



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

Submitter: Independent Schools Council of Australia
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: ACT

Summary

- Australian students need to develop the capabilities, skills and knowledge to engage successfully in all facets of their life.
- Quality and success may look very different in different contexts; there is no one size fits all measure. Success is not just about academic achievement, it may manifest in a variety of ways.
- Non-cognitive attributes and qualities, extra-curricular activities, and parental engagement are important components of strong student outcomes.
- Investment that supports teacher and principal capability, fosters a quality curriculum, sets ambitious standards and leaves schools free to adapt their program and priorities to respond professionally to the needs of their school community, within a framework of high level accountabilities, is most likely to lead to better performance system-wide.
- Top down recommendations of specific strategies or programs do not work for all schools. Local decisions can focus on the specific needs of students and through evidence-based research identify how to meet their students' requirements.
- Schools, school leaders and teachers need to allocate time and resources to research, trial and share evidence-based practices that are relevant to the school's needs and context. Teachers require greater awareness of how data-use practices can expand students' opportunities to learn and how misinformed use of data can limit opportunities.
- Autonomy provides Independent schools with the flexibility to determine where resources are best utilised for their student community.
- Strong collaborative networks across schools provide opportunities to engage in professional discussions around what strategies and practices are having a positive impact on student outcomes.

- Continuous improvement is preferable to the search for a magic bullet.
- Long-term bipartisan political agreement will enable the development of education policy with a common, focused commitment to action to be developed and implemented.
- A consolidated and footnoted version of this submission is available from ISCA.

Main submission

This is Part 1 of 2

What does 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?

Barber (2015) has stated, “It is important that at school students learn the knowledge, master the skills and develop the attitudes that will enable them to succeed in the 21st Century. But we should not think of school as being solely about preparation for the future but also about building a community of work and learning, a productive place where today matters because every day matters.”

Each student needs to develop the capabilities, skills and knowledge to engage successfully in all facets of their life, both individually and in relation to others. Their skills and capabilities need to be individual for personal development including in order to participate in economic growth (OECD 2017) and also civic in order to contribute as active citizens (Ghazarian et al 2017). These attributes need to be adaptable and transferrable across a range of educational, social, geographical, and professional contexts.

Accordingly, the Australian Curriculum must be flexible and adaptable to the needs of learners and their contexts, to be relevant in their pursuit of fulfilment as learners now and in the future. The curriculum needs to emphasise the importance of foundation literacy and numeracy skills as the building blocks for all further learning. These skills are the basis for students to develop capabilities for deep, reflective learning, collaborating with others and sharing ideas, and looking beyond operating in explicit traditional subject areas. The focus of Australian schools, whether in curricula, extra-curricular or beyond should reflect, promote, and enable these aspirations.

In addition, evidence about the importance of developing attributes and qualities beyond the purely academic comes not only from education research but from other fields such as neuroscience, psychology and economics. The evidence from this research consistently shows that the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of students underpins academic achievement and success in life - confident, resilient

children with a capacity for emotional intelligence perform better academically and are well placed to develop responsible and satisfying lives.

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Quality and success may look very different for different cohorts of students in different contexts; there is no one-size-fits-all measure. Success is not just about academic achievement, it may manifest in the wellbeing of students, the active participation in voluntary roles and responsibilities, the ability to demonstrate interests and passions and develop healthy relationships. The temptation to measure success simply based on a narrow point in time snapshot should be avoided.

Research findings are limited by what is measurable. School quality is often measured by student results in national and international tests and end-of-school grades. While it is important to have such measures of academic achievement, each of them has been designed with a particular purpose and therefore gives only a partial, incomplete picture of the quality of schooling. The goals of schooling are broad, involving the education of the whole person, yet most of the measures available and used in research studies are confined to academic achievement, and often a limited definition of academic achievement.

The value of test results, such as NAPLAN, as a measure of school quality is limited by their focus on discrete narrow skills and minimum standards. While literacy and numeracy are essential foundational skills, they are not wholly sufficient for individuals to succeed in life, and while the achievement of minimum standards is an essential component of quality, it is only a part of the whole.

Another factor in interpreting the research evidence is the complex and amorphous nature of the concept of school quality, consistent with a broad view of the goals of schooling which encompass both academic and non-academic outcomes. Robinson (2015) provides a useful approach to understanding the concept of quality by breaking it down into different dimensions reflecting four basic purposes of education.

- Economic: education should enable students to become economically responsible and independent.
- Cultural: education should enable students to understand and appreciate their own cultures and to respect the diversity of others.
- Social: education should enable young people to become active and compassionate citizens.
- Personal: education should enable young people to engage with the world within them as well as the world around them.

On this basis, success is clearly contextual and multifaceted. Measures of educational success and school quality tends to focus on student growth and progress. Success is about preparation of 'well-rounded' students who are confident and aspire to be successful in whatever they do. It should be measured by how well schools prepare students for participating in society, in their day-to-day living, their health and wellbeing, and their ability to adapt and function in new situations.

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?

Independent schools provide for students of all abilities, including students with special needs, and serve a wide range of communities from remote and disadvantaged Indigenous communities to socially, culturally and ethnically diverse metropolitan communities.

Independent schools address the needs of their students efficiently by using funding innovatively to target areas of need. The autonomous nature of Independent schools allows flexibility in determining where resources are best utilised in the interests of their student community.

Government reforms can also provide a valuable source of additional funds to enhance or support existing programs such as the National Partnership for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education or to target new areas such as Digital Literacy and STEM initiatives. This additional support ensures schools are able to support initiatives that extend beyond the day-to-day core business of a school.

Investment that supports teacher and principal capability, fosters a quality curriculum, sets ambitious standards and leaves schools free to adapt their program and priorities to respond professionally to the needs of their school community, within a framework of high level accountabilities, is most likely to lead to better performance system-wide.

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

PISA results indicate that teacher quality in all its dimensions – selection into and the quality of initial teacher education, continuing professional development, teacher salaries and teacher professionalism – is the mainstay of excellent individual schools and a high performing school system overall. Using PISA data, Mourshed et al (2017) show that a blend of teacher-directed and inquiry-based learning results in the strongest student outcomes.

Schleicher (2013) has summarised this approach; “Top school systems pay attention to how they select and train their staff. They watch how they improve the performance of teachers who are struggling and how to structure teachers’ pay. They provide an environment in which teachers work together to frame good practice. And when deciding where to invest, they prioritise the quality of teachers over the size of classes...they provide intelligent pathways for teachers to grow in their careers”.

Much of the work undertaken by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership over recent years including in the areas of Teacher Standards and certification and Initial Teacher Education Standards and accreditation, is likely to support improved systems, practice, and outcomes for student learning.

Effective leadership has been identified as the second most important school-related factor influencing student learning (AITSL 2017). A school’s culture and values, and the extent to which these connect the student body, have a substantial influence on student achievement, largely through motivation and support. The role the principal plays in setting the school climate is pivotal. A good school principal will set a tone for the school which encourages professional collaboration and a strong sense of community and sets challenging goals.

A high-quality curriculum will set clear expectations of progress and high standards; it will emphasise both substantive content knowledge and essential competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, and accessing and analysing information, and it will be aligned with assessment to enable diagnosis of each student’s learning needs. In the highest performing education systems, the curriculum tends to be rigorous and not too expansive or prescriptive, with manageable content taught well and in great depth.

Assessment linked to the curriculum is an essential means of identifying the progress and learning needs of individual students. For educators, assessment is an integral and essential skill for their teaching and their students’ learning. Its educational purpose is primarily diagnostic, to assess individual student learning needs so that teachers can adapt their teaching accordingly (Goss et al 2015).

Teachers need to be skilled at both formative assessment, which enables them to support students’ progress, and summative assessment, which allows them to judge student learning at the end of a program of work. Increasingly, in addition to developing a complex knowledge of how students typically develop skills and progress, teachers and schools need the skills to analyse and use the data that comes from assessment to inform their teaching. Such knowledge will enable teachers to support the learning of students at whatever point of development their learning may be.

Schools with greater levels of parental engagement have been shown to be the most effective. There are many ways in which parents can be involved, from encouragement and support for academic work, to contact with teachers, to participation in school social, extra-curricular or administrative activities, to the payment of school fees. One theme emerging from the research literature is the benefit of parents' involvement in the home context, through reading activities and help with homework.

Significant research suggests that it is the demonstration of the importance parents attach to education in general that has a positive influence on student achievement. The messages children receive about the importance of schooling increase their competence, motivation to learn, and engagement in school. There are strong links between students' perceptions of how their parents' value learning and their educational outcomes.

Research on the benefits for students of participation in extra-curricular activities underlines the value of non-cognitive skills and attributes. Studies have found that structured extra-curricular activities are important for development and growth, especially during adolescence, and are associated with lower rates of anti-social and risky behaviour, lower rates of academic failure and lower dropout rates. Research shows a clear link between extra-curricular participation and levels of connectedness, engagement and satisfaction with school. These activities can include music, sport, and special interest clubs and activities.

Independent school communities value the autonomous nature of their school. Research indicates the importance of schools having control over staffing decisions as well as autonomy for curriculum and assessment, and resource allocation within the school. Schools that operate with this type of autonomy have been shown to achieve stronger student achievement than the average (Hanushek et al 2012).

Schools need to have a degree of autonomy to build the capacities of their leaders and teachers through the development of skills and competencies, to foster teamwork and focus on improving instruction. Reflection by individual teachers and groups of teachers, developing school aspiration and connectedness, developing purposeful actions, pursuing deeper investigation through collaboration requires time and guidance. Schools need to be able to take time to build the capacity of staff, engage with the school community, and identify where they may need in-school support.

What works best for whom and in what circumstance?

Many elements of quality are dependent on context and are influenced by factors such as stage of schooling, geographic location, social and economic environment, and systemic arrangements. Many of the general conclusions legitimately drawn from large-scale studies and big data, while relevant to system-wide decisions and

policies, will not necessarily be applicable for individual students or individual schools.

For example, decades of research establish a clear relationship between family background and education achievement when data is aggregated to the school and system level, yet the generalised data has no explanatory or predictive value for individual students. Individuals vary in their capacity and readiness to take advantage of what schooling offers and each student's educational progress will depend on a host of factors, including their innate ability, personal attributes and family support (with family income playing a very minor role) as well as elements of their schooling experience (Marks 2015).

Schools need to be flexible and agile, able to work on key issues and needs that affect their student community. Top down recommendations of specific strategies or programs do not work for all schools and can often add pressure to participate in something that is not well suited to their context or community. Local decisions, whether at the individual school level or regional level can focus on the specific needs of students and through evidence-based research identify how to meet their students' requirements.