

SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW TO INFORM A BETTER AND FAIRER EDUCATION SYSTEM

By [REDACTED], Albert Park College

TAKEOUTS

- Public school funding and teacher salaries must increase, but we mustn't let this ongoing argument divert us from improving how schools operate or focus on what they do. Continually pointing out our public schools are underfunded is encouraging parents to flee to the non-government system.
- While teaching the basics and addressing student wellbeing are important, we must give proper emphasis to giving young people the sophisticated knowledge and creative capacities they will need to succeed in today's economy and society. Parents know that achieving the basics is not enough and this poverty of aspirations is another factor leading parents to flee the public system.
- Improving schools starts with building up their internal capabilities to support teaching – though improved leadership, professional learning, teaching methodologies, mentoring and so on. Imposing more top-down solutions and compliance will not work.
- The best way to improve the performance of every school is to innovate in the way we teach and the subjects we offer. In other words, we need to get the discussion about our schools back to education because better education will improve all schools, no matter the socio-economic background of their students.

1. Introduction

Albert Park College (APC) is a 7-12 secondary college in the Melbourne bayside suburb of Albert Park, serving the communities of Albert Park, South Melbourne, Port Melbourne and St Kilda.

The college opened in 2011 on the site of the previous APC, which closed in 2006 when a dramatic loss of community confidence in the college caused plummeting enrolments.

Having achieved high academic results and a reputation as a school of creativity and innovation, the college has now become the school of choice for its community, with high demand for places. Built as a single campus school for 900 students, it now has five campuses (with a sixth now under construction) and 1600 students. By improving the overall performance of our school, we have lifted all boats, getting better results for students from upper, middle and low socioeconomic status families alike. This makes our approach – focusing in education quality – a model for improving the school system as a whole and shortening the long tail of underachievement of low SES students.

In 2021 it was named Australian Secondary School of the Year and Australian School of the Year by the Australian Education Awards.

2. Funding

Many others making submissions to this review will likely concentrate on the issue of funding. One problem the public system faces is that discussion of school funding often ends meaningful discussion of how to improve the way schools educate young people. For this reason, we do not want to submit a detailed argument about funding, including the public-private funding issue. Instead I want to discuss some practical reform ideas. Put simply, lack of adequate funding is not the only thing preventing Australia from creating better schools, but unless there is a reasonable increase in funding the following reform ideas will have limited effect.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, we suggest two things that we suspect will meet with general agreement from principals and teachers: reaching 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard for public schools, and paying staff salaries that are commensurate with their skills and importance. Our salaries must enable us to compete with the non-government system.

With funding put to one side, we suggest the following approach to improving public secondary schools.

3. Schools must be about the future for Australia and aspire to more than the basics

The starting point for this review of school education should be the question: *What sort of nation do we want Australia to be?* Most would agree the answer to this question is something like: *A more successful, innovative, prosperous and equal nation than we currently are.*

To put it bluntly, we will not come anywhere near this goal with the school policies we now have. The current over-emphasis on the basics of literacy, numeracy and student wellbeing will condemn us to mediocrity. These three objectives should be seen as the starting point for education and the building blocks of far more ambitious goals for our schools. Their domination of thinking about school policy serves only to dumb the system down – a lowest common denominator that drives those who seek more out of the public system and into the non-government system.

If I were to advertise my secondary school to local parents as one that will give their children little more than the basics of literacy and numeracy and address their wellbeing needs through reactive welfare services, enrolments would certainly decline. This is because parents know that to succeed in our modern economy and society and become well-adjusted citizens their children need (1) deep high-level knowledge, (2) skills that are relevant to the contemporary and future economy, and (3) sophisticated social capabilities. These are the qualities non-government schools sell... parents want them... Australia needs them... and if state schools don't offer them, parents with the means to choose their childrens' schools will continue to shun public education, reinforcing the existing inequities in our system. Only by retaining in our public schools a critical mass of families who seek more from education can we build schools able to give all students the education Australia needs.

My evidence for this rests on the success of APC. From the start we have regarded basic learning skills and student wellbeing as the foundation block for developing the full educational potential of our students. Our subject offerings, teaching methodologies and culture encourage student and teacher creativity, utilise innovative technologies, and pursue excellence. The whole school is exhorted at all times to live up to our culture of excellence as well as creativity.

I offer a few examples of how we turn this aspiration into reality:

- **We build creativity into the curriculum structure.** We regard ourselves as a strongly liberal arts and humanities school and have merged all of our arts and technology subjects into a group called 'Create', which covers a quarter of all curriculum offered. These are treated as core subjects, not ancillaries to STEM and other subjects.
- **Teaching strategies focus on creativity.** Teachers are expected to demand creativity as a matter of course in all subjects. For example, our school plays, musicals and dance shows only put on performances that we have written, composed or choreographed ourselves – utilising not only the creative energy of our teaching staff but the input of the several artists in residence we employ at any one time.
- **Selling creativity to our community.** We run annual art shows and literary festivals that spread the word to our community that we take these things seriously.
- **IT proficiency.** We require all our teachers to be highly proficient in information technology and its application in the class room and invest significant funds in providing the strongest IT infrastructure of any state school in the country. We are also an all-Apple environment and an Apple Distinguished School – along with programs to ensure no child lacks the necessary technology.
- **Team teaching to reach the whole class.** Our team teaching in the classroom approach means teachers are able to address students at the bottom, middle and top of the class, pushing everyone to pursue excellence.

The result is reflected in our NAPLAN, year-12 results and continuing high demand for places at the college. Our pursuit of creativity, innovation and excellence is working and has not affected our students' adoption of the basics.

4. Real and lasting improvements can only come from within schools

Much of the debate about how to improve our schools focuses on the wrong things. They seek to impose top-down solutions upon schools from the outside, often through mandating short-term programs, and, increasingly, concentrate on issues that are not directly about education. The proliferation of reactive wellbeing programs and compliance with data collection is directing resources away from what schools should be doing.

The most recent of many examples is instructive – the new Initial Teacher Education Quality Assurance Board. It addresses the right problem – ineffective classroom teaching – but does so in ways that are almost certain to fail or at best have limited success. Educators know that effective classroom management skills are more often than not gained from experience

and are best fostered by the right school environment. No amount of measurement and compliance paperwork by university education departments and schools will make it work.

The answer lies in not in top-down solutions but in helping schools build the internal capacity and helping teachers improve their professional skills and standing in the community.

(a) Leadership

Principals need to be given more autonomy and more authority within their schools. The tendency in recent years is to provide more top-down directions and compliance. One good example is expulsions. The tightening of restrictions on principals' powers to discipline and expel students who disrupt the education of others and, in extreme cases, make schools unsafe for teachers and other students, is one of the greatest frustrations principals face. The proliferation of mandated, costly and poorly-thought-out new programs is another source of frustration.

Experienced educators know that good leadership makes an outsized difference to a school. Good leaders (principals, deputy principals and leading teachers) are able to provide a consistent vision for their school that meets with community approval, create a harmonious and productive teaching and learning culture, and set up processes that enable everyone to concentrate on teaching and learning without dealing in constant crises. For example, a consistent approach to discipline and student wellbeing saves enormous resources, creates calmness in place of chaos, and boosts a school's reputation amongst its community. A good leader who demands constant improvement of teaching and learning, upkeep of the school's capital and facilities, and innovation in its approach, prevents stagnation and decline.

Well-led schools have the right internal processes in place to achieve their very best results they can for their students and should be allowed to 'get on with it' rather than be assailed constantly with directives which come from departmental and think tank policymakers who are not educators and who, as every year goes past, understand less and less about the practical details of how good schools actually work. It's time to trust school leaders to pursue what they think right for their communities.

Recommendation: More resources need to be invested into promoting better leadership from the principal class and senior teachers who will be the leaders of tomorrow. This means higher pay, more opportunities to travel and study good schools, less pressure for compliance.

(b) Professional development

The first example of good internal processes is the existence of a high class professional learning system (PL). Some resources are being put into school leadership and teacher PL, but most would agree they are of limited value because they do not allow teachers to build their skills year on year, and the recognised qualifications they provide do not necessarily translate into improved teaching. As with most things in schools, the best results come from

within schools themselves, utilising the experience of well-motivated peers to hand down practical wisdom to new and usually younger teachers.

At APC we invest considerable resources into our PL program. Its main features include:

- an assistant principal with responsibility for running an ongoing PL program
- a strong induction program for all new teachers that ensures they understand the school's values, culture and agreed teaching methodologies
- weekly mandated PL meetings in which teachers share responsibility for curriculum development and address classroom teaching issues
- a yearly staff residential conference that provides instruction on maintaining the school's learning culture, improving classroom practice, and building a strong and united staffroom
- requirements to be proficient in evolving teaching technologies.

We regard this as a crucial factor in our college's success, and for that reason we make considerable investment in it.

Recommendation: One of the best improvements the Australian Government could make it to provide resources to allow all secondary schools to fund effective in-house PL programs, including time release for assistant principals and teachers to lead and conduct PL, and in-house PL events. APC's PL program offers a good example of what is possible – other schools will have similar approaches that work.

(c) Consistent high quality curriculum

One of the well understood problems in the school system is the lack of consistency in the quality of teaching from class to class. While many teachers have truly amazing skills, the Hollywood myth of the brilliant and inspirational classroom teacher has encouraged many in the belief that each teacher should be left to their own devices in the classroom. Well-run schools know that the way to raise the standard in schools is to ensure consistent classroom instruction and curriculum to every class at each year level.

One of the complaints made by many is that teachers do not have sufficient time to develop their own curriculum and lesson plans. This has drawn calls for this crucial part of teachers' jobs to be outsourced to bureaucracies or private companies. We disagree with this response. Developing curricula and classroom plans is an essential part of the teaching profession, without which teachers become mere ciphers and instructors not professional educators. The answer is to involve every teacher in the development of curricula and lesson plans within their school.

At APC all teachers in each subject area are required to contribute to the creation of a common curriculum and teaching plans. Called our Guaranteed Online Curriculum, this information is mandated, stored online, accessible to all staff, and is the property of the college. Because it brings the most experienced and new teachers together, it provides a blend of experience, energy and innovation and contributes strongly to the creation of a positive school culture.

Recommendation: Rather than fund the development of curriculum and teaching plans through the bureaucracy or private providers, education systems should encourage schools to develop these essential assets within their schools, using the input of all teaching staff.

(d) Approach student wellbeing through an educational not welfare approach

Society increasingly demands that schools address the wellbeing of their students. Because we care greatly for young people, educators naturally accept this challenge. It only becomes a problem when wellbeing programs diverge from the specialised skills of educators – *which is to educate*. When this divergence occurs, wellbeing programs take the form of a reactive and highly expensive *welfare* programs. State, federal and individual school budgets struggle to cope without diverting scarce resources from teaching. Welfare also fails to build student resilience to prevent wellbeing problems emerging in the first place. On the principle that it is better to have safety barriers at the top of the cliff than ambulances at the bottom, a better approach is needed.

The best way to address student wellbeing is to transform it into an educational model that leans in to the skills teachers possess.

At APC we have developed our own Positive Education program and restructured the college to make it a central organising principle of the school. It has been transformational in the way the college operates and we have observed a noticeable difference in how students behave towards each other and their school community. Its main components are:

- an assistant principal with direct responsibility for running the positive education program
- the replacement of homegroup teachers with ‘positive education mentors’ charged with looking out for student wellbeing and encouraging positive attitudes through a set curriculum and dedicated events
- a positive psychology philosophy that encourages students to adopt a positive ‘can do’ attitude towards life and its problems, develop personal strengths, take responsibility for looking out for each other, and gain the capacity to understand and cope with the big issues that face them as they undergo adolescence (good study habits, personal fitness, mental health, gender, alcohol and drug use, sex, and so on).

Recommendation: That secondary schools be encouraged and funded to develop positive education models and curriculum that address student wellbeing in ways to utilise the skills of teachers.

(e) Vocational education

Schools must get better at vocational education. The temptation is to rebadge existing subjects as vocational and to ‘do it on the cheap’ through outsourcing to private providers. Quality outsourcing provides one viable answer, but a better, though more complex and longer term, solution is to modernise the way we think of vocational education and to fund schools adequately to provide it.

This offers hope for addressing one of the biggest problems facing all schools, which is the disengagement of large numbers of students who haven't been exposed to things that really grab their interest. But to grab and keep their attention, vocational education needs to be high quality. It can't be done 'on the cheap' or 'dumbed down' but be challenging and high quality.

Vocational education must involve the teaching of contemporary and future workplace skills like leadership, communications, teamwork, creativity, technology proficiency, and marketing – all the skills young people will need in the industries of the future (and most of the industries of today as well). The nervousness inherent in policymaking about the disruptive influence of emerging technologies in schools must be replaced by a positive attitude to technology and innovation more generally. Schools should be encouraged to take risks and adopt new technologies and ways of working. One excellent example is how the most technologically advanced and innovative-minded schools easily made the transition to being full online remote educators at the start of the COVID-19 shutdown.

At APC we reached out to the local gaming industry who were delighted to assist us to develop modules that teach gaming industry skills.

Recommendation: Secondary schools should be funded adequately to deliver high quality vocational programs in emerging new employment areas, with high level new technologies. Schools should be assisted to work with local industries to develop new vocational programs that address the interests and future employment prospects of their students and meet the needs of local employers.

(f) Implications for the educational bureaucracy and society

Devolving the responsibility for educational improvement to schools has profound implications for the educational bureaucracy and requires an attempt to change community attitudes towards the teaching profession.

At present most principals would agree that they feel bureaucracies police them rather than assist them. This is due to (1) the evolution of managerial approaches to education policy (i.e. the increased use of data, choice, regulation and incentives to change the behaviour and direction of schools), and (2) widespread negative attitudes about the quality and motivations of schools and teachers (especially public schools and their teachers). There is a strong sense that schools and teachers are not professional educators but instructors who cannot be expected to do their jobs without constant and explicit direction. The denigration of public schools and teachers over many years has made this perception almost universal and it has been ingested by bureaucrats who should know better. It creates a psychology that stifles initiative and innovation in our schools.

Both bureaucratic and community attitudes need to be changed for devolution to work. In short, educational bureaucracies need to accept that increasing top-down direction does not work and that their job is to empower leaders and schools to improve and address the needs of their communities. Governments need to treat educators as professionals and

invest in them as happens in other professions. Educators should be given the same respect and trust as our scientists now enjoy.

There also needs to be a prolonged public campaign to raise the standing of teachers and the public system and to build a culture of respect for them. In other countries with higher performing school systems, educators have far higher levels of respect and pay.

Recommendation: That educational bureaucracies set out to change their culture to one of supporting schools to do their job rather than directing them how to do it.

Recommendation: That there be a sustained public campaign to improve the public's respect for teachers and public education.



Albert Park College

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