



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

Submitter: Australian Association of Christian Schools
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: Vic.

Summary

- We support the holistic goals captured within the Melbourne Declaration. Utilitarian goals are too narrow.
- How students learn is a critical issue.
- The Australian Curriculum has many fine features but the overall model is marked by over-crowding and too many negative impacts on localised expression and character expression.
- Vocational education should not be forgotten.
- The increased focus on teacher quality is the right policy direction.
- Administrative compliance is causing considerable distraction and stress for teachers and school leaders alike.
- Parental choice, engagement and partnership are critical issues for Australian education. Greater focus and resourcing and attitudinal change is needed.
- The rise of the measure of 'state' responsibility for education is a concern.
- The tools that have mainly been used to measure educational success have been too limited and largely quantitative. The dominance and NAPLAN and PISA results has been damaging to this debate. Broader qualitative views and tools would be helpful.

Main submission

About AACCS

The Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACCS) represents 126 schools and 54,000 students from all states and territories across Australia. AACCS schools are mostly low-fee schools. Our average SES is 97.40 and we are an average of 19% in the lowest ICSEA quartile and 25% in the 2nd ICSEA quartile. AACCS schools operate autonomously and are accountable to their parent and school communities.

We are thankful for the opportunity to contribute and provide commentary in a number of areas where member schools have expressed stronger viewpoints.

We commend the work of this Review.

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

The Melbourne Declaration (2.0 p.13) well captured a fine set of holistic goals for education. The Australian Curriculum “will enable every student to develop: (1) A solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values on which further learning and adult life can be built... (2) Deep knowledge, understanding, skills and values that will enable advanced learning and an ability to create new ideas and translate them into practical applications.... (3) General capabilities that underpin flexible and analytical thinking, a capacity to work with others and an ability to move across subject disciplines to develop new expertise.”

We encourage the Review to embrace this type of wider view of the goals of education. The explanatory note appears to contain a much narrower view when it states, “To help ensure students have the skills they need for future employment, further training or higher education, the Review will necessarily consider what students should be learning during their time at school ...”

We view the articulation of schooling purpose simply in utilitarian terms – where terms of workforce or competency skilling are the primary focus, or where terms of academic outcomes for their own sake are used - as narrow and restrictive. Christian schools appreciate and affirm holistic goals for education which we frequently outline as being: academic rigor; cultural engagement; and, character formation. This includes broader over-arching goals /values of service to the greater good of society, and participatory citizenship.

What students learn and how they learn

We applaud the investigation of how students learn and what is important in providing an engaging learning environment. Our schools have made extensive use of the research that has emerged over the past decade regarding what has the greatest educational impact for students, particularly quality teaching and timely personalised feedback (‘High Impact Teaching Strategies’ - John Hattie).

The Australian Curriculum has brought a significant contribution to the Australian educational scene - a clear outline of content and skills to be covered; clarity of terminology and a consistency of structure. Its web-based access and significant

resource support provide a treasure trove of helpful and accessible curriculum resources.

The AC Model: However, we have some concerns. A national curriculum, by its very nature, demands compliance. A compliance culture leaves little room for local content and it potentially disempowers and minimises flexibility and options of choice-making, shaping and adjusting. In this, it reduces the expression of independent schooling. It can also push the agenda of the most powerful interest groups and frequently it struggles to cater for those who do not fit 'the norm'.

The 'light touch' framework outlined at the introduction of the Australian Curriculum has not been understood as such by many teachers. Over-crowding and teacher fears that they are not sufficiently covering the content makes the supposed 20% space for schools to express their own curriculum choices and character, virtually non-existent.

Rather than the 80:20% model, which in reality is more like a 130:?? model, we would have preferred a less dense outline of content with encouragement to use the broad outlines as a framework that then allowed significant flexibility for the school to shape the learning in a manner that reflects the school's character and culture.

Christian school educators are concerned that a prescriptive curriculum outline, increased centralisation of curriculum expectations, and the standardised testing regimes and textbook support that follows has the effect of reducing local and independent empowerment and choice. A diversity of options is good for Australian education and society as it presents real choice.

Vocational Education (VE) – We encourage this Review to also focus on vocational education as this is a vital aspect of the provision of educational opportunity and access for all. Whilst we recognise that VET and Vocational Education is largely a state/ territory responsibility, we encourage the federal Minister to consider the role the Commonwealth could take through the Education Council to advocate for, and facilitate, the implementation of a more stream-lined, nationally consistent, holistic VE approach that incorporates the whole training sector. Presently, at the state level, it is marked by short-term policy flightiness, inconsistent financial support, and a confusion of regulation and administration.

Teachers and school leadership

We applaud the work of AITSL and its provision of teaching and leadership guidance and resources. A fine provision.

We acknowledge that unfortunately the status of teachers within Australian society has diminished over time. This is a significant issue because good teachers are critical for the realisation of effective educational outcomes. A poor view of teaching as a

vocation/ profession adversely affects student and parent attitudes towards teachers, and acts as a major disincentive for attracting high quality candidates. This could be addressed through: improved salaries; greater positive public discourse; greater authority to Principals to deal with poorly performing teachers; and tougher criteria for teacher training entry (a worthy initiative already being undertaken).

Within the Christian school sector we have identified two key factors that are having an adverse impact on teacher well-being, namely (1) The burden of increasing administrative compliance and its consequent reduction in time and energy available for high quality teaching engagement, and (2) Inadequate support for 'extra need' students and the consequent strain this places on teachers (this is not a disparaging comment about integration or providing for the very legitimate needs of SWD students).

We recommend that the problem of unnecessary teacher administrative burden be addressed. It is an increasingly problematic issue as teachers are being swamped by paperwork and administrative compliance which then takes them away from their key task of 'leading in learning'.

Likewise, school leaders have also become inundated as they seek to ensure that: their schools are compliant; they adequately report to registration bodies and parents; they introduce new curriculum and curriculum documentation systems; and, make use of new IT systems that are designed to serve and improve efficiency (but quickly add considerable strain during the adoption stages and then through the added task of input requirements, many of which are unnecessary). A popular cry has emerged, "Let them teach".

In an article, 'Teachers being swamped in paperwork', Brittany Vonow, (The Courier Mail, May 6th, 2015) writes there are numerous "comments by education experts who say that Queensland teachers struggling to deal with stress will be away more from the classroom or will struggle to prepare for class. The comments are in the context of a crowded curriculum and growing amounts of paperwork... [which are] are stressing teachers, with the stress manifesting itself in lack of enthusiasm and morale, as well as lacking empathy for students..."

Scott MacNab in the Scots Teachers (21 March 2015) writes that the Scottish Minister for Education Alasdair Allan is taking on a 'war on pointless paperwork' under a campaign with the great title Make Time for Teaching. The Minister said, "It is unacceptable that hard-working teachers should have to cope with pointless paperwork. That's why [we're] announcing another strong package of measures to tackle unnecessary bureaucracy."

The article goes on to say, "School inspectors will now 'rigorously challenge' excessive bureaucracy in classrooms, ... Action to tackle bureaucracy must be included in every school improvement plan for the next school year ... Our message

is clear – everyone in education has a responsibility to root out unnecessary bureaucracy and this can be done by simplifying processes and focusing on major priorities... There are many challenges still to be overcome relating to issues such as excessive forward planning, overly cumbersome assessment, unreliable and frustrating ICT planning and reporting systems, and over-reliance on audits as a form of improvement planning.”

Parent and community engagement

We affirm the principle of parental choice in education. We appreciate the contribution that parents make when choosing their children’s schooling option.

We affirm the worth of high parental engagement in their children’s education. We challenge the assumption made in many quarters that education is the prime responsibility of ‘the state’. Parental disengagement and an adoption of wholesale responsibility by ‘the state’ does not contribute to the improved health of society. We would encourage the continued adoption of clear ‘shared responsibility’ language.

We would encourage the incorporation of multiple avenues for parent partnership and engagement in the education of their children, e.g. further empowerment of local parent councils; enhancing participation in teacher-parent interviews; local school input-seeking; development of programs designed to engage parents in opportune educational moments; resourcing parent networks; attitudinal change for both parents and teachers, etc.

School Responsibility Clarity: In the context of growing community expectations of the duties that schools should fulfil and services they should offer, greater clarity regarding the measure of school responsibility would assist all schools. This is particularly pertinent in the area of student well-being.

Expanding ‘load’ on schools can diminish the role played by other key institutions and agencies (parents, extended family, church, sporting and community groups, the state) and distorts a broader sense of shared responsibility. Here we are seeking a more balanced attitude towards school responsibility, one that recognises that schools cannot be ‘all things to all people’. We recommend greater caution by governments in ‘loading up’ school programs with increased responsibilities and programs that are outside of the key educational focus of the school (yet understanding healthy holistic, ‘all of life’ goals for education).

Defining and measuring success in education

The challenge of government oversight and accountability for funding is a complex and challenging matter. Whilst it is understandable that an evidence-based approach can be seen as desirable, the only present easily accessible 'hard' data is through the use of NAPLAN results. Great caution should be taken here. Many distortions can arise through the use of such limited testing tools.

We express concern about the use of NAPLAN and PISA results as the singular indicator of educational performance (see lengthier critique below regarding the use of PISA results). We acknowledge that these two tests are the key national comparative data instruments presently available for use. We recognise the usefulness of this data, particularly when used diagnostically at the local level.

We seek to highlight the fact that this narrow form of testing does not provide insight into the many broader educational goals outlined in the Melbourne Declaration and that the use of the data to create comparative league tables is wholly unfair and unhelpful. Other assessment tools that take into account broader educational formation goals should be used when seeking to understand educational performance.

To date, targeted programs have been used to improve educational success particularly in areas where low educational outcomes have been seen. The continuance of such ventures is encouraged.

Should 'rewarding' be considered through the use of NAPLAN type data, we would only support such approaches should the identified improvement look at the overall collective rate of (the same) student improvement over time (longitudinal use) and that the 'reward' is school based (not teacher based). This could then be acknowledged/ rewarded in a range of ways. We do not favour direct financial incentives.

The Review could take further note of other notes/ principles that inform the discussion about measuring success. These include:

- Discouragement of an increased role for direct government oversight. Reduced unnecessary bureaucratic compliance. Rather, models of localised accountability like increased localised (School Council) oversight and governance training.
- Greater alignment of Commonwealth and State accountability/ reporting mechanisms.
- Encouragement to keep using NAPLAN testing as a localised diagnostic tool to assist teachers/ parents/ schools and not for government accountability or 'league table' purposes.
- Discouragement of the use of PISA results as the main means of discussing Australian educational quality. Whilst it is an legitimate assessment tool, its

prominence and weak 'cultural' comparability distorts the Australian educational discussion.

- Acknowledgement that increased funding alone is not the panacea for educational improvement.
- Accountability and compliance systems can easily become onerous and cumbersome; checklist dominated; clinical and overly bureaucratic in style.
- Continued transparency of funding. We applaud the new funding transparency features that have been a part of Gonski 2.0.
- We have no difficulty with the 'School Improvement Plan' accountability approach and the compulsory requirement of 'Annual Report' reporting. The use of quantitative and qualitative measures should be encouraged.
- The use of long term change frameworks and not short term 'fixes'.

Administrative Burden: As the Review looks at accountability mechanisms, the issue of 'compliance creep' should be noted. Our sector is not resisting transparency, appropriate supervision and accountability, rather we are seeking to find ways to show responsible corporate citizenship, that at the same time does not require increasing measures of bureaucratic oversight and the imposition of unnecessary compliance measures.

The place of PISA results: We express a stronger and longer critique regarding PISA data because of our concern about the manner in which these results have distorted the 'educational success' debate. Our basic contention is that setting competitive targets against others on the OECD table is a 'no win' game and a disservice to 'balanced' and helpful educational planning.

Many commentators question the worth of buying into this international league table race. The following are some of the questions and criticisms captured about the PISA test debate.

- The statistical modelling is questioned. PISA figures in England dropped dramatically between 2000-09 whilst the rival Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study saw the English score rise. Why are there contradictory findings?
- Why are Shanghai, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore consistently in the four top PISA ratings? Is there something about these nations/ city-states that has captured what a quality education is, or are there other factors at work? The similar nature of the East Asia 'tiger' economies which dominant the top 5 rankings on all measures might suggest that authoritarian governance, cultural context (where educational authorities and parents can command

punishing study schedules) and educational methodologies within those contexts better suit PISA testing.

- The changing group of participants (new entrants) push other longer term participants (since 2000) down the list.
- “Just as the ACT’s PISA scores do not accurately reflect Australia’s overall performance, Shanghai’s scores do not reflect the educational milieu in China.” (Dinham in Australian Journal of Education)
- “The top-ranking countries are often very different from Australia socially, culturally, demographically, geographically and linguistically. Simple country comparisons on a single assessment, no matter how good it might be, provide little guidance for policy development and should be viewed with caution.” Jennifer Buckingham www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-04/buckingham-pisa-panic/5133364
- PISA testing doesn’t and can’t take in the full cultural context or the complexities of education. By its nature, any international testing instrument has to ‘dumb down’ the assessment criteria in order to find items that it determines are comparable. This can hardly weigh up broader, holistic goals for education.
- “There are very few things you can summarise with a number and yet PISA claims to be able to capture a country’s entire education system in just three of them. It can’t be possible. It is madness.” Dr Hugh Morrison, <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6344672>
- When PISA asks a 15 year old Australian, ‘Do you like coming to school?’ (as it factors in cultural context) you can expect a less positive response than those in a competitive Asian context. Whilst attitudes to school are important, (even to understand comparatively) this does not provide insight into educational systems but rather into societies. “Our schools reflect the characteristics of our society as much as they create them” (J. Buckingham).
- It is interesting that governments (of both political persuasions) decry the use of domestic league tables, while at the same time give a great deal of attention to international ones. It would seem that using the PISA table plunge (Australia 2000-15) has been “used politically as quasi league tables to promote PISA shock narratives of education-in-crisis”.

All these are legitimate concerns but they can also sound hollow, as if we are trying to excuse poor results. Whether the critique is legitimate or not is really not our biggest concern. Our concerns are two.

Firstly, is the whole purpose of Australian education primarily to serve Australia’s position in the global economy? It would be foolish to say that this doesn’t matter.

One commentator said, “Today’s increasingly interconnected world, where knowledge is supplanting traditional industry as the key to future prosperity, means that education is the main event in the global race.” This raises many questions, however. What jobs should Australia be competing for? What about any broader goals for education?

Secondly, the PISA system is no different to using NAPLAN results on MySchool to compare school performance. Just like we do not believe that students should be defined by their test results, likewise, we should not accept such ‘defining’ through the use of PISA testing to assess the breadth of our national school performance.

Many comments out of the educational fraternity or from the political corner are ‘caught up’ in the simple acceptance of the presuppositions of PISA testing as if this is the only means of ascertaining the scorecard of national educational performance.

In summary here, as Jennifer Buckingham expresses, “It is important that Australia does not sacrifice the valuable aspects of its unique educational system in the pursuit of an unattainable goal.”