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

Submitter:	Mr Dean Ashenden
Submitting as a:	Other (Education journalist)
State:	Vic.

Summary

This submission

This submission accepts that 'practical measures that work' can play a significant part in lifting key academic outcomes. It also suggests, however, that improved practice should be supported by structural reform to:

- permit more needs-based resource allocation within schools, and to

- reduce social segmentation in schools, a key driver of unsatisfactory performance.

The submission also considers other questions raised in the Issues Paper:

- using funding at the school level to improve the performance of all students

- the definition of 'success'

- sustaining improvement over the longer term

- barriers to implementation; and

- related institutional or governance arrangements.

The submission argues that:

- curricula more aligned with present and future social and economic circumstances should be combined with learning organised to provide continuous growth and progress, for all

- many elements of such a 'grammar' of schooling now exist, but within schooling organised around relative attainment

- structural change could give schools more 'space', within key metrics, to re-organise the work of learning

- the emergence of a more appropriate form and content of schooling could be supported by a national agency taking a long and broad view of the task, and capable of sustained, rigorous, policy-focussed review and analysis.

Section 1 makes out this case via discussion of six propositions about the scope and tasks of schooling.

Section 2 sets out ways in which the Review could recommend accordingly

Main submission

1. Section 1

WHAT SCHOOLS DO AND SHOULD DO:

SIX PROPOSITIONS

1.1.

Allocating resources according to need is as important *within* schools as *between* them

Until relatively recently research on 'what works' was directed toward finding the most [effective](#) interventions, a reflection of the fact that most schools worked within a regime of classes, fixed maximum class sizes, lessons, and teaching loads, all determined at system rather than school level.

The rise of [cost-effectiveness](#) research reflects schools' greater control over resource allocation, although usually over supplementary rather than core resources.

The risk is that as 'new' needs-based funding reaches schools it will be seen as 'extra' funding for doing 'extra' things, for 'enrichment' or 'remedial' programs, leaving undisturbed a mainstream program that is less than rich, and which routinely leaves some students behind.

New funding should be used to encourage schools to 'do a Gonski' themselves. In the first instance that means adjusting class sizes and the allocation of teacher time to more closely align with the school's educational priorities. The implications for structural change are discussed in 1.6 (below).

1.2.

In trying to improve their 'performance', schools may be rowing against a systemic tide

[Research](#) commissioned by the Review of Funding for Schools found that Australia has a relatively low proportion of students in schools with socially mixed enrolments and relatively high proportions in schools with concentrations of disadvantaged students (on the one side) and advantaged (on the other). An ACER [study](#) looked at the same question through via an index 'school variance'. It found an increase in

variance in Australian schools from 18 to 24 per cent between 2000 and 2009; over the same period school variance in Finland rose from eight to nine per cent. Other research has identified a rising incidence of both ethnic and social class segmentation.

These developments, it is argued, underlie problems in performance. The gap between the highest and lowest performing students is 'far greater' in Australia than in many OECD countries, and Australia was the only OECD country to see an increase in the performance gap between high and low SES schools between 2000 and 2009.

This research directed its attention mainly to the consequences of segmentation for the academic performance of students in disadvantaged schools, but in a recent analysis Hattie has argued that students in schools with high concentrations of advantaged students are also under-performing because (as he puts it), the schools are 'cruising'.

Seen from one direction it can be suggested that an effective way to improve 'performance' would be to arrest and reverse the trend to segmentation. From another angle it can be suggested that to the extent that segmentation is allowed to continue to grow, schools are being asked to row against a systemic tide.

An important step toward tackling the problem of segmentation has been taken with the introduction of needs-based, sector-blind funding. But it is not clear that it will be equal to the task.

Several of the key structural drivers of segmentation and associated student and school under-performance remain. These include: the division between fee-charging and free schools; the absence of a ceiling on school expenditure; and a regulatory regime which permits some schools (in both government and non-government sectors) to select on various grounds but requires other schools to take all comers, and which gives some Australian families an exceptionally wide choice of school but others little or no choice at all.

It is suggested that this is more than a problem for 'academic' performance.

1.3.

Academic outcomes in fundamental areas are not the only outcomes that matter fundamentally

Much attention is being given to defining, teaching and assessing new kinds of 'outcomes', variously referred to as generic, cross-curriculum, or twenty-first century skills. They range from 'collaborative problem-solving' to 'learning to learn' to 'applying deep understandings of key disciplinary concepts'.

Less attention is given to a category of learning regarded by many parents and others as fundamental to schooling, the development of values, attitudes, and ways of seeing self and others.

The role of the school in this area of learning is limited but real, and is more challenging than delivery of the academic curriculum. It is not just a matter of running anti-bullying programs or establishing an SRC; the educational task is to make the entire 'hidden' curriculum explicit, and the subject of a sustained effort to align it with fundamental social and educational goals.

Much of this 'informal' or 'hidden' curriculum exists in the relationships among the students themselves. The school is the place where children and young people spend extended periods of time together, and where they therefore do a lot of growing up, of themselves and of each other.

What students learn from and about each other depends crucially on who the other students are. Who goes to school with whom? In this area some schools have a great deal of control (as noted in the previous section) while other schools have little say at all, and the upshot is something that no-one intended.

When economics writer Ross Gittins notes that Jewish kids go to one school, Islamic kids to another, and poses the trick question 'what did the rich kid say to the poor kid?' (answer: nothing, they never met), he is drawing attention to a social problem, but also an educational impoverishment, for all concerned.

Diversity is a fundamental social principle, but it should also be a core educational value. That value can be taught, but even the best teaching in this domain is no substitute for, or counter to, what many students see and experience. That research and national policy have attended to rising social segmentation mainly because of its impact on academic outcomes suggests that the 'what works' agenda can encourage an unfortunate myopia.

1.4.

Outcomes of schooling matter, but so does the experience itself

Schooling is unavoidably a preparation for life after school, but it is not only that. Twelve years is, after all, one fifth or more of most working lives. To most parents it is as important that their sons and daughters really look forward to going to school each day as it is that they make good progress in the formal curriculum. Its importance to students themselves is obvious.

How many do look forward to going to school? Why or why not? How far does that differ from one school or kind of school to another? Is the 'performance' of schools in this vital area improving or the reverse? How does it relate to their 'performance' in other domains?

Answers to questions such as these do exist, but within systems, and often in less than robust form. Nationally, schools can use standard instruments to collect data on student, parent and staff satisfaction, and under the terms of the National Education Agreement they are required to 'report on it', and to include a link to the MySchool home page in the section of their annual reports dealing with school satisfaction.

'Satisfaction' is a limited concept, and the questions posed in the standard survey instrument are anodyne, and would not allow students to say at least some of what they see, think and feel about their experience at their school. Data thus collected would not support national aggregation.

The case for a robust, national collection of direct feedback from students as the basis for an experience of school key performance indicator is that:

- what students experience is more fundamental than – indeed, is the point of - what the school provides ('school quality')

- the students themselves are the experts. Data on attendance, engagement, retention, suspensions and the like are all important, but all depend upon inference; none can be as direct or specific as what students themselves say

- The value of that feedback in national policy would be in contributing to a broader, more realistic account of 'performance', and making possible analysis of the relationship between key performance elements.

1.5.

Schooling as currently organised can not deliver the experience or the outcomes that increasingly matter

In a widely-discussed paper, Masters contrasts what schools are now asked to do with what they do do:

- current curricula are often dominated by factual and procedural knowledge rather than deep understandings and their application to real-world problems as demanded in many workplaces

- subjects are often taught in isolation from each other, at a time when cross-disciplinary solutions are needed

- passive, reproductive learning and the solution of standard problem types prevail when creativity and innovative solutions to new problems are called for

- Assessment provides information about subject achievement when employers want information about ability to work in teams, use technology, communicate, solve problems and learn on the job

- Students often learn in isolation and in competition with each other, when workplaces demand teamwork, and interpersonal and communication skills

- Curricula are designed for delivery in traditional classroom settings at a time when new technologies are transforming how courses are delivered and learning takes place.

Masters is here calling for a new category of outcomes (as noted in 1.3 above) to be taught and assessed. But he is also calling for a different organisation of work in schools – and, it should be emphasised, of the work of learning (rather than of teaching).

One implication of this analysis is that more of the work of learning should be managed by the students themselves, that they need to do more 'teaching' of each other, and more work in collaboration and in learning to collaborate. But the primary re-organisation required is (as Masters and many others have long advocated) of the relationship between each student and their curriculum.

Students can only work at full tilt to the extent that the work they are asked to do makes sense, is engaging, and is above all doable - but not too easily doable. Students should be working as often as possible in their 'zone of proximal development', and the work of learning should wherever possible be organised as a series of 'developmental continua'.

That this is not easy to do is obvious. It is possible only in fits and starts within the typical organisation of people, time, space and task - a group of 20 or more students, often three, four or even five 'learning years' apart, brought together for just 45 minutes to work on a more or less common task in ways necessarily orchestrated by the teacher - that is, within a 'grammar of schooling' formed in its essential features early in the 20th century.

The phrase 'grammar of schooling' was coined to refer to 'the regular structures and rules' of schools which function 'in the way grammar organizes meaning in language'. In these terms, what Masters and many others are looking for is a different grammar of schooling.

The elements of such a grammar can be found in many places: in special programs and schools for students who could not or would not swim in the mainstream; in efforts to work out how the digital technologies can be deployed to increase (rather than decrease) the productivity of schooling; in efforts to devise new kinds of assessments and new ways to integrate them into the learning process; and in a few thoroughly reconfigured mainstream schools, past and present.

Programs and work of this kind are proliferating. They are important in themselves and in what can be learned from them. But an obsolete grammar still confines them

to one or other of schooling's margins – the earlier years; the low-status or non-core areas of the curriculum; and programs for 'non-academic' or 'difficult' students.

The task for schools and systems over the coming decades is to form these elements into a new compound, one that answers to Masters' criteria – cross-disciplinary, collaborative, project- and workshop-based, high tech, and organised to ensure the continuous growth of each student – and capable of displacing an anachronistic grammar.

A.6

Schools can not re-organise themselves by themselves

The prevailing grammar is deeply embedded in the culture of schooling, in habitual ways of thinking and doing things.

It is also the case, however, that this culture is supported by structural arrangements and defended by associated interest groups and institutions. These include:

- an influential segment of selective schools (both government and non-government), well served by the received grammar

- tertiary selection systems which codify and, in high-status areas, insist upon that grammar

- industrial agreements and associated ways of allocating resources which take for granted 'classes', 'lesson periods', and a workforce dominated by a single category of education worker, the 'teacher', and embed them in quasi-legal regulation

- a physical infrastructure centred on 'the classroom'

- an 'effectiveness' [industry](), which has tended to obscure the fact of a specific grammar by taking the current one as given.

The combination of these well-defended structures with widely-shared habits and assumptions has kept the familiar grammar in its dominant position long after the circumstances to which it belonged have disappeared, to the frustration of many working in and around schools. A new grammar of schooling will not be moved from the margins to the mainstream of schooling by diffusion or [persuasion]() or by the efforts of schools and innovators alone. Structural reform will be required also.

2. Section 2

THE REVIEW'S RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1. Lifting academic outcomes

It is suggested that, whatever the Review might recommend by way of 'practical measures that work' to improve academic outcomes, it should also:

- recommend that ways be found to permit and encourage schools to increasingly allocate core as well as supplementary resources (teaching effort particularly) according to need

- note that increasing social segmentation and disparities between schools are strongly associated with under-performance and that these developments may reduce or even negate gains from improved practice in schools

- propose that the Government consider further reforms to funding and to the regulation of student selection that build on needs-based and sector-blind funding to increase diversity within each school and reduce disparities between them.

2.2. Other tasks of schools

It is suggested that the Review should:

- express the view that academic outcomes are not the only crucial outcomes or aspects of schooling

- suggest that the Government give consideration to changing the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia so as to give parity with academic/cognitive outcomes to:

  o the character and quality of students' experience of school

  o diversity within each school – as distinct from the invidious demographic comparisons currently offered on the MySchool site - and disparities between schools

  o students' social perceptions and values

2.3. The organisation of work in schools

It is suggested that the Review should note that:

- the wider use of 'practical measures that work' within the familiar form of schooling will not be sufficient to meet the present learning and developmental needs of many students or emerging social and economic demands, and, will therefore not deliver an optimum return to increased school funding

- many schools, researchers, policy-makers and others are working to develop more active, collaborative, technology-rich, task- and project-based forms of learning, organised around the principle of continuous progress for all students

- these efforts are conducted within the constraints of inherited structures of schools and schooling rather than an appropriate performance and accountability framework such as that suggested in 2.2 (above)

2.4. Reducing structural 'barriers to improvement'

It is suggested that the Review propose:

- a sustained, high-level conversation between the industrial partners to consider:
    - for the near-term, ways of encouraging more needs-based allocation of resources within schools (for example, by shifting from a maximum size for each class to a maximum average class size); and
    - for the longer-term, the implications and desirability of substantial changes in the organisation of learning and teaching along the lines of those noted in 2.2 (above)

- an investigation into whether and how the impact on school curricula of selection for highly-competitive courses and courses in the strongly sequential disciplines is being and could be reduced by means including replacing the TER with more broadly-based assessments of capability.

2.5. Implications for institutional and governance arrangements
  It is suggested that the Review should:

- recommend that specific initiatives aimed at lifting academic outcomes should form part of a larger effort to assist systems and schools to develop cost-effective forms of learning and teaching more appropriate to the 21st century

- note that such an effort would need to be informed, over an extended period of time, by authoritative, policy-focussed and consultative analysis, review and recommendation of the kind exemplified by the OECD in the international sphere; and

- recommend that the government give consideration to the development of such a capacity within the proposed national schools resourcing body, or a revamped ACARA