



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 2 of 2

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?

The Productivity Commission’s Education Evidence Base Inquiry report highlighted “creating an evidence based approach to education policy and teaching practices and turning best practice into common practice are also required to drive better value for money and improve the outcomes achievable from any given level of expenditure.”

Schools and school leaders need flexibility to allocate time and resources to allow teachers to research, trial and share evidence-based practices that are relevant to the school’s needs and context. This includes the development of a purposeful action plan that allows the development of clarity and precision of practice, of transparency and monitoring of progress, the opportunity to trial and reflect on what is working or not working for students (Fullan and Quinn 2016), and can be communicated clearly to the school community.

Many Independent schools have developed contextual evidence-based research and follow-up practices with expertise and support provided through the Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Opportunities to share research and outcomes is an important aspect in developing a collaborative culture within and across schools. Whether it is targeted research sharing through an online repository, the dissemination of research findings through papers/summaries or providing opportunities for networking/workshop days, the AISs play an important role in assisting and enabling Independent schools to share best practice.

Independent schools, teachers, and leaders would welcome opportunities to undertake and engage with collaborative research across schools and sectors, particularly those that serve similar students and communities. Ultimately the first

step will be about seeking information from schools about what will work for them depending on whether they are able to lead research inquiry or whether they would benefit from linking with other schools who are leading this work.

Where appropriate, strong collaborative networks across similar schools provide an opportunity to engage in professional discussions around what strategies and practices are having a positive impact on student outcomes.

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?

The Productivity Commission's final report for the Inquiry into a National Education Evidence Base identified that "monitoring outcomes, performance benchmarking and competition between schools alone are insufficient to achieve gains in education outcomes. They must be complemented by the use of data and evidence to identify, and then apply, the most effective programs, policies and education practices."

In order for data to inform practice, there needs to be a greater teacher awareness of how data-use practices can expand students' opportunities to learn and how misinformed use of data can limit opportunities. There are data-use practices that can either serve as obstacles or as facilitators to driving educational success. These include: accountability-driven data use versus data use for continuous improvement, using data to confirm assumptions versus using data to challenge beliefs and tracking versus flexible grouping to promote student growth (Datnow 2017).

While it is an attractive proposition for governments to set targets, it is inevitable that unless the targets are negotiated and set sensibly there will be students and schools that will never be able to follow and reach an 'ideal' trajectory.

Top down reforms focusing on micromanaging two or three measurable priorities only works for systems pursuing traditional and comparatively narrow achievement goals. A digital age of complex skills, cultural diversity and high-speed change calls for more challenging educational goals and more sophisticated and flexible change strategies (Hargreaves and Ainscow 2015).

Accountability needs to be supportive and provide a safety net if there needs to be some form of intervention. Ultimately schools have a responsibility to their students, teachers and community for ensuring focus and commitment for the education of their students. It is about a shared ownership and collective responsibility by all key stakeholders in the school.

The ongoing work of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is essential for developing and assisting potential and current teachers and school leaders. Addressing the quality and consistency of Initial Teacher Education programs, developing Professional Teacher Standards and a framework for developing school leadership skills, the provision of support tools/resources to promote reflection and discussion, enables the profession to develop the capabilities to engage in collaborative discussion about their work.

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 with most fields of complex public policy, it is unlikely that there will be education policies that are immediately easily implementable and will automatically lead to large improvements or gains in outcomes. Continuous improvement is preferable to the search for a magic bullet.

However, there are some elements that should form the basis of government policies and school emphases.

At the very least, policies should be based on evidence which rigorously indicates how they will contribute to student learning (Productivity Commission 2017).

Significant research (Singhal 2017, Schleicher 2017) indicates that government policies which can make a difference to student learning and outcomes include:

- Investment in student learning in the early years, particularly with relation to developing skills and capabilities in basic literacy and numeracy as the foundation for learning.
- Structures that emphasise and support quality teaching.
- Development of a learning culture for all students that emphasises the importance of effort, growth and teacher support rather than innate talent or other background characteristics as the important factors in student learning, development and success.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

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

Fragmentation of policy at the system level along with overload and duplication of accountability measures at different levels of government make careful, considered and sustained action difficult at the school level.

Schools are experiencing heightened pressure from governments, school communities and from the general public about what their work should be and how it should be measured. The expectations on schools to undertake an expanding role in society can dilute and distract from their core business. Support for the profession and the provision of time to allow schools to be successful (whatever success may look like for their context) is imperative in building a successful education system.

What is required is bipartisan agreement, an overarching vision for education that builds trust within schools, teachers and school leaders to make local decisions about addressing difficult questions regarding students' learning. A balance is required between broad systemic goals and the opportunity to respond to local needs and priorities. Too much external accountability is de-motivating and intrusive, too little limits accountability and transparency.

The opportunity presents itself when developing the new Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians to engage with all levels of education - providers, key stakeholders and the community to discuss what educational goals we want for our children and how we can all work together to a common end with a focused commitment to action. How we get to this end may look very different depending on the characteristics of the school, the community it serves and their student needs.

Summary of key points

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