked nationally with sample based surveys as is the case in the National Assessment Program. Utilising sample surveys, in 2013, civics and citizenship was tested and in 2014, ICT literacy was tested.

Both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities are shaped early in the life cycle. The vision for education success must cover the full age range of children in the lead up to and during the school years, recognising the trans temporal nature of development and success.

"Skill begets skill; learning begets learning. Early disadvantage, if left untreated, leads to academic and social difficulties in later years. Advantages accumulate; so do disadvantages...Successful schools build on the efforts of successful families." (Heckman & Masterov 2007, p.447)

Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) combined with NAPLAN results establishes a link between developmental vulnerability at school entry and later educational achievement. This pertains to the two AEDC domains of language and cognitive development; and communication and general knowledge. Students who were developmentally vulnerable in these domains were found to have lower NAPLAN scores in their first year of testing, and did not catch up (Brinkman et al 2015). So educational success and school quality must be considered across both a wide range of indicators and for students at different stages of life.

Parents and school communities should be (and are) concerned about a broader range of student outcomes than ever before. This is matched by an abundance of broad ranging data and evidence on schooling. However broad and deep the collective vision for educational success is, it is important that there is room for schools to contextualise this vision for their own communities. Schools may pursue the vision in line with their own educational values and practices. The role of the government then, is to provide high level leadership and co-ordination among education stakeholders. With the socio-economic landscape of 21st century Australia rapidly developing... perhaps the time is ripe for rearticulation and re-emphasis of Educational Goals for Young Australians.

#### Improving practice and outcomes

The use of funding to improve learning should be guided by a vision of educational success, informed by evidence on what works, and contextualised to the needs of students, schools and systems. The Australian Government can take the high level approach of providing vision and leadership to guide the ongoing discourse around improving practice and outcomes in schools in Australia. A longstanding and robust framework of relevance is Bernstein's (1971) sociology of education, which:

"demonstrated the ways in which the three "message systems" of schooling- curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation- sit in symbiotic relationships with each other, with change in one affecting the practices of the others. In policy terms across recent times, the evaluation message system - or more specifically high-stakes, census testing at national levels - has become the major steering mechanism of schooling systems (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010)."

In its' high level policy architecture, the Australian Government should carefully consider how these three message systems interact. The national curriculum, the National Assessment Plan, and national teacher and leadership standards are all interrelated and need to be continually aligned to with each other and across jurisdictions, in a way that is supportive of school autonomy and diversity. The danger of over-emphasising national level student evaluation is that differences in students and school communities will not be duly acknowledged and accommodated in the policy process.

Schools and systems are in the best position to make judgements about the effective and efficient use of extra funding. Every school's circumstances and student body are different. The range of disadvantages and vulnerabilities of students at the school level can be used to inform the allocation of additional funding that is needs based (above and beyond inflation). In this regard, the underlying principle the Government should follow is the allowance of school/system autonomy. At the same time, the Government should provide certainty about the level and distribution of funding. This presupposes that the Australian Education Act is a good basis for a fair

system of funding distribution. The education sector as a whole, and governments around Australia, are strongly supportive of needs based funding. But this is accompanied by a recognition that funding to schools in real terms, and according to need, must grow.

The Australian Government can also play a key role in ensuring that funding is provided to schools in a transparent manner according to robust educational data. This will involve working in partnership with schools and teachers, to ensure that needs based funding is not hampered by data issues. A newly developing area of data which the Government has to pay particular attention to is the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on students with disabilities (NCCD). The basis of the NCCD approach to collecting statistics on students with disabilities lies in its reliance on teachers' professionalism, their professional judgement in identifying special educational needs and designing appropriate adjustments. The focus is squarely on "quality differentiated teaching practice", with all teachers required to have a clear understanding of the educational needs of all their students, opening up the possibility of identifying risk before that risk becomes a deficit.

However, questions have been raised over the reliability of the initial NCCD results. This may stem in part from different approaches at the school level being used to identify and categorise learning difficulties. Therefore, there is a continuing need for professional development to build the skills of teachers to identify students with special needs and intervene in a timely and appropriate way to improve their learning experience. With greater understanding in schools and more consistency in approach over time, the NCCD collection has the potential to have a positive impact on support for students with special learning needs, including those needing only minor adjustments.

An extensive research literature reveals the many interrelated factors contribute to quality schooling. The Government however, is not best placed to implement much of the research findings. Neither does the evidence provide simple recipes for action by schools. Rather, its main value is in providing a deeper understanding of the factors that influence student achievement, identifying those that are within the control of the school. Schools themselves are in the best position to contextualise the evidence, integrating it with insights from professional experience and the day to day reality of school life. Some of the key research evidence is fully elaborated in an AISNSW Institute Report (2017). Some key messages that emerge for schools seeking the best outcomes for all students include:

- use data and evidence in the context of the school's own community to inform approaches and strategies for raising achievement;

- focus on the capabilities of teachers, cultivate teacher professionalism, make provision for teachers to have adequate time for preparation, planning, assessment and collaboration with colleagues;
- create a school climate that is positive, orderly and supportive, that values diversity and achievement;
- attend to the early development of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills in young children, identify individual learning needs early and provide appropriate support;
- create a school environment that is characterised by academic press, where high expectations are set for all students;
- develop a broad program of high quality extra-curricular activities and encourage student involvement;
- focus on student wellbeing, foster a positive schooling experience based on values and character strengths such as motivation, resilience, curiosity, optimism and self-control;
- value and promote parental involvement in the school.

#### Institutional arrangements and governance

Existing institutions and governance arrangements can be utilised to promote evidence based good practice, without radical change or the creation of any new education bodies. For example, NSW schools are well served by the high quality data analysis, research and inquiry undertaken by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). CESE makes use of the wealth of data available on NSW education and presents evidence drawn from the data in a series of outstanding, informative research reports. This kind of analysis at the state level is particularly relevant and useful to schools. The CESE reports provide insights into effective action by NSW schools, positioning research findings from overseas in an Australian context, helping schools to determine priorities, focus and investment. But even locally grounded research will never provide a single recipe for action in all schools. Schools themselves are best placed to consider the evidence in the light of their knowledge of their own community, their own data and their professional experience.

All the evidence on school effectiveness points away from centralised prescription and heavy regulation in the day to day operation of a school. Rather, the evidence supports local decision-making, the professionalisation of teaching, responsiveness to local communities and individualised learning as key ingredients of effective education. The OECD for some years has championed the combination of school autonomy and accountability, finding that when 'autonomy and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance' (Hooge et al 2012:7). The interplay between autonomy and accountability has been

identified in several cycles of PISA assessments, with the 2015 PISA results confirming the link between autonomy and higher academic achievement, with the proviso that:

"...to reap the full benefits of autonomy, education systems need to have effective accountability systems to discourage opportunistic behaviour by school staff, and highly qualified teachers and strong school leaders ...(OECD 2016c, p.114)."

Accountability that is too heavy-handed however imposes an intolerable burden on schools and adds no value, distracting from the prime purpose of teaching and learning. The imposition of additional monitoring or compliance measures can be counter-productive, especially for small autonomous schools. The Australian Government needs to continue supporting organisations like AITSL and ACARA, rather than imposing more of a regulatory or data collection burden on schools.

#### Barriers to improvement

One challenge posed in the research which seems to be particularly apposite in the Australian schooling context is the need to shift from a deficit model of student learning and behavioural difficulties and focus instead on positive experiences and strengths (Noble & McGrath 2008, p.130).