



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

Submitter: Australian Government Primary Principals Association
Submitting as a: Other (Australian Government Primary Principals Association)
State: Qld

Summary

Australian Teachers and Schools – a Closing Statement by AGPPA

This review provides Australia with an opportunity for a much-needed re-set. Education in Australia must be underpinned by every level of government being committed to what works – that is, sound policy, free from day-to-day political point scoring, yet responsive to community expectations. Sound policy is research-based and data-informed, implemented over time and independent of political cycles. Sound policy is informed by the establishment of a culture of continuous improvement to meet immediate and longer-term goals for students, which is not founded on the inappropriate use of high-stakes testing practices.

We believe that if we work together at every level, school, home, community, state and federal governments, we can ensure that every public school is a great school. We contend that every child should have access to the best possible education, regardless of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend.

This review provides a rare opportunity to highlight a fact that is understood by most educators, that is, for the best possible life chances for our students, we need to get it right in the primary years. AGPPA looks forward to seeing the outcomes from this review and urges the committee to also examine and include models of best practice to support the upskilling of teachers and ongoing collaborative professional learning.

Historically, the primary years have been the lowest funded of all compulsory years, despite arguably being the most important. If students experience success in the primary years as a result of early and sustained intervention and support, then this success will continue into the secondary years and life beyond. Such early and sustained success would also lower the need for costly interventions to deal with disengagement, truancy and school refusal in the post-primary years.

Main submission

Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submission by the Australian Government Primary Principals' Assoc. (AGPPA)

2 November 2017

AGPPA is the professional association representing over 5,000 Principals of Australian Government Primary Schools

Australian Students and Schools – a Background Statement by AGPPA

(N.B. Some elements of this background statement are included as responses to the specific questions below.)

Every school day in Australia, over 1.5 million primary students continue their learning journeys in over 5200 public schools in every corner of this vast country. Members of the Australian Government Primary Principals' Association – the leaders of our public primary schools – support and guide this vital endeavour. We believe that if we work together at every level - school, home, community, state and federal governments, we can ensure that every public school is a great school. We contend that every child should have access to the best possible education, regardless of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend.

Primary schools are places of curiosity and discovery, enthusiasm and inspiration, collaboration and engagement. In our classrooms and playgrounds, children should acquire the academic and social foundations that set them on the path to realise their life's potential.

State schools in Australia cater for the overwhelming majority of children with disabilities or with complex and challenging needs. These include those whose location, family, social, or economic circumstances hinder their ability to learn at school, their social development or their wellbeing. These characteristics are identified in the original Gonski Review, and schools with these students require the resources needed to support them.

A comprehensive suite of wrap-around services must be available in primary schools to support students with intellectual, physical, emotional and social needs. A focus on the whole child – to support academic achievement, wellbeing and social development – requires increases in support provisions in primary schools. This is an inter-agency, whole-of-government responsibility that must be addressed.

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

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

Primary schools are places of curiosity and discovery, enthusiasm and inspiration, collaboration and engagement. In our classrooms and playgrounds, children should acquire the academic and social foundations that set them on the path to realise their life's potential. An agreed national curriculum is the foundation upon which

schools can build to meet their specific contexts. The provision of increased teaching time in literacy and numeracy must be considered, together with extension times for cultural, sporting and practical skills development.

No longer is it enough for students to just know. In a complex and volatile environment, students must be able to think critically, problem-solve and possess capabilities to be empowered masters of their own learning. This concept is supported by researchers such as Hattie (2012), Fullan, Hargreaves and more who emphasise that teaching students how to learn is critical for success.

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

AGPPA believes there needs to be a major rethink on the current tools used to measure student success. Current standardised testing measures such as NAPLAN do not accurately measure student success. While they may be of some systemic value to show some overall trends, such data could be captured by sample testing at a much lower cost. This is currently the way data is collected through PISA and TIMSS testing.

Success should not be measured by NAPLAN. A 'one size fits all' approach is not aligned to the move to personalised and differentiated learning now currently being implemented in schools. Standardised testing is not congruent with a 21st century learning approach. The use of means and averages will always have schools below and above the line. Even if every school improves, there will still be schools below average and 'in the red'. AGPPA welcomes a major rethink on national testing and how schools report success to their community.

Students need to know where they are on their personal learning journey. Parents need to know if their child is learning at the rate and level expected. Teachers need to know if their teaching practices are well-focused and effective. Greater respect for formative and qualitative assessment is needed, with opportunities for teachers to moderate and share effective practice.

High stakes standardised testing also fails to foster creativity or innovation in the learning environment, skills which are seen as essential for students to engage in a changing future. Rather, they can only provide an indication of student performance at a point in time on a narrow range of indicators. This narrow approach has had adverse effects on teaching and learning. For these reasons, standardised testing is not congruent with a 21st century approach to learning.

- AGPPA commends to the Review, the findings of the UNESCO Report 'Accountability in Education: Meeting our Commitments' (UNESCO – Global Education Monitoring Report 2017-18).
- We believe accountability and transparency with our school community is important and as such, we support the concept of annual school reports.

- AGPPA is not supportive of the My School website. AGPPA supports sample testing for school and system data collection rather than testing all students and schools.
- AGPPA believes the My School website has not contributed to any significant change to school performance. In fact, since My School was introduced there has been a flattening of results and a narrowing of the curriculum. We have also seen an increase in the focus by some schools, system leaders and politicians on simplistic rankings and 'league table' journalism.
- The My School website is centred on a political decision. NAPLAN, as a federally and state endorsed assessment of a limited range of literacy and numeracy skills, has become the 'test' endorsed by governments - the defining 'ruler' for how a student and school is performing.
- The use of the My School website as the reporting mechanism for NAPLAN has moved NAPLAN into a high stakes environment where negative aspects are encountered by Australia and many countries around the world. The most successful education systems do not have national reporting of school results.
- Experienced school leaders have resisted this push to overemphasise the NAPLAN results. However, our most experienced educators have little say in the policy development at the system level.
- AGPPA does not support the move to have Year 3 Writing completed online or auto-marked.
- AGPPA advocates for the withdrawal and discontinued use of the My School website.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students?

State schools in Australia cater for the overwhelming majority of children with disabilities and with significant learning needs. These include those whose location, family, social, or economic circumstances hinder their ability to learn at school, their social development and their wellbeing. These characteristics are identified in the original Gonski Review, and schools with these students require the resources needed to support them.

A comprehensive suite of wrap-around services must be available in primary schools to support students with intellectual, physical, emotional and social needs. A focus on the whole child – to support academic achievement, wellbeing and social development – requires increases in support provisions in primary schools.

A funding model is needed that provides support at the classroom, school and system level to continuously build teacher knowledge and skill. This may take the form of school based coaches, ongoing and differentiated professional learning for teachers and leaders and specialist system support such as consultants to work alongside schools.

What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?

“Teaching students how to learn is as important as teaching them content because acquiring the right learning strategies and the background knowledge is important if not essential for promoting lifelong learning”. (Dunlosky 2013)

Building the capacity of students to do this requires a growth mindset by teachers and students themselves. The dispositions and level of self-efficacy a learner has about themselves and their ability to learn is strongly associated with how well they will perform. Therefore, teachers must understand the process of learning and the conditions in which it takes place most effectively.

The tension here is that the guidance we offer on the act of learning itself is often hit and miss (Hattie 2012). States, Territories and the nation must fill the gaps between the provision of a national mandated curriculum and a repertoire of strategies to support self-empowered lifelong learning.

Michael Fullan 2012, contends that “teachers are change agents and facilitators and designers of learning and students do more than learning – they bring the learning issues to the collectivity.” With this collectivity comes a moral responsibility on behalf of the teacher to provide an environment which supports learning and yields high student success.

An increased focus on the learning and developmental progress of the General Capabilities, other than Literacy and Numeracy, would be a sensible and positive move. This needs to involve teacher judgement and scope for sharing these judgement decisions through professional moderation.

What works best for whom and in what circumstances? What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place to ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time?

Schools need the autonomy to locate and identify a range of tools to accurately measure and monitor the impact of teachers on student learning, in terms of

progress and achievement that are relevant to their context, location and uniqueness.

We believe there needs to be a rethink on the descriptions of student success. Authorities need to examine the measures used and ensure they represent real success. For example, in the primary years, young children may demonstrate rapidly developing personal and social capabilities rather than high skills in literacy and numeracy. These team skills and self-awareness will ensure success in their adult life. In primary schools the development of appropriate social skills and the capacity to collaborate with others successfully are strong indications of developmental success. Success may also be the number of students enthusiastically entering spelling, reading or maths competitions, actively participating in local sporting, cultural and artistic activities or mentoring and supporting other students. In the secondary sector, local students staying in the community and becoming trades people or gaining employment may be just as, or more worthwhile than university entrant numbers.

Key Recommendations from AGPPA

- It is critical to consider an appropriate and contemporary pedagogical basis to the Australian Curriculum. This should remain contextual to each school, taking into account their unique circumstances;
- A more in-depth focus on the General Capabilities and the disposition to learn must be emphasised;
- Instructional leadership across the nation should be a priority e.g. focus on instructional strategies, data and teacher impact, provision of Instructional Coaches in all primary schools;
- Development of effective professional learning communities;
- Improved technological provision - digital competency and technical support;
- Enhanced provision for the appropriate support of students with disabilities and disadvantage;
- Development of models of formative assessment that takes into account Assessment Of, For and As Learning;
- A greater focus on social and emotional learning to develop self-confidence, hope and a will to learn; and
- Replacement of inappropriate standardised testing and the high-stakes consequences of publishing simplistic figures which create an inaccurate picture of student learning progression in Australian schools.

How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and

transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

Qualifications, accreditation, certification, registration and regulation must be collaboratively developed between education authorities and practitioners, including professional associations of teachers and Principals. Continuously improving education standards should not be something that is done 'by employers' to 'employees', but rather agreed to - for the profession, by the profession, based on trust and mutually agreed outcomes.

An effective Initial Teacher Education (ITE) environment provides quality teachers in sufficient numbers to meet current and future student needs in specific subject or age disciplines, in small and large school settings, in isolated areas, in schools with differing student backgrounds. The issues of course rigour, quality and supply of teacher-trained graduates by universities should be addressed in close consultation with education authorities and schools.

Regulated ITE course providers must be held accountable for the quality of the graduates produced. ITE courses should ensure a minimum of 100 practice days to ensure that ITE programs produce 'classroom-ready teachers'.

International comparisons, reported in league-table styles in the media, have created an impression of Australian education 'failing' and therefore being a poor investment. This is not true. Public education, in particular, is a vital component of Australia's democratic, social health. (Reid: 'Building Our Nation through Public Education' 2015-16)

In order for public education to thrive, its Principals and teachers must work under conditions which allow them to thrive. This means there should be ample professional learning opportunity to ensure public and practitioner confidence that teachers and Principals are continually refreshing and developing their professional capabilities and competencies. There must be comparability of opportunity for professional learning across Australia's jurisdictions. There must be differentiation of professional learning for practitioners at all stages of their careers.

The relationship between Principal, teacher and learner is clearly central to the effectiveness of school education. Factors leading to burn-out in teaching and school leadership must be addressed as a matter of urgent priority including over-work and the dominant focus on standardised, comparative testing.

Optimal resourcing for delivery of education in the full range of contexts must be realistically costed and essentially redesigned – including support for meaningful community involvement (i.e. business and not-for-profit organisations). Many schools need vastly improved access to support services including social work,

psychology, speech and language pathology, health advice and direction including mental health services.

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing? What are they and how could they be further developed?

- An agreed national curriculum is the foundation upon which schools can build to meet their specific contexts; the provision of increased teaching time in literacy and numeracy while offering extension times for cultural, sporting and practical skills development.
- Development of models focused on formative assessment and enabling schools to share best practice in a model of shared inquiry e.g. Spirals Of Learning (Halbert and Kaser).
- A funding model that provides support at the classroom, school and system level to continuously build teacher knowledge and skill. This may take the form of school based coaches, ongoing and differentiated professional learning for teachers and leaders and specialist system support such as consultants to work alongside schools.
- Governance arrangements and appropriate professional learning and tools that support schools, teachers and Principals to define and measure student-specific growth and 'value added'.
- The direct engagement of parents and carers by each school should be actively supported and resourced by all education authorities. Schools where the vast majority of students come from a home and a culture that values schooling, have the best chance for ongoing student engagement and the best learning outcomes, irrespective of differing levels of parental education, income, or language background.
- Greater emphasis needs to be placed on emerging research and evidence of effective models of teaching and learning which are demonstrating greater gains in student attendance, engagement, learning, and outcomes, and at the same time enable a working 'smarter- not-harder' approach to delivering educational programs.
- Explore the work of new pedagogies for deep learning and invest in the 'must-have' skills and dispositions for the future.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements? If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

Schools need sufficient resources:

- to cater for students with complex and challenging needs, including the ‘wrap-around’ support of additional staff, counselling, access to health professionals;
- to pay for quality teachers, including additional funds for incentive employment;
- to build and maintain quality learning spaces; and
- to keep pace with teaching and learning technologies. This is an inter-agency, whole-of-government responsibility that must be addressed.

For many students who have suffered, or are suffering, aggregated disadvantage including abuse and/or poverty, extra resourcing must be available to engage these students and assist their transitioning to full-time, productive educational environments.

Australian schools are increasingly burdened with a ‘cluttered’ curriculum. Primary education is about educating the whole child – growing each child’s knowledge and understanding, skills and capabilities in academic subject areas, in music and the arts, sport and social/emotional development. This is appropriate, but the mandatory inclusion of areas of social mores that have traditionally been the responsibility of family, churches and other outside school organisations, has ‘cluttered’ the school day with inclusions such as surf safety, animal welfare, bike education, social media use, disaster resilience. The solution starts with engaging in conversations between education authorities and the profession.

The Australian Curriculum (AC) is still overcrowded, despite modifications and changes. Teachers must be unencumbered by the pressure to cover content and constant new initiatives. They need time to imbed effective learning. It would be very helpful if ACARA developed a guide identifying the core essentials of the AC. This would ensure that the most important elements of the Australian Curriculum are addressed by all schools.

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