



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

Submitter: ACT Government
Submitting as a: Government agency
State: ACT

Summary

The ACT believes that any high quality, high equity education system needs to ensure it is delivering the capabilities and dispositions students need beyond school, such as problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration as well as skills in areas such as coding and digital literacy. The ACT has some innovative programs that are using the literacy, numeracy and ICT general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum to deliver these skills to our students. However, the ACT is interested in strengthening the use of the other general capabilities to achieve this overall goal as well as robust measures and learning standards relating to these capabilities. Increased national effort in this regard would be of benefit to all Australian schools and systems.

The ACT believes that raising the professional standing and quality of teaching and teachers is the fundamental key to raising Australia's educational performance. We would hope that this review examines research like McKinsey (2007) and Hattie (2007), reinforced by the extensive recent comparative study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) that identify the drivers and focus of educational systems around the world that have, often in short periods of time, significantly raised their performance through a focus on quality instruction.

We have also included information on some leading practice programs in the ACT focused on articulating teacher quality and identifying practices that represent quality instruction. It is of course important to measure the success of teachers and of improvement over time and we have outlined some strategies used in the ACT to achieve this.

We conclude our submission with some challenges facing the ACT and Australia more broadly, such as an ageing workforce and the shortage of teachers with particular specialisations.

Main submission

Introduction

The ACT Government has a very strong and publicly declared commitment to equity and excellence, which aligns with the goals of the Melbourne Declaration and ensuring the best possible life opportunities for every student, grounded in quality early childhood and schooling experiences.

As part of this commitment the ACT has honoured and actively progressed a number of nation-wide reforms including:

- establishment of the Student Resource Allocation program, transparently giving effect to needs-based funding in public schools
- embedding the Teacher Quality Institute as national best practice in teacher quality and registration through high quality initial teacher education and a comprehensive framework for continuous improvement in the quality and professionalism of the ACT's teaching workforce
- early engagement with the Australian Curriculum, with implementation progressively underway
- systematic implementation of ACER's National School Improvement Tool.

With some unique benefits including our size, location, and population, the ACT is known for its innovation, high expectations and strong overall performance. Our commitment and focus is firmly upon improving educational achievement and life opportunities of all students, particularly our most vulnerable and disadvantaged students.

Despite these commitments and reforms the ACT, like all jurisdictions in Australia, is challenged with matching the general high quality of our system with equity of outcomes for all students.

There is significant national and international evidence that reinforces that improvements of this nature have greatest impact when reforms are initiated and implemented as close as possible to the point of delivery – ie every classroom. On this basis, the ACT Government advocates for maximising the role of local reforms and minimising the scope and number of national reforms, limiting them to areas where a national approach would be of genuine and significant benefit, such as enhanced quality and consistency of initial teacher education or development of national assessment tools.

In addition to participating in this review the ACT is currently undertaking a significant local review – the Future of Education community conversation, with the intention that the ACT will succeed in “ensuring that socioeconomic disadvantage

ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes” (Melbourne Declaration 2008).

Qu1: For some time theorists and educators have been predicting that it will become decreasingly important for students to learn content or discipline knowledge and more important for them to develop the skills to acquire, assess value of and interpret knowledge. This requires a shift in the emphasis of schools from the imparting of facts or content to the development of capabilities and dispositions within the context of content. Sets of capabilities and dispositions have been developed, including those by the OECD, the World Economic Forum and the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. These lists generally include: critical thinking, problem solving, adaptability/flexibility, creativity, resilience, collaboration, relationship building, cultural literacy as well as both financial and digital literacy.

Public schools in the ACT are implementing the recently completed Australian Curriculum. The dominant focus of the Australian school curriculum remains the discipline knowledge, skills and understanding articulated in the learning areas of the curriculum. However, as they invest in the Australian Curriculum, ACT schools are finding the general capabilities have the potential to provide the structure they need to change the focus of student learning to better meet the demands of the future.

The ACT Government has committed to STEM education in Canberra public schools with a futures education focus on capabilities such as critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as developing the core understandings and skills that are essential for preparing today’s students for lifelong learning and the workplace of tomorrow. They encompass innovative learning and collaborative teaching practices and explore the potential of educational technology and learning space design to provide opportunities for and equip students for their future. Some of the key Initiatives in Canberra Public Schools include:

- Charles Weston School – Coding release program P-6, teacher coaching and mentoring <http://digitalschoolsact.blogspot.com.au/2016/08/coding-in-coombs-charles-weston-schools.html>
- Melrose High School – Partnership with Lee Crockett - 21st Century fluencies <https://globaldigitalcitizen.org/lee-watanabe-crockett>
- Gowrie Primary School – STEM Centre: coding, robotics, 3D printing, 21st Century skills <http://digitalschoolsact.blogspot.com.au/2016/12/stem-centre-gowries-community.html>
- Lake Tuggeranong College – Skills-based pathways, engineering, links to high schools (student mentors), cyber security and partnerships with the private sector

- Amaroo School – Coding, makerspace, Inspire Hub, technology/STEM electives, 3D printing
- Mount Stromlo School- partnership with Mount Stromlo Observatory/ANU Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics.

These leading practice examples demonstrate that there is already widespread use of the literacy, numeracy and ICT capabilities continua across ACT primary schools and into secondary schools. However, there is evidence that the systematic development and delivery of the remaining four general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum is not as well established in schools. The development of rigorous, evidence based learning sequences, and potential achievement standards and assessment methodology regarding innovative use of the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum, would be particularly helpful for ACT public schools.

Qu2: Transparency, targets and accountability provisions, along with well-designed monitoring have the potential to add more to ensuring successful outcomes. The focus in the ACT has recently shifted to measurement of growth in student learning, rather than mean scores. This includes learning growth for various student population groups which brings in the important element of equity and can be effectively used as both measures and targets for improvement.

Ultimate success will be best measured through the achievements of students exiting the school system, such as the number of students continuing into further education and/or employment. It will also include other measures of success more connected to learning attributes, such as self-reported measures of general wellbeing, flexibility and adaptability and capability to participate to the individuals desired level, as well as more traditional success related measurements like not requiring income support. National tools to capture a broader range of success measures would be of benefit to all systems.

The ACT has recently identified a suite of quality assessment tools for ongoing assessment of student learning at the school level. Formative assessment at the school level (assessment for learning) is essential to inform learning programs for individuals and groups of students. A national computer-based ‘assessment and learning’ system that allows teachers to assess a wide range of learning in a ‘just in time’ way, and then provides links to high impact teaching strategies based on the student’s responses would be of immeasurable benefit as teachers, schools and systems seek to increasingly personalise learning for maximum learning benefit.

While there is a role for national literacy and numeracy data in assessing overall system performance (although a national sample, rather than population test could serve the same purpose) and some benefit in ‘point in time’ diagnostic data (when available more immediately through online delivery) from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the ACT sees very limited value in

reporting school level information, particularly in the comparisons published on MySchool. Further, the ACT strongly believes that it is timely, now that 10 years of NAPLAN tests have been completed, to conduct a formal review of the impact of the program. This should include unintended consequences of school level comparisons, such as contributing to residualised populations in some schools, which then results in further unfavourable comparisons.

Qu3: Great Teaching and Great Teachers

The evidence from analysis of the world's top performing school systems suggests that three things matter most for improving practice and outcomes, including for disadvantaged and vulnerable students (McKinsey 2007 and reinforced in Darling-Hammond et al 2017):

- getting the right people to become teachers
- developing them into effective instructors
- ensuring the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

McKinsey's detailed analysis of 25 of the world's school systems shows that "few, if any of the most widely supported reforms (such as more school autonomy or reducing class sizes) have produced the results promised for them". Rather, "the available evidence suggests that the main driver of the variation in student learning is the quality of the teachers" (McKinsey, 2007:11).

Reflecting the evidence in reports such as McKinsey, the ACT Education Directorate has a comprehensive strategy to attract, develop and retain high quality teachers at all career stages, including recruitment, induction, ongoing professional learning and the recognition of excellence.

Notably, the ACT strategy includes

- Strong partnerships with tertiary teacher training providers
- A range of supports to beginning teachers to develop quality teaching practices through induction, reduced face-to-face teaching hours during their first year to facilitate coaching and mentoring, and feedback through probation and teacher registration assessment processes
- An Annual Professional Learning Program at every school
- Opportunities for our best teachers to gain promotion in the classroom and be recognised as professional practice experts.
- An Aspiring Leaders Program that supports future school leaders in developing leadership capacity as well as an ACT Teacher Scholarship

Program to support teachers undertaking further education, training and/or research leading to improvements in student outcomes.

The ACT is currently updating teacher and school leader performance and development processes to align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the ACTPS Performance and Development Framework. Teachers who achieve certification at the high standards of Highly Accomplished and Lead teacher are recognised and financially rewarded.

The ACT is also currently developing a revised principal career structure that recognises leadership excellence and ensures and actively encourages high performing, skilled, experienced principals to take up placements in schools that demonstrate the need for strong leadership and improvement

The ACT Government has developed and is implementing Great Teachers by Design - an instructional leadership framework developed through synthesis of research and evidence-based approaches to improving student achievement.

Great Teachers by Design offers a foundation from which school leaders can drive improvements in quality teaching. The framework articulates key actions for Principals and school leaders to improve teachers' capacity to provide students with the capabilities, skills and knowledge to prepare them for the future. Key actions included in the framework are: collaboration, increasing opportunities for teachers to engage with research, promoting student voice and feedback, providing all teachers with high-quality feedback (based on the AITSL Standards) and strengthening parental engagement in schooling.

The complementary Great Teaching by Design framework was also produced through synthesis of best practice and evidence based teaching practices to support school and teacher level decision making and implementation of classroom practices that have the most impact on positive student outcomes.

The classroom practices found, through the research to be effective and included in the Great Teaching by Design framework are:

- Respond to individual needs.
- Build effective relationships.
- Use explicit teaching approaches.
- Embed formative assessment.
- Set high expectations for student achievement.
- Provide students with quality feedback.
- Engage students.

Building off these existing reforms and enhancing the strength and consistency of professional learning communities in ACT Public Schools; and teachers and educators as action researchers are both key priorities going forward – and where considerable ongoing effort will be invested.

Measurement of Improvement over time

In the ACT, the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) is used across the system as the structure underpinning five yearly external school reviews with in-depth reports prepared for the individual school and a system level report to the Minister and Director-General on school improvement findings.

In-school evaluation of the efficacy of the school's approaches and effectiveness can be measured by applying the nine domains from the NSIT (ACER, 2012). In the ACT, it is clear that the NSIT allows schools to make judgements about where they are on their improvement journeys, to set evidence informed goals and design strategies for improvement, and to monitor and demonstrate improvement over time. The ACT notes that Masters (2017) cautioned for an over reliance on measurement: "Good measures of progress in improving outcomes and closing gaps are essential. However, success may best be achieved not by pursuing it directly, but as a 'side-effect' of an unwavering dedication to the larger educational purpose." (Masters, 2017), and acknowledges our own approach to school improvement is holistic in intent and practice.

Several data sets are used to define and measure progress in ACT Public Schools, including the School Climate Tool and Satisfaction Surveys, both of which capture responses from students, parents and staff. These are important data sets to be considered alongside various measures of student achievement (at both the school and system level).

These local investments in grounded, high impact reforms should be acknowledged, supported and complemented, not compromised, by any potential national reforms.

Qu4: McKinsey's (2007) research into the top performing schools shows that the best systems invest significantly in identifying best practice teaching, classroom and school practices and then scaling up the findings of these across the system. The research must include observation of direct and authentic teaching settings as well as team teaching and other inbuilt standard processes for teachers sharing of their practice, their weaknesses and their learnings. (McKinsey, 2007: 26-28). The ACT would welcome discussions about developing a national leading teaching practice research unit in collaboration between governments and tertiary institutions. The partnership work in train with the University of Canberra is grounded in action research and related developments in both initial and ongoing teacher education and would make an excellent contribution to such a direction.

In the ACT, the Education Directorate's Education Support Office (central office) is structured to provide school performance and improvement as a combined 'school facing' function that includes all branches working together, using explicit governance practices to deliver strong service and support, resourcing, policies and accountability, including:

- Principal supervision and principal performance planning
- School planning at the five year strategic planning and annual operational level
- School reviews held on a five year cycle involving a rigorous external process undertaken in conjunction with the Australian Council of Educational Research
- Leadership sessions delivered twelve times per year focusing on school improvement
- Network meetings facilitated by network executive to discuss operational and long term school performance matters
- Directorate leadership forums led by the Director-General involving principals with a focus on system improvement, challenges and pathways
- National and international eminent educational speaker series through which school leaders are exposed to strong practice and intentional success stories with an emphasis on how these initiatives translate to the ACT context. These sessions are often extended to include master classes with school leaders to plan implementation of improvement strategies at school level
- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are established each year for newly appointed principals, and specific PLCs are developed for the wider cohort of principals for targeted improvement initiatives across all stages of schooling.

Qu5: With a focus on quality teaching as the most important element of educational success, Hattie has noted that "we need excellent diagnoses identifying strengths and opportunities to improve, then a focus on understanding what has led us to the situation and being clear on where we therefore need to go. We need gentle pressure, relentlessly pursued towards transparent and defensible targets, esteeming the expertise of educators to make these differences, while building a profession based on this expertise" (Hattie, in Bentley and Savage, 2007: 30). The ACT Government has a clear vision and strong implementation of system enablers focussed on quality teaching to drive educational success.

As also noted, many of the world's top performing systems used system enablers such as qualifications, quality assurance, peer review and targeted allocation of investment to drive their nations towards improved educational outcomes through quality teaching.

The ACT Government acknowledges that some administrative tasks take time away from and distract teachers' from their core role. To redress this a supportive, problem-solving and preventative approach has been taken to managing teacher workload with the current Teaching Staff Enterprise Agreement, which for the first time, identified the core role of teachers.

To support sustainable workload levels, the ACT Government has allocated \$7m of additional resources to schools to relieve administrative burden and ensure teachers are able to do their job as effectively as possible.

Sustainable management of workload enables teachers to sharpen their focus on their students' learning needs in the classroom, develop their teaching practice with their colleagues and allows time for teachers to engage in high quality professional learning, through Professional Learning Communities throughout ACT Public Schools. The school's annual professional learning program is of high quality, focussing on the teacher's core role and supports all teachers to meet requirements for registration with the ACT Teacher Quality Institute (20 hours of recognised professional learning each year).

Qu6: Investing in our workforce

As previously stated, the ACT believes that quality teaching is integral to school improvement and that the emphasis should be placed on local reforms in order to realise maximum impact.

In addition however, the ACT would support further national quality teaching reforms to:

(i) reduce the diversity and number of initial teacher education courses and institutions in Australia and (ii) further enrich the selection processes into teacher education and (iii) increase the consistency in content and quality of initial teacher education programs.

The ACT also believes this could include a nationwide public and action based commitment to changing the perceived status of the teaching profession. This involves building trust in the profession as experts in their field and recognises that buy in, by teachers, of the critical role that they play is required for success.

Investing Early

The social and economic benefits of investing early are well documented. While this review does not explicitly include Early Childhood Education and Care within its scope, this is one of the most obvious areas where focused and increased investment will reap the greatest gains.

The significant life-long benefits for children who participate in early childhood education and care include the ability to self-regulate, manage emotions and behaviour; learning how to learn, and; longer engagement in schooling and

improved academic achievement. Children who participate in quality early education and care experience these benefits irrespective of their family, social or economic context.

Sustained investments by all governments in quality early programs for both three and four year olds is a critical foundation in any set of reforms for improved educational outcomes for young Australians. In addition, investing in developing the skills and knowledge of parents as a child's first teacher, greatly enhance learning and development as a positive foundation for schooling.

Impacts of assessment and reporting

As noted earlier, an emerging area for urgent action is reconsideration of what is measured and reported. Governments need to measure what matters and makes a high impact on learning, and empower teachers with tools like assessment for learning (formative assessment). The effects of public reporting on student outcomes also requires attention; the current approach has been adverse.

Public reporting through, for example, school-level NAPLAN scores, and its underlying intent to bring a contestability/choice paradigm into school education is particularly problematic. Instead of this policy setting resulting in school improvement, it has escalated equity gaps between schools because families with the means opt for schools with positive public information, leaving those without the means in residualised local schools. Global evidence shows that the best school systems (e.g. Ontario) are founded in equity, which ultimately results in excellence for all.

Measures of school and teacher performance intrinsically affect student outcomes and therefore decisions about what is privileged in public reporting and the level of disaggregation presented requires careful consideration.

Qu 7: Investing in our workforce

The ACT is experiencing challenges in filling teaching positions in some discipline areas in our schools including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), early childhood, special education and some languages. This is a challenge in common with other jurisdictions and according to the Australian Council of Education Research 2015 Policy Insights: The Teacher Workforce in Australia: Supply, Demand and Data Issues report, there are a large number of teachers nation-wide teaching subjects 'out-of-field', without specific training in that subject. This is likely to become more acute in the coming years if the demand for specialist teachers is not more systematically addressed through using workforce planning data to inform initial teacher education. While preliminary work has commenced in this area, this needs to be continued and strengthened if we are to meet these challenges over time.

In addition, as identified in the 'emerging areas' section, a key barrier to improvement is the current status of the teaching profession including building trust in the profession as experts in their field and recognises that buy in, by teachers, of the critical role that they play is required for success. Any school improvement or reform proposal, initiated at the federal or state level, must occur with buy in from school communities, particularly teachers and school leaders.

Steering the community conversation

As Hattie and other researchers point out, the community is often focussed on things that make no discernible impact on quality educational outcomes. As noted earlier; "few of the most widely supported reforms (for instance giving schools more autonomy or reducing class sizes) have produced the results promised for them". (McKinsey, 2007: 10). The imperative is to change the narrative of schooling away from the structural concerns to the concerns about expertise (Hattie, in Bentley and Savage, 2007: 28). Conversely, the ACT's Future of Education conversation has shown a community willingness to look at the central importance of workforce capability and building on it. It appears that the ACT community narrative has changed but without a change to the national narrative, it will be difficult to bring the community along to make the changes necessary to significantly improve Australia's stagnated (and in some cases regressing) educational performance. Communications arising from this review could assist greatly by minimising the national reforms to those that are genuinely of high impact and national benefit and reinforcing the pre-eminent importance of local, quality-teaching-focused reforms.

Conclusion

The ACT recognises that the world's top performing systems demonstrate that meeting the educational needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged students is an essential part of an equitable and high quality education system.

The ACT believes that investing in early childhood, raising the status of the profession and quality teaching are the fundamental keys to raising Australia's educational performance.

As the ACT undertakes a broad Future of Education community consultation process, we can already see that the community wants and is ready for significant change and is urging to move our education system into the future. In addition the ACT community wants our teachers to be of the highest quality and to be free and supported to teach. They also want our system to target resources to ensure we can meet the needs of every student.

Full details of the directions emerging from the Future of Education community consultation will be made available to the panel once available.