



Better and Fairer Education System

Consultation Paper Feedback from Abbotsleigh School

As the period of time for consultation was insufficient for us to respond thoroughly to the questions posed at the conclusion of each chapter, we make the following observations having read the paper and hope our comments will be helpful in further deliberations.

Equity and Excellence

We endorse the focus on equity and excellence and see the imperative of maintaining high and yet attainable standards for all children. We should be aspirational in our expectations. Reducing expectations to make meeting standards more easily achievable is not in the best interests of children or education in Australia.

That said, the focus should be on attaining excellence for all children that is differentiated to context. Scaffolded steps should be in place to take all learners forward so that potential is realised. This should be for students at all ends of the spectrum and be differentiated to context.

What appears to be missing from this document are the needs of gifted students. Given recent OECD PISA data has highlighted not only poor performance in children from disadvantaged backgrounds but also underperformance at the top end of the scale, it is essential that all learners' needs are responded to through educational initiatives. Specifically, the needs of gifted learners are not addressed in this document. Failing to cater to these students' needs results in underperformance, disengagement in learning and the greatest of intellectual minds are stunted in their growth. This is not in Australia's best interests.

Educational Focus

The principal aim of primary schooling is to see all children leave Year 6 with the requisite literacy and numeracy skills to continue as strong learners as they move to later stages of secondary and tertiary education and on to be lifelong learners. This is coupled of course with social emotional learning to ensure positive student wellbeing. We concur with Chapter 3's focus in this domain.

While there is much beyond these domains that makes for a well-rounded education, none of this is significant if students are not able to read, write and be numerate. A lack of skill in these domains impacts very negatively on all other learning, wellbeing and career prospects. Thus, the focus of a 'Better and Fairer Education System' should on these fundamental skills.

Equally we argue that while there are many 'soft skills' that are essential dispositions to being great learners, determining means of assessing and reporting on these is still in its infancy and should not be the fundamental focus.

Targeted Funding

The data in Table 1, page 13 in the Consultation Paper makes clear that lack of literacy and numeracy skill growth occurs predominantly between Years 5 and 7. This also aligns with a paucity of funding in Years 3-6. Equally, research is clear in identifying that early intervention is essential if entrenched learning and social disadvantage is to be avoided.

Targeted, individualised literacy and numeracy programs of intervention are essential to prevent the bottom 12-15% of primary aged children from falling behind and entering secondary school without

fundamental skills. This problem is compounded when realising that few secondary teachers have the skills to teach fundamental numeracy and literacy skills.

Differentiated Initiatives

The challenge for those seeking to make a macro difference in the education of our children is that there is no silver bullet, or one size fits all initiative that will result in wholistic improvement in results for all children.

For instance, while children where English is not their first language need to have access to targeted and skilled English language instruction, not all these students are disadvantaged in their learning outcomes. A blanket approach to all second language speakers, irrespective of SES and background, would be inappropriate and wasteful of resources.

Additionally, initiatives that respond to the learning needs of First Nations children in rural and remote areas need to be developed in consultation with families/elders and tailored to needs and cultural contexts. This may well differ to the needs of First Nations children in metropolitan areas.

Accountability

It is our view that school leaders are trying to do their best in meeting the diverse needs of students in their school. While mistakes will be made, it is pleasing to note that punitive measures such as withdrawing funding is not being considered as a consequence of targets not being met.

Measures of accountability are already in place in terms of measuring literacy and numeracy levels through NAPLAN. Yet this statement should not be seen as a comprehensive endorsement of this testing regime. Individual student feedback to parents and schools is helpful. What is not, is the creation and publishing of macro school results. This only encourages inequity as parents make decisions, without great insight, to seek to move their child to schools perceived to be achieving high results on these assessments. Thus, the cycle of concentrated disadvantage continues.

While a change in timing of NAPLAN testing has occurred this year, it is disappointing that results are still not being made accessible to schools until Term 3. Given the testing is being conducted in mid Term 1, it is difficult to understand why delivery of results is so delayed. We accept that the design and creation of written texts may take some time. However, this does not explain why the auto marking of multiple-choice reading, grammar, spelling and mathematics assessments are not turned around almost immediately. Teachers having access to good, reliable data in a timely fashion is essential to determining targeted learning interventions. If this is to be a reality, then further changes are needed in NAPLAN.

Quality Teaching

It is not disputed that high calibre, experienced educators have the capacity to make a significant difference to the learning outcomes of students. Yet, too frequently those children experiencing most disadvantage are the last to have access to such educators. While again there is not a simple solution here, measures must be taken to improve the quality of initial undergraduate teacher education, enhance early career mentoring for young graduates, as well as providing additional initiatives to make teaching in hard to staff schools attractive.

Conclusion

The unique nature and potential of each child are what makes teaching such a rewarding privilege and profession. If the Australian educational system is to see our students thrive irrespective of SES, background and circumstance, then nuanced, best practice, targeted solutions are needed. Macro, one size fits all answers will only repeat the outcomes we currently experience.