



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

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### Summary

School education in Australia is at a crossroads. Testing and a focus on education rankings have come at a price. High levels of student disengagement, especially in high schools, low principal and teacher morale and a type of ‘assessment and curriculum paralysis’ is evident in teachers in that they no longer trust their own judgment about what is important in their professional work. The lack of material resources in public schools is leading to a STEM divide that will further disadvantage students in poorer communities where deep, well-resourced engagement in the four STEM disciplines may serve as ‘potential tickets out of poverty’ and the open up wider career pathways. Increased funding of school education in the public sector where innovation is common must be increased so that the democratic function of public schools and the tenants of the Melbourne Declaration are not forgotten. Final certifications in school education like the HSC and VCE are stifling the teaching and learning approaches of many teachers and with that comes a net decrease in student engagement and motivation. Project based learning, inquiry, working in teams; problem finding and real world orientations are increasingly evident in successful teaching and learning approaches in high schools. It is time to support all teachers with rich opportunities for ongoing professional learning with sufficient release time. University partners working alongside school leaders/teachers offer moments for professional growth for both parties involved in the critical provision of relevant teacher preparation. More data and tedious accountability measures have not led to better performance in ‘key high stakes tests’ for the nation’s students nor has it led to increases in student learning outcomes – narrow ‘testing’ measurements must become artefacts of the past. It is time to examine and take action on what counts for teachers and young people in our schools.

### Main submission

Background

I am a teacher, teacher educator and researcher in school education in an Australian university. I have taught in teacher education in three Australian universities this includes a short period [2015] as a visiting professor in a school of education in a US university.

My education background also encompasses a long stint as a classroom teacher/executive staff member K-12 in NSW, ACT and the UK schools (12 years), seven years as an educator policy officer in a large government education bureaucracy in NSW and a shorter time as a private consultant to schools in my own education advisory business.

In all, this amounts to >30 years experience in school education. I am interested in what constitutes great classroom teaching and learning. The study of teacher pedagogy is a particular focus of my work. In 2016 I spoke to >32K system leaders, principals and teachers on invitation in Australia and overseas. I follow the work of schools, school systems, teacher professional associations and education departments closely. I am the parent of two young people who went through the NSW education system, completed university studies and are now employed in satisfying careers – both are in their late 20s. My background gives me a unique perspective. I came to teaching a little later, and I am a parent and my education experiences include employment in various school education arenas that give insight at the level of theory and practice.

What should success for Australian schools and students look like?

Education success for young people at the school level should look like preparation for now, not just the future. Too many schools and teachers, and this is more apparent in high schools, are 'stuck in an industrial or last century regime'. I note balkanised subject departments where teachers are reluctant to change or work/co-teach with other colleagues to grow and configure teaching and learning practices in a more holistic and inspirational way. Where innovation and growth does occur in schools and the 'culture is switched on' there is palpable recognition and deep engagement on the part of students. Young adolescents in many high schools are disengaged – problems at home, lack of supervision, no significant people/carers and mental illness/youth suicide; these remain roadblocks for many young people where school is, and must remain, the 'constant' place. However, what students are learning at that 'constant' place must be authentic and interesting.

The focus of my current research is building teacher capacity and confidence in the STEM disciplines in primary schools. It includes observations in classrooms and interviews with teachers and students. The work is making an impact. It is intense, action learning research conducted at the 'elbow of classroom teachers'. I am the academic partner and teachers' work on a problem/s they want to solve and they are supported to enact their teaching in different ways.

It is increasingly obvious that more teachers want to know how to plan well, to develop quality-integrated learning for students; they like being given opportunities to work in teams and seek to up-skill their subject knowledge in the STEM disciplines. Such actions for change take time and often the focus of the school's learning is lost in 'too many activities', a focus on 'busy work', and with little time to embed reflective practices/new curricular. I detect the constant jumping from 'one program' or 'better idea' to the next. It is worrying.

ACARA has identified a number of general capabilities. These are critical, for example: problem solving, problem finding, and critical literacy, teaching students how to find good information about a concept in a discipline, creativity, and design thinking.

High schools where I see success and real student engagement/love of learning are those who use inquiry and project based learning approaches (PBL) - not 'PBL lite' but authentic deep approaches that cover less content but deepen students understanding – students 'get into flow', work in teams, and carefully argue their ideas and offer solutions to significant problems.

#### School quality

School quality must be measured according to context. Damaging media reportage of 'high stakes testing' and 'test results' for many years in Australia has harmed K-12 schools and the morale of principals and teachers. Testing also serves to narrow how teachers approach what they do and how students learn. Teachers are intrinsically motivated professionals, if testing is valued by education systems, then teachers will dutifully prepare students for tests. The flow on effect from such actions is 'teaching to the test' where thin, repetitive and disengaging classroom practices flourish.

This narrowing is most obvious in high schools where 'endgame or final certifications' (like the HSC/VCE) reign supreme. We must remove 'high stakes testing' impediments for teachers and for students. It is time.

At a recent address I gave to NSW selective school principals [December 2016] I flagged the idea. The principal of our 'most successful selective high school' said: "If the HSC went/ATAR too - we could focus on learning". In Queensland in August 2017 I made the same statement in a keynote address at a conference on middle schooling and received a standing ovation. Unease about excessive testing 'strips' schools of their quality.

#### Measuring school success

Education research distinguishes that it is not so much across school differences, but within classroom differences, that impact most on student-learning outcomes.

My study of exemplary teachers in NSW schools in this monograph (2015) makes the point.

Read more here:

[https://www.academia.edu/10356472/Technology\\_integration\\_and\\_High\\_Possibility\\_Classrooms\\_Building\\_from\\_TPACK](https://www.academia.edu/10356472/Technology_integration_and_High_Possibility_Classrooms_Building_from_TPACK)

Measuring school success stems from giving high school students greater education options. For example, the case of schools in the ACT is instructive. I was educated at a Canberra high school and I taught in Canberra schools too – there, students do a reference test, they connect readily to employers, learn in adult, senior school environments where students work to collate a portfolio of work/s ready to present to a TAFE college, university admissions officer or employer. The ACT education system is more aligned to the current world. This counts as success. Another example, a school in Sydney, Marist Parramatta has now experienced its most successful HSC cohort [2016]. Teachers at the school use a PBL approach to learning with students across 5-6 years; involving subject integration, problem solving and a focus on significant issues. This school's success is instructive.

Improving and improving over time

For many years now the invitations I receive to work and conduct research in schools come from both government and non-government sectors. The paucity of resources, in particular material and environmental assets [dysfunctional layout in classrooms/tired school grounds/old hardware] in government schools is shameful and it's getting worse. There is a two-tier system of education in Australia. The current STEM focus is widening the gap. The cost of resources and lack of storage/space means that public schools, teachers and students are being left behind. Some of the outstanding teaching practices I see in classrooms are in SW Sydney public schools yet the quality of the material resources/hardware teachers in these locations have to work with are severely wanting. There are too few. Most are broken and old.

In non-government schools I work with there are smaller classes, bountiful resources, carefully designed learning spaces and one cannot cease to be struck by the amount of well-supported teacher professional learning available.

Disadvantaged and rural and remote schools both government and non-government in Australia must be given the 'lions share' of schooling funding. Another urgent improvement is the appointment of a bursar for every public school, this would mean that school principals could focus on educational leadership.

Collecting evidence – what counts?

Systems are collecting more and more data with a focus on RCTs and quantitative measures. Yet the failure in these kinds of data sets is that they often do not include the 'voice of teachers and students'. Qualitative research methods need to be recognised for its important place as evidence of impact in school education.

Frequently it is smaller-scale, slower work that gives a more authentic and precise picture of education transformation. Such approaches can work at scale.

#### System enablers

Funding for action research as professional learning for every school, for every teacher with links to universities and academic partners would benefit both parties. It would serve to freshen teacher educators' practices, whose daily work means they are removed from current classrooms. Such enablers need to be seamless, and also include a reduction in teacher workloads in schools, especially in the first five years. Universities want academics to publish papers; this requirement needs to be balanced against ongoing learning for teacher educators who are charged with preparation responsibilities for the next generation of teachers. In school, long-term professional experience placements would better prepare pre-service teachers entry to the profession.

#### Good practice: new emerging areas for action

A framework I have developed for pedagogical change in schools known as "High Possibility Classrooms" [HPC] is emerging as a successful paradigm for teacher and school change in Australia. The HPC framework builds on the valuable and well-respected work of TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

#### Recent paper here

<http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/JHreBhCSkPpfXMpR8xMI/full>

HPC is being scaled up in NSW schools. Findings are promising and repeated studies with that include quantitative trend data from a survey tool used in the research showing significant improvements across a series of 10-week studies.

#### Read more here:

[https://www.academia.edu/34736745/Switching\\_Middle\\_School\\_Teachers\\_onto\\_STEM\\_Using\\_a\\_Pedagogical\\_Framework\\_for\\_Technology\\_Integration\\_The\\_Case\\_for\\_High\\_Possibility\\_Classrooms\\_in\\_Australia](https://www.academia.edu/34736745/Switching_Middle_School_Teachers_onto_STEM_Using_a_Pedagogical_Framework_for_Technology_Integration_The_Case_for_High_Possibility_Classrooms_in_Australia)

Ongoing teacher professional learning (TPL) must be supported with time for reflection and team building alongside increased public school funding. The TPL emphasis could be more targeted as opposed to: "we'll try to do a bit of everything" approach. This method means superficial, less interesting learning for students at all levels of schooling. Successive governments have perpetuated the current diminishing education context in schools with its focus on excessive testing/ranking; this has narrowed the vision for what education for young people in Australia could be. It is time to take action.