



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

Submitter: Education Standards Institute  
Submitting as a: Think Tank  
State: Vic.

### Summary

As proven by the TIMSS and PISA results released late 2016, where results for Australian students either flat-lined or went backwards, the nation's education system has reached a tipping point where unless there is a root and branch renewal of how schools are organised and managed as well as teacher education and associated curriculum and pedagogy standards will continue to fall. In addition to having an adverse economic and financial impact such a decline also impacts on the ability of individual students to fully realise their potential and to contribute to society more broadly.

If state and territory schools are to succeed in raising standards and improving educational outcomes those responsible should:

- benchmark curriculum and pedagogy against stronger performing education systems,
- strengthen teacher education by monitoring and evaluating courses and how effective beginning teachers are once they enter schools,
- reduce cost, duplication and waste across the two levels of government involved in school education,
- free schools from provider capture by adopting a more market driven model of educational delivery – one based on competition, diversity, autonomy and choice,
- reduce the bureaucratic overload experienced by teachers and those responsible for schools by simplifying and streamlining what is an intrusive and time consuming accountability system, and
- ensure that all schools, government, Catholic and independent, are properly funded and that parents are not financially penalised because of school choice.

## Main submission

### **A Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools**

Dr Kevin Donnelly AM: Director Education Standards Institute. 11 October 2017.

#### **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?
- How should school quality and educational success be measured?

In addition to basic literacy and numeracy competencies and skills education for the future should involve a well-rounded, rigorous and challenging education based on what Victoria's Blackburn report describes as "our best validated knowledge and artistic achievements". Such an education introduces students to the essential knowledge, understanding and skills associated with the established disciplines and areas of knowledge that are essential if students are to be enriched personally and become productive and responsible citizens as well as being culturally literate.

Both content and process are essential as the ability to conceptualise, critically analyse and evaluate is domain specific. The American academic Neil Postman describes this view of educational success as follows:

*... to become educated means to become aware of the origins and growth of knowledge and knowledge systems; to be familiar with the intellectual and creative processes by which the best that has been thought and said has been produced; to learn how to participate, even if as a listener, in what Robert Maynard Hutchins once called The Great Conversation (p 188).*

To be adequately prepared for the future students need to understand and appreciate that this conversation is an on-going one that has evolved and grown since the time of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and sophists, and that continuity is equally as important as change. So-called 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are best developed and strengthened within the context of this conversation – one that is not always immediately utilitarian or practical and that deals with significant emotional, moral and spiritual challenges and issues.

School quality and educational success should be measured in terms of the degree to which students become familiar with and able to participate in this conversation.

This requires, in addition to the types of knowledge and skills tested by NAPLAN and the TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS international tests, that students are culturally literate. Equally as important as intellectual outcomes are characteristics such as resilience, empathy, confidence, curiosity, truth telling, being morally grounded and committed to the common good.

When measuring school quality and educational success it is important to acknowledge that not all schools should be committed to the same educational outcomes for their students throughout Foundation to Year 12. Curriculum diversity is important as not all students have the same ability or interests and not all are committed to the same post-school destinations. While Foundation to Year 10 should incorporate a core/elective model once students reach years 11 and 12 there should be a range of curriculum offerings and pathways – including academic pre-tertiary studies and those that are VET and TAFE oriented.

### **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?
  - What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?
  - What works best for whom and in what circumstances?

For funding to be more effective and efficient it is vital to understand that additional investment, by itself, will not lead to any improvement. As illustrated by Figure 1 (accessible at [http://www.ncoa.gov.au/report/docs/appendix\\_volume%201.pdf](http://www.ncoa.gov.au/report/docs/appendix_volume%201.pdf), p.265, chart 9.7.6, Figure 1 Australian Government, 2014a, p 265.) recent history proves that standards as measured by international tests have either flat-lined or gone backwards despite the additional billions invested.

Based on research undertaken by the OECD it is clear that advanced economies like Australia are already investing an adequate amount and that schools, relatively speaking, are well resourced.

Secondly, while there is no silver bullet or easy solution, it is vital to benchmark state and territory schools and education systems against both national and international 'best-practice' – especially those schools and education systems that achieve the strongest results as measured by international tests, Year 12 results, tertiary entry and school completion.

While not all schools and systems are the same, thus making it impossible to simply translate what occurs in one jurisdiction to another, it is important to identify characteristics that are transferable. Research suggests that such characteristics include: a rigorous, academically based curriculum focusing on deep knowledge where more is less; explicit teaching and disciplined classrooms with high expectations; high stakes testing and examinations with clear consequences for success and failure and an environment that fosters students' resilience and willingness to learn.

Teachers also need to be well rewarded and resourced and given the time and flexibility to do what they do best – that is to teach instead of being overwhelmed by red tape and an inflexible and intrusive accountability and certification regime.

As argued by Ludger Woessmann and Eric Hanushek, it is also important to properly fund Catholic and independent schools and to refrain from financially penalising non-government school parents. Research suggests that a well-resourced and viable non-government school sector leads to competition and choice in education which, in turn, leads to improved educational outcomes for both government and non-government schools. In addition, Catholic and independent schools save taxpayers and governments billions each and every year as non-government school students are not enrolled in state schools.

- 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?

In addition to benchmarking locally and internationally it is important to empower teachers by involving them in action-based research where groups of teachers and clusters of schools can innovate, evaluate and share what constitutes “good practice”. Similar to the Disadvantaged Schools' PEP Schools Resource Program teachers involved would receive time release and while outside consultants might be involved the focus would be on classroom practice and teachers controlling their own research.

At the same time a clearing house, similar to the American What Works Clearing House and the American Resources Information Centre, should be established to promote and disseminate what constitutes evidence-based best practice in curriculum and classroom pedagogy.

Education faculties involved in teacher training and professional development should also be closely monitored and evaluated to ensure that beginning teachers enter schools with a firm and evidence-based understanding and knowledge of what

constitutes the most effective curriculum and pedagogy. Academics in education faculties should also be made to work closely with schools and classroom teachers to ensure they have realistic and practical appreciation of what is occurring in schools and the impact of recent educational innovations and policies.

- 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?

Research carried out by overseas experts including Ludger Woessmann, Eric Hanushek, Caroline Hoxby and Andrew Coulson as well as Australia's Mark Harrison and Jennifer Buckingham suggest that a less centralised and bureaucratic model of education is necessary as stronger performing education systems and schools, within a broad and light-touch monitoring and accountability system, are increasingly autonomous.

The OECD's analysis of the 2015 PISA results also points to the benefits of autonomy when it states "Students score higher in science in education systems where principals exercise greater autonomy over resources, curriculum and other school policies". Such autonomy facilitates innovation, diversity and choice in education instead of forcing all schools to adopt an inflexible and moribund one size-fits-all approach.

As noted by Brian Caldwell Australia, by comparison, has a 'command and control' approach to school education where the Commonwealth, even though it has no constitutional authority, continues to exert too much control over state and territory jurisdictions and school sectors. The UK's *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010* provides a useful summary of what needs to be done to reduce bureaucratic overload and unnecessary compliance costs and to better empower schools at the local level.

Evidenced by research undertaken by the ACU's Gary Marks and the UK's Durham University Catholic and independent schools outperform government controlled schools even after adjusting for students' socioeconomic status as measured by home background. One of the principal reasons is because non-government schools have the autonomy to respond to market forces and what constitutes best-practice without being stifled by government and bureaucratic interference.

Beginning with the Rudd/Gillard ALP commonwealth governments there has been an increasing centralisation of education evidenced by imposing a national curriculum,

national testing and national teacher registration and certification – all tied to funding. This has led to an overcrowded, superficial curriculum and schools and teachers being overwhelmed with red-tape and an intrusive and needless system of assessing teachers for continued registration. The way to improvement is to simplify and streamline existing arrangements and to ensure that schools have greater freedom and autonomy, within a broad accountability framework, to best direct their own affairs and to best reflect the needs and aspirations of their students and school communities.

Such an approach would also lead to competitive federalism where the states and territories would benefit as those responsible for schools would be free to excel untrammelled by centralised control.

- 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?

As argued by Brian Caldwell in his research investigating local and international school systems the old industrial ‘command and control’ approach to organising and managing schools is ineffective and characteristic of a bygone era. Much of the leading edge of educational innovation and reform overseas relates to freeing schools from provider capture and increasing school choice. Whether charter schools in the USA, English academies and free schools or New Zealand’s community schools the belief is that those closest to schools, as far as practicable, are in the best position to improve outcomes and strengthen standards. While Australia has toyed with the idea of autonomous schools, under the commonwealth’s Independent Public Schools initiative, the schools involved are still constrained by state and territory wide industrial agreements and government mandated curriculum and accountability measures.

Increased parental choice represented by school vouchers or tax credits is another example of innovation occurring overseas that is worthwhile exploring. Supporting parental choice is an inherent good, as parents are primarily responsible for their children’s education, as well as providing an incentive for schools to better meet the interests and demands of parents and students.

### **Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?**

- If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

Barriers to improvement include the confusion, over-regulation, duplication and cost caused by two levels of government (state/territory and commonwealth) seeking to

manage and control schools. As noted by the Reform of the Federation White Paper Issues Paper No 4 there is an urgent need to simplify and streamline current arrangements if outcomes are to improve. Under present arrangements it is not unusual for schools, especially those in the Catholic and independent sectors, to have to comply with two sets of regulations and imposts that often deal with the same or similar issues and requests.

The influence of provider capture also needs to be addressed; a situation where self-interested bodies including the Australian Education Union, the Deans of Education, ACSA, professional associations like the AATE, the Australian College of Education and the various state/territory and commonwealth education bureaucracies exert too much control. Based on the concept of subsidiarity and the work of Friedrich Hayek the guiding principle should be that those closest to schools are primarily responsible for their organisation and management.

An additional barrier to raising standards is what the Michael Gove, the UK's ex-Education Secretary, describes as the "soft bigotry of low expectations". For far too long, based on the belief that low SES students are destined to underperform and that meritocracy and competition reinforce disadvantage, the curriculum has been dumbed down and expectations lowered. Unlike stronger performing education systems such as Shanghai, Singapore and Japan where examinations are high risk and students are streamed in terms of ability, in Australian schools the belief is that all students are capable of success and that none should fail. The first time Australian students face a competitive, high-risk examination is in Year 12 and even here the overwhelming majority of students are guaranteed to pass.

Compared to curriculum and pedagogy in stronger performing overseas education systems Australian schools has suffered as a result of adopting a less rigorous, academically based curriculum. Classroom interaction and practice also suffer as a result of adopting progressive innovations like child-centred learning, inquiry based and discovering learning, open classrooms and constructivism. While all have their place unless greater focus is given to explicit teaching and a curriculum that focuses on teaching deep knowledge, skills and understanding standards and outcomes will not improve.

## **Conclusion**

As proven by the TIMSS and PISA results released late 2016, where results for Australian students either flat-lined or went backwards, the nation's education system has reached a tipping point where unless there is a root and branch renewal of how schools are organised and managed as well as teacher education and associated curriculum and pedagogy standards will continue to fall. In addition to

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