



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

Submitter: Australian Primary Principals Association
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: ACT

Summary

KEY MESSAGES

APPA has recently completed a major survey and report on Policy to Practice. The report, *Back in Balance: How policy and practice can make primary principals highly effective* (APPA 2017) identifies that the key to ensuring we have effective leadership is trust and support for our school leaders. Trusting and working with principals and teachers to be empowered to lead their school's teaching and learning will be the difference between successful reform and more of the same

Schools need autonomy with curriculum priorities to enable context to be a key component of teaching and learning. Assessment and reporting should be aligned to the school's need and purpose.

Education must become a long term, bi-partisan approach not interrupted by elections or politics. Our school communities need certainty in a changing world. APPA is very cautious of any drop-in solutions from other countries and believes that, while we can learn from other systems, many of our solutions can be found within our country.

APPA believes a key priority for the panel is to ensure that any educational reforms provide equity for all students, no matter their location, context or family circumstances.

(References list available)

Main submission

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is the national professional association for primary school principals in Australia, representing over 7200 principals from affiliated Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools in every state and territory.

APPA's advocacy is based on:

- Every child attending a school with highly effective leaders and staff;
- The knowledge that primary schools are where Australian children acquire the necessary foundational academic, social and emotional skills to lead fulfilled and enriched lives; and,
- Initiatives, actions and projects that are research informed and encourage contemporary professional learning and growth.

Australia's future depends on an educated population that is responsive to a changing world and the challenges it brings.

OVERVIEW

This submission will focus on the key areas as presented in the discussion paper. Our emphasis will be on identifying opportunities and making recommendations for the panel to consider. APPA believes this Review can provide the policy and practice direction for addressing the needs of schools and communities across Australia. The following comments are made in relation to this:

- There is an urgent need to review and update the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. We need a 're-boot', according to Professor John Hattie, Chair of the AITSL Board.
- School principals need flexibility together with the support to harness locally based decision-making processes in developing and implementing learning programs for students across urban, regional, rural or remote locations. This flexibility should not come at the expense of school-based support. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not allow local communities to respond effectively to their needs and requirements. Education authorities should be working with principals and local communities to develop, modify or adapt learning approaches and programs for their community.

The following has been developed in consultation with the APPA National Advisory Council (NAC). The NAC is comprised of a representative from each of the state and territory principal associations covering Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools.

Whole system reform is possible and has been achieved in a number of countries. An excellent example is the Canadian province of Ontario. Prior to 2003, Ontario adopted an aggressive education reform strategy based on centralised testing and teacher accountability. In 2003, an alternative approach that insisted on high academic standards but engaged teachers in a joint effort to develop their capacity was adopted. Collaborative initiatives raised the average proficiency rate on Grade 3

provincial exams in reading, math and writing from an average of 55% in 2003 to 72% in 2014.

What do primary schools need?

- A new overarching national document that clearly sets out the goals for Australia in the long-term, and provides a structured and focused plan for the future.
- Dedicated school leaders and teachers with high expectations of student learning and communities that respect and value education.
- Adequate and equitable resources necessary for every child to reach his or her potential. Equity across a country's system is a key strategy for many high performing countries (e.g. Singapore, Estonia, Finland, Japan, Korea).
- Time to imbed effective practices around teaching and learning rather than schools having to adopt constant new initiatives. (This issue has plagued Australian education for many years with stop-start national or state / territory initiatives that lack a credible evidence base.)
- School leader representation on key education authorities to ensure the voice of the principal is providing insight for policy development.
- Greater authority by principals, teachers and school communities over the curriculum priorities for their community.
- A major emphasis to move the profession from a 'content delivery model' to the development of school-centred curriculum using the existing Australian Curriculum with the General Capabilities as the delivery model.
- A national approach that moves to a philosophy of 'assessment for learning' rather than 'assessment for accountability or reporting'.
- The removal of student NAPLAN results from the My School website. With an autonomous model in mind,
 - schools would elect whether their students 'sit' NAPLAN;
 - NAPLAN results would be shown on individual school websites;
 - national assessment would be by way of a sample-testing regime, very much like PISA, to chart the progress of systems across literacy and numeracy domains;
 - existing formative and summative assessments are used to communicate with parents on a child's progress.

What students learn and how they learn

There is a strong expectation that schools respond to the demands of the workforce and address society's problems. What do children need to learn and be able to do to demonstrate through that learning? Although this has been debated widely within the profession, and across the community, there is great confusion on how this should occur. The solution is also compounded by a 'one-size-fits-all' assessment priority that has been in place for the past ten years.

Principals across Australia are dealing with the challenge of implementing a quality curriculum for their students, amid competing interest groups, political viewpoints, national agendas, and state and territory priorities.

Primary schools are pressured to cover more content, including 'special' programs aimed at solving social ills and personal trials. Little advice is given about what content does not need to be prioritised or taught explicitly. Unfortunately, in all of this feverish development and lobbying for content delivery, a most important aspect of teaching, the how to teach, has been lost.

In the years of developing the Australian Curriculum, APPA consistently advocated for what works best in delivering high quality teaching and learning in our primary schools. That is, learning is not siloed but rather it is integrated, connected and meaningful. While it is critical that, in the primary years, students should be given literacy and numeracy foundations; this should be balanced by a curriculum that is broad, balanced and rich, and allow for deep learning. The primary curriculum today should be focused on integrated units of learning with easy access to resources to support the embedded learning.

We know the bar must be raised on the quality of teaching and learning within and, just as importantly, between schools and the community. We also know that when parents partner with schools and engage with their child's learning, the benefits are many. We need to create 'visibility' in the learning that draws others into what the child is doing.

Our primary principals have a vital role in leading learning through collaborative decision making with their community. An effective primary principal, focused on the students, wants to be confident and assured that learning is happening through a rich, concept-driven curriculum that allows deep knowledge and understanding.

Publishing school NAPLAN results on the My School website has seen a 'labelling' of communities. This is particularly a concern for communities beyond major centres. The collection of data needs reviewing to ensure it is serving the school community and undertaken for a valid purpose. The reality is that primary schools regularly collect evidence of student achievement and make this available to parents and students. Teachers are constantly assessing to inform their teaching and learning. A return to teacher professionalism will only occur when the compliance nature of high stakes standardised assessments and 'outside influences' are removed.

APPA offers the following recommendations in relation to what students learn and how they learn:

- A framework is developed to shift the emphasis from what we teach to the how we teach. (Researchers such as Fullan and Hargreaves, and high performing countries, have clearly identified the need to develop the professional and social capacity of teachers and school leaders as a means to achieve educational excellence.)
- Greater decision-making authority is given to principals and school communities in identifying curriculum priorities.
- All children have access to high quality pre-school programs and receive the support needed in the transition to school. Recognising that isolation, distance and transport present challenges for many Australian communities, there should be opportunities in regional or rural towns for government and non-government schools to have shared early childhood services and facilities.
- In remote area communities, support for early childhood education would need to come through digital / virtual platforms or other connections with deliverers of services.
- AITSL should develop a bank of strategies to enhance and build the competency and teacher judgement of teachers. (A ten-year researched moderation tool such as 'Brightpath', at present being used widely in Western Australia and South Australia, should be investigated.)

Teachers and school leadership

Dr Geoff Masters, Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research in his article, 'Big five' challenges in school education outlines a brief for student improvement. All the challenges outlined concentrate on the development of the professional and social capital of teachers and school leaders. This crucial priority is the centrepiece of education high performing countries such as the various provinces in Canada, Singapore, Estonia, New Zealand and Finland.

Although there is a level of scepticism when decision-makers and the communities discuss teacher professional judgment, research shows that, when an experienced teacher's professional judgement is critically and independently investigated, there is a high correlation to existing high stakes standardised assessments.

APPA endorses the Education Council's approved changes of the revised Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leaders (AITSL) standards for teacher education courses. APPA strongly supports the focus on lifting teacher education standards so that teachers, having been challenged by a rigorous and contemporary course, enter the classroom with the necessary skills, training and education to be good teachers.

APPA would recommend the fourth year of the ITE course move to a more in-school experience and learning for graduates.

APPA is aware of the challenges facing authorities and communities on attracting and retaining leaders. APPA's recent research "Back to Balance: How policy and practice can make primary principals highly effective" 14 highlights the increasing workload and compliance requirements impacting on principal health and wellbeing. Changes to policy and practice are required to improve the health and wellbeing of our leaders, and attract teachers to leadership positions.

The career development of primary school principals across Australia is haphazard and lacks coordination. High performing countries value their school leaders. Singapore, for example, prepares its school leaders by taking prospective leaders 'off-line' for seventeen weeks to participate in a high level demanding leadership course. In Ontario, all school leaders must participate in a two-year preparation program outsourced to, and administered by, professional associations and universities.

APPA offers the following recommendations in relation to teachers and school leadership:

- Establish a national system of teacher registration thereby providing the flexibility for teachers to cross state and territory borders without encountering an often cumbersome and onerous bureaucratic process.
- Professional learning is provided at the local level through existing collaborative structures that support teachers developing skills in collaboration and team teaching.
- In difficult to staff primary schools, salary and other incentives, such as (safe) housing and professional support, are available so as to attract and retain teachers and school leaders.
- Establish Central Teaching Schools that partner with universities in delivering flexible and high quality initial teacher education programs that combine onsite and offsite course delivery with in-school experience and teacher educator support.
- Existing teachers and initial teacher education course students must be provided with comprehensive and ongoing professional learning on managing and supporting students with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. Such learning focuses on identifying and implementing strong evidence-based strategies, moderating curriculum and meeting the needs of each student.
- The development and implementation of a National Leadership Framework that supports and accredits the delivery of leadership courses or programs

that cover the key roles in school leadership and prepares principals to lead their school community in practical and achievable ways.

- Provide professional learning for pre-principal and current principals in working with communities and developing community partnerships.
- Resource initiatives that provide school leaders with access to mentoring and coaching by an experienced principal or networked support structure.
- Support for the recommendations listed in the APPA report: *Back in Balance: How policy and practice can make primary principals highly effective* (2017).
- A national review of school administrative tasks related to compliance and accountability is conducted with the intention of lessening and streamlining processes.

Parent and community engagement

Parent engagement and community partnerships are very much part of the contemporary education setting. There is strong and growing focus on the vital connection between school and home in supporting the learning of children.

APPA offers the following recommendations in relation to parent and community engagement:

- Strengthen and support school-family partnership initiatives.
- Increase efforts to improve the collective impact of coordinated services by establishing primary school 'hubs' where, particularly in disadvantaged communities, broader health, housing, parent education, early childhood and other non-government agencies and services support students and families.
- Flexible practices, such as sharing school facilities and expertise, working across sectors, combining classes and online classroom interaction with overseas schools, etc are valued and supported by systems and government.
- Establish virtual schools where students and teachers access courses and expert support. (Policy change at the system level would need to ensure there was no disadvantage in having students attending one school but enrolled in a course across two or more schools.)

Defining and measuring success in education

Professor Michael Fullan in his 2011 article *Choosing the wrong drivers for system* says:

“no system in the world has ever achieved whole system reform by leading with accountability ... (The) United States and Australian aspirations sound great as goals but crumble from a strategy or driver perspective ... high-stakes accountability will

only motivate a small percentage of teachers and, even if motivated, only a minority will know what changes to make in instruction to get better results.”

APPA contends that the My School website has not demonstrated or contributed to any significant change to school performance. School comparisons on the My School website sit alongside a flattening of results and a reported narrowing of the primary curriculum. There is a focus by some schools, system leaders, politicians and media on ‘league table’ rankings. The use of the My School website as the reporting mechanism for NAPLAN moved NAPLAN into a high stakes environment with all the negative aspects that environment brings.

APPA offers the following recommendations in relation to defining and measuring success in schools:

- Sample testing for school and system data collection be recognised as providing an effective measure of broad educational outcomes.
- AITSL develop a core list of standardised and professional judgement assessments that can be used to report to systems and parents on school progress.
- The removal of the My School website and direct these resources into developing and providing schools with more aligned assessment and evaluation tools for student learning.
- NAPLAN Online provides sample testing data for state, territory and national achievement trends.
- A review be conducted of the assessment and reporting needs of schools, ensuring the views of principals, teachers and parents are central to any recommendations.

Identifying, sharing and driving good practice and continuous improvement

APPA is supportive of continuous learning by schools to ensure children are achieving success and growth. However, the focus should be on empowered accountability not compliance accountability. Compliance does not drive better achievement or improvement. Education reform is effective and sustainable when teacher collaboration and team-teaching are key approaches.

The sharing of practice needs to happen in networks where schools collaborate rather than operate in a competitive model. APPA’s Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) and Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) are two programs that support literacy improvement based on research, collaboration and sharing of practice between schools.

We need policies and practices that enable schools to attract, develop and retain highly effective teachers and leaders. Good practice is developed through building capacity and supporting leaders and teachers in focusing on the priorities of teaching and learning. Schools need the resources to respond to a changing group of learners. APPA believes early and sustained intervention, resourced adequately, will have a better return on investment. Intrinsically motivated staff, not extrinsic or punitive measures, should drive improvement. There is also an urgent need to raise the awareness of the role of school leaders within the community so that trust returns to the profession.

APPA offers the following recommendations in relation to identifying, sharing and driving good practice and continuous improvement:

- Set in place a long-term, bi-partisan plan to embed consistency and strive for school improvement.
- Develop a strategy, in consultation with principals, to raise the status of, and trust in, school leaders across the country.
- Develop cross-sectorial professional learning, modelled on the successful PALL and PALLIC programs, in the areas of Digital Leadership and Students with Learning Difficulties.
- A national portal be expanded for the sharing of resources and evidenced-based practice.
- Initiate a “Prime Minister’s Learning Innovation Award for Schools” modelled on the “Prime Minister’s Science Prize” so as to highlight, for the community and within the profession, the importance of school education and the development of 21st Century pedagogy and skills.
- Innovation and action research should be key practices that are supported and encouraged in schools. Jurisdictions need to actively support school initiatives that respond to local challenges.