Public submissions for the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Association of Independent Schools of South Australia
Submitting as a: Peak Body
State: SA

Summary

The Association of Independent Schools South Australia (AISSA) submission is based on consultation with its member schools, the expertise of AISSA staff, and current best-practice research. The AISSA supports the submission made by its national organisation ISCA.

All students, including those with diverse educational needs, should emerge from their schooling as purposeful, reflective and informed citizens, who invest themselves actively to achieve goals and contribute as productive members of society.

The foundational literacies should be emphasised as the building blocks for all learning and the General Capabilities, other dispositions, habits and transversal skills strengthened. While knowledge is a key component in a quality education, it is not enough to prepare students for future success.

Measuring educational success must evolve from the focus on benchmarking and standardised testing of content to include the tracking of student growth in relation to the General Capabilities, dispositions, habits, and transversal skills. Policy makers need to be outward focused and internationally minded in developing partnerships to support this work.

Government investment that supports the capability of schools to maintain autonomy and to be responsive to the needs of their school community, within a framework of high level accountabilities, is likely to lead to significant school improvement.

To achieve ongoing improvement governments should:

- Enable schools to implement strategies which are context specific, evidence-based and targeted to need.
- Focus on shifting long-held teacher beliefs and emphasise the development of innovative pedagogy.

- Enable schools to invest in professional learning programs which are long term, data driven and school-based which involve the active engagement of school leader
- Invest in building leadership capability.

The AISSA has demonstrated significant capacity for innovation across a range of approaches that offers the potential for further development in a wider Australian and international context.

Main submission

- What should educational success for Australian students look like?

- What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

Educational success for Australian students necessitates that all students can emerge from their schooling education as purposeful, reflective, and informed citizens, who invest themselves actively to achieve goals and contribute as productive members of society.

Meeting the needs of all students, including those with diverse educational needs, such as students with disabilities, Indigenous students and gifted and talented students, is crucial. For the Australian Education system, this means fulfilling both the aspirations of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for the 21st Century of equity, excellence and entitlement and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which supports inclusive education as the human right to education for all.

While knowledge is a key component in a quality education it is not enough, in and of itself, to prepare students for future success. Instead, the foundational literacies should be emphasised as the building blocks for all learning and the General Capabilities and other dispositions, habits and transversal skills should be strengthened to enable deeper learning so students can transfer understandings across contexts.

Strengthening the use of the current General Capabilities is critical, particularly as notions of innovation and skills such as entrepreneurship are becoming an increasing focus for schools. In South Australia, a process of integration of senior secondary subjects with the Australian Curriculum, with a particular focus on the General Capabilities is currently being undertaken. The work on the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions is also a positive move towards a developmental approach to learning which will allow teachers to more accurately identify student ability and needs.

- -How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Despite the emphasis in the Australian Curriculum on the importance of skills, capabilities and dispositions, the concept of "measurement", particularly in a political context, continues to focus on benchmarking and standardised testing of content. The obsession with scores as the goal rather than on learners who are confident, collaborative and creative problem solvers needs to be urgently addressed. A paradigm shift is needed.

The metrics required to measure educational success are constantly evolving, therefore Education leaders and policy makers should be outward focused and internationally minded in developing partnerships to support the evolution of this work in schools. Key focus areas should include:

- Expanding the role of international and national benchmarking to include new skills such as collaborative problem solving and creativity which are tested in authentic tasks.

- Tracking individual student growth.

- Recognising and measuring the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills of young people including student, teacher and leadership wellbeing.

- The engagement and agency of students and their attitudes to their learning.

- The success of all students, including those with diverse needs, in being challenged throughout their schooling to reach their potential.

- -What can we do to support ongoing improvement?

Government policy frameworks, including funding arrangements, which enable schools to implement programs and strategies which are context specific and targeted to need are essential if Australia is to improve education outcomes. While governments have a role in setting the overarching policy framework, the increasing trend of interference is counter-productive.

The three-dimensional nature of the Australian Curriculum that recognises the central importance of disciplinary knowledge, skills and understanding; general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities is welcomed and provides the foundations of a quality curriculum. However, its effective delivery requires a re-invigoration of pedagogy that has the capacity to engage all learners. It is essential that pedagogical approaches promote deep understanding, allow for skilled application of knowledge, and develop students as problem finders, solvers and inquirers. An important component of a new pedagogical approach is a strong focus on personalising education to ensure it serves the needs of all students. Here the focus should be on developing the uniqueness of each student rather than the current focus on a standardised education.

Education policy frameworks which both enable and encourage schools to adopt transformative pedagogies, which involve students in the design of their own learning and incorporate deep inquiry-based practices leading to high quality products, are key. If education is to develop young people as capable agents, it can no longer focus so heavily on learning by routine. It needs to take young people wider, deeper and further, to give them experiences of what it is like to take action, to make things, to work with others and to take on new challenges. Students should feel a sense of agency as purposeful, reflective, responsible capable investors in their learning, capable of responsible autonomous action.

Learning needs to connect with real world experiences, siloing knowledge and contrived learning experiences are increasingly outdated. This requires schools to become more outwardly focused and internationally minded and develop collaborative, mutually beneficial partnerships to support their work. Collaborative partnerships across and between schools and sectors, with industry, corporates, not for profits, councils and governments are vital in designing learning opportunities that are relevant and engaging for all students.

It is widely accepted that teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions have direct and serious implications for the success of the students they teach. Shifting long-held teacher beliefs about teaching and learning and equipping them with appropriate pedagogical skills is critical. Key areas of focus include:

- Student agency and engagement.

- Differentiation, acknowledging that it is every educator's responsibility to educate students with diverse need, including gifted and talented students.

- Collaborative knowledge building in schools and beyond.

- Developing classroom-based, evidence-based practice that is directly aligned to enhancing student outcomes (such as Timperley's (2009) inquiry and knowledge building cycle).

- Performance and review processes which are closely aligned to practice, the AITSL standards and professional learning and which grow teachers as professionals

- Access to mentors and ongoing school based support, including specific support for early career teachers.

- Allocating time for teachers to critically engage in the above in order to continuously improve pedagogy and quality teaching.

AISSA has significantly enhanced its professional learning programs to meet the emerging needs of schools, with an increasing focus on long-term, data driven,

school based approaches which include the active involvement of the school leadership team.

Continued investment by education authorities and schools in building leadership capability is essential given the complexity of leading today's schools. Contemporary leaders are required to navigate uncertainty, innovate and educate in ways that will prepare young people for a successful future in a world that is ambiguous and increasingly complex. The capacity to be strategic, to articulate a vision which has teaching and learning at its core, and the ability to shift beliefs and practice are at the heart of effective leadership.

Teacher training courses must also be designed to meet the emerging needs of the student population and organisational change within schools. Given the continued disconnect between the skills schools require in new teachers and the current teacher education courses, reforms to teacher education, such as those implemented by AITSL and respective governments should continue. It is unacceptable that graduate teachers should complete teacher training without a basic set of key competencies including classroom management. The need for Universities to increase the length and quality of practicum has been a long-term call from the sector.

- -What works best for whom and in what circumstances

School autonomy and local decision making are vital in enabling individual students to remain at the heart of school improvement and for schools to identify evidence-based improvement strategies appropriate to their context. One model does not fit all schools. A school's socio-economic status (SES), location, size and the specific needs of students, staff and the community are important determinants in student outcomes.

Top down decision-making models are outmoded and unlikely to encompass the needs of individual schools. However, government investment that supports the capability of schools to maintain autonomy and to be responsive to the needs of their school community, within a framework of high level accountabilities, is likely to lead to significant, school wide improvement.

- -How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment System enablers

The AISSA supports the focus of State Governments, the Australian Government, and AITSL on enhancing the quality of teacher graduates.

A best practice approach to educational accountability should recognise the diversity of purposes of school education and the autonomy of Independent schools and systems within the sector. Accountability should enhance educational standards not standardisation.

The primary purpose of collecting data should be for use by each school to inform individual student growth and development, rather than the comparison of schools and sectors and the generation of public league tables, and for governments to evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs. Similarly, accountability measures for teachers must have as their focus the development and growth of teacher professional knowledge, practice and engagement which supports student learning. Lindstrom's (2016) research on Big Data and Small Data is pertinent to policymakers. Education reform is often based on Big Data which correlates national student assessments and systems and international education data bases. In contrast, a focus on Small Data, the details, narratives and relationships in schools, will illuminate what good teaching is and how it leads to better learning in schools. Understanding this fabric must become a priority for improving education.

-Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

The AISSA has demonstrated significant capability and capacity for innovation in relation to a range of approaches that have the potential for further development both within the Independent school sector and in a wider Australian context.

Utilising the Students First funding, and underpinned by the latest educational research and thinking, the AISSA has been working intensively with principals on school improvement, the ultimate goal improved outcomes for students. Senior Educational Consultants work closely with allocated leadership teams focusing on school improvement in the context of individual schools, with an emphasis on longer-term engagement and commitment with teams at the school level. Design Thinking, the ability to problem solve leadership issues from the point of view of the end user and to arrive at creative, context specific solutions, underpins the support offered. Schools are encouraged to be adaptive, to consistently review and reflect on their efforts to improve the quality of the education offered through school-wide conversations and evidence collection – including with parents and families, school governing bodies, local communities and students themselves.

This work has led to the development of an AISSA High Impact School Improvement Tool, which supports leaders to undertake targeted, data informed, explicit and effective school improvement processes which make a difference to student learning.

AISSA's flagship programs, the Rudolph Group, led by Distinguished Professor Yong Zhao and Cultures of Thinking, led by Professor Ron Ritchhart, Harvard University,

have been designed to focus on the types of skills, dispositions and habits that will enable students to be successful both now and in the future. This transformative work is exploring new measures of excellence and the authentic application of skills and capabilities such as entrepreneurship, collaborative problem solving, critical thinking, globally connected and personalised learning.

The focus on reimagining the education paradigm in traditional school settings is applicable to all schools and is a significant step forward in shaping schooling around the learning needs and talents of young people.

The AISSA has also developed a model for Innovation and Leadership which articulates the fundamentals of leading innovation and change. The model highlights the duality and synchronicity of innovation and leadership for transformation and recognises that leadership is one of the most fundamental predictors of innovation. The model drives the work of the AISSA's Centre for Innovation, Leadership Institute and AISSA Impact Hubs.

The leadership formation of aspiring leaders in AISSA schools is a powerful model which offers primary and secondary curriculum leaders the opportunity to strengthen and develop their leadership skills as they implement a teaching and learning priority in their school. They are supported to lead a current change initiative that is linked to their school's priorities, consider research about what works best in the leadership of teaching and learning and make decisions that will allow for successful implementation and sustainability. The success of these programs lies in the personalised, contextual and practical nature of the work, access to mentors and expertise from the sector and beyond.

The ongoing education of school boards and governing councils needs also to be a priority for education authorities. Understanding the changing environment in which schools operate is critical in enabling Boards to drive innovation and plan strategically. Effective Board leadership requires agility and adaptability, strategic foresight and the ability to generate new insights and directions.

Student agency is an area that requires further exploration and investigation. Leadbeater (2015), Fadel (2017) and Bandura (2001) note the need for schools to prioritise the development of students as inventors of their learning and to build opportunities for responsible autonomous action. The Investigating Student Agency in the Personal and Social Capability project, in partnership with ACARA, aims to support teachers to design and implement evidence based approaches that build greater commitment to the personal and social capability and increase opportunities for student agency. The outcomes of this work will include a range of resources including illustrations of practice, case studies, student agency metrics, student goal setting, and student portfolios which will be available to schools on the ACARA website.

Supporting students with diverse educational needs continues to be a key area in which further work and support for schools is needed. It is clear for example that the outcomes for many Indigenous students remain unacceptable. The AISSA has recently introduced an Indigenous Secondary Student Mentor Program which provides Indigenous students with mentoring support that will contribute to positive educational outcomes and post- secondary school learning opportunities.

The education of gifted and talented children requires further prioritisation. The AISSA and Flinders University have embarked on a three-year partnership and project, entitled ChallenGE, which aims to support schools to develop context specific solutions that targets improved outcomes for gifted and talented students. The sector urges the panel to consider:

- Ongoing leadership in the education of gifted and talented students.

- The establishment of a National Research Centre on the education of gifted and talented students.

- Neuroscience research to be applied in teaching of all students including the gifted and talented.

The AISSA is collaborating with Swinburne University, University of Queensland, and the Queensland University of Technology on a STEM initiative to understand the impact of humanoid robots on student learning and the pedagogical approaches that enhance and extend student learning. Outcomes are signalling increases in student engagement, differentiation of learning, self-directed learning, and a fostering of creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, coding and communication skills.

Initiatives of the above nature ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes. Individual schools and the sector's growth are closely linked to professional collaborations within schools, across schools, with the community, business, thought leaders and universities and demonstrate the power of collective capacity and knowledge building.

- -Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

The highly political nature of education policy is a key barrier to improving student outcomes. This can be seen most clearly in the perceived content requirements of the Australian Curriculum and the increasing political use of NAPLAN testing beyond its original purpose.

The overemphasis on content as opposed to concepts and "big ideas" requires urgent attention to enable the enacted curriculum at a local level to provide students with the necessary complexity and depth of learning as opposed to breadth of content.

The requirement for teachers to assess and report against year level standards is complex. Interpreting the Achievement Standards across Learning Areas and locating five possible levels of achievement within a year level referenced standard is a new way of assessment. Teacher support and further learning are required to enhance understanding and application of the Standards.

The AISSA, in partnership with ACARA, has developed a highly successful cross school moderation project for primary teachers to build teacher confidence and practice in using the achievement standards. Best practice research, such as Scott (2016), Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2010), has been central to this work which is underpinned by the belief that teachers and schools can lift all students' performance if they are equipped to collect and use evidence of individual student achievement and progress. The focus on developing primary teacher's assessment literacy, knowledge and understanding of the moderation process better positions teachers to be effective and assessment capable moderators of student work. This work provides the opportunity for participants to consider a range of assessment approaches, including empirical progressions that more accurately identify learner readiness and zones of proximal development.

The high stakes nature of NAPLAN testing has led to the important diagnostic element of the testing being superseded by the focus on My School. Political leadership will be required to return the public debate around NAPLAN's purpose to reflect the original intent of the test.

The traditional organisation of schools and public perceptions of what schooling looks like, particularly in relation to timetabling, staffing, restrictive lesson times and static classroom spaces are a potential barrier to the establishment of contemporary and flexible learning experiences. Government support should enable schools to embrace more innovative approaches to education such as those seen in High Tech High in San Diego and other Australian schools.

The continued focus on senior secondary outcomes and the ATAR is perceived as inhibiting the ability of schools to provide innovative offerings. This is in spite of the modernisation of many senior secondary curriculums such as the South Australian SACE and, university entrance becoming more open and flexible and moving beyond the ATAR to include other attributes such as aptitude and prior learning.

*References available on request