



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

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Summary

Summary response Please refer to previous page for details

Main submission

The question of what capabilities and skills are required by a future Australian workforce has long been settled in the literature and research. While, themes may vary marginally at the edges, the education community world-wide is consistent on the challenges and opportunities confronting learners and systems.

What is universally agreed upon is that the Australian education systems needs to undertake major critical self-evaluation to ultimately meet the needs of our current and future students, not only in the limited context of preparation of learners for the Australian economy, but as young people who can thrive as productive and engaged global citizens.

This very notion was clearly articulated by Lord Kenneth Baker when addressing this very issue, “The U.K.’s future workforce will need technical expertise in areas such as design and computing, plus skills which robots cannot replace – flexibility, empathy, creativity and enterprise.”

Many echo the OECD/CERI International Conference Learning in the 21st Century: Research, Innovation and Policy conclusions:

“The inevitability of lifelong learning in knowledge oriented societies implies that school systems should have different objectives and characteristics than if education were considered to have been completed when a student leaves initial education. Yet in practice, there remains a tendency for school education to be assessed in terms of the achievements and targets that systems have set themselves, rather than their broader success in laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

In the knowledge economy, memorization of facts and procedures is not enough for success.”

Furthermore, the OECD report clearly states:

“Educated workers need a conceptual understanding of complex concepts, and the ability to work with them creatively to generate new ideas, new theories, new products, and new knowledge. They need to be able critically to evaluate what they read, can express themselves clearly both verbally and in writing, and understand scientific and mathematical thinking. They need to learn integrated and usable knowledge, rather than the sets of compartmentalised and de-contextualised facts. They need to be able to take responsibility for their own continuing, life - long learning.”

Therefore, it is commonly agreed that the following attributes are essential capacities for an Australian operating successfully in a global economy.

- World Language(s) incl. English
- Arts
- Geography
- History
- Mathematics
- Science
- Compassion, resilience and empathy
- Civics literacy and global Awareness
- Financial, Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial literacy
- Health Literacy
- Critical Thinking & Problem Solving
- Creativity & Innovation
- Communication, Team Work & Collaboration
- Flexibility & Adaptability
- Productivity & Accountability
- Leadership & Responsibilities

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

The days of simplistic analysis of Australia’s education performance needs to end.

A deeper and more productive examination is required by all levels of the community and government.

As a nation, we need to acknowledge that pockets of the Australian population are amongst the highest performing educational groups in the world. For example, the northern suburbs of Sydney individually identified would rank high on any world league table. Teams from Finland, Singapore and China should visit to view a balanced education system.

We, therefore also need to equally acknowledge the areas of consistent underperformance in our nation.

However, the fundamental issue of this enormous continent is easily articulated by the simple concept of equity of excellence and opportunity, but tremendously difficult to address, or as Fred Argy from the Western Australian University wrote: 'there are also serious geographical disparities in education standards - both within urban Australia and between urban and rural/remote young people. Country students are less likely to finish school, tend to perform more poorly than urban students and have a more restricted choice of subjects. Education performance is also relatively low in almost all outer suburbs of the major cities because of the more limited choice of schools available.'

The federal government has few levers, other than the crude financial to push to bring about improvement or change. Rarely gained goodwill across states and territories is a necessity.

Therefore, any initiatives must be evidence based and non-political in nature or they will be rejected as a harmful intrusion into state rights.

The research is once again explicit about what makes a difference. The themes are consistent throughout the literature.

1. Strong leadership that raises expectations- supported by a trusted system and community. Establish a mentoring/coaching model for all new principals and principals with limited experience in implementing inclusive education to increase their capacity to lead inclusive schools
2. Carefully selected high quality teachers who are committed to professional collaboration and are provided with explicit ongoing training and feedback.
3. All schools to dedicate professional learning time, aligned to the goals of the school plan in relation to improving inclusive teaching and learning practice
4. Shifting assessment and reporting towards a growth mindset to improve the learning
5. Positive school culture focussed on learning with multiple options for support of all learners.
6. Re-engaging parents and the community to build national trust and respect for education.

I believe that significant educational impact can be made through the adaptation of a consistent national teacher and principal program based on the outstanding Singaporean model.

This summarized in the paper:

Education in Singapore: Preparation for School Leadership by Yan Hock LIM Board Member Academy of Principals (Singapore) Principal Geylang Methodist Secondary School Singapore for Australian Secondary Principals' Association

Embedded within this highly structured organisation is a carefully conceived staff development programme that addresses the career aspirations of teachers. The Leadership Tracks provides opportunities for education officers who aspire to lead, develop, inspire and draw out the very best in individuals and teams working together towards providing high quality education. Talents are being identified actively at schools to take on leadership roles.

For those who have been assessed as having the capacity for greater tasks and who wish to take on higher office within the school system, the normal career path requires them to take on administrative duties in addition to their teaching loads. These teachers can be appointed initially as subject heads or heads of department, and, if they demonstrate the potential for leadership, they are put to the test as vice-principals before being considered for principalship.

Along the way, potential candidates have to attend interviews at MOE HQ, chaired by the senior management of the MOE (like Director-General of Education) for assessment for suitability for school leadership.

Since 2001, all potential candidates for school principalship have to undergo a 6 month full time training at the National Institute of Education for the Leadership in Education Programme (LEP).

The programme is a full-time 'state-of-the-art' programme of six months' duration. It is designed for selected education officers and it prepares them for leadership in schools. These selected personnel are experienced and well-qualified educators, with a background of successful experience in both teaching and management.

The National Institute of Education works in partnership with MOE to provide a development platform that prepares educational leaders for the challenges and demands of a fast changing system. Thus, the programme is essentially future-oriented, with an emphasis on leadership capability in a dynamic and complex context.

Through a process of learning in diverse contexts, including the authentic workplace of the school and international locations, the learning platform addresses a range of issues that are seen as critical to the success of future leadership. They include: futuring designing and managing learning school organisations that can sustain a

competitive advantage in a fast -changing and turbulent environment; strategic choice and marketing; innovative communication and information technology; designing an integrative and innovative curriculum in order to achieve excellence in teaching and learning; and building human and intellectual capital.

This programme, in short, seeks to provide the sorts of leaders who will continue to keep Singapore at the cutting edge of knowledge and who will lead their institutions to sustainable success.

As Singapore is a fairly centralized system, there is a consistency of expectation, and standardised procedures are in place to help principals in their job. Although every school is unique, the standard operating procedures are the same across all schools, and this enables principals to work within certain parameters.

Customised courses are mounted for incumbent principals to better equip them to be effective leaders in areas like Leadership, Strategic Planning and Administration, Management of Staff, Management of Students and Management of Resources.

Milestones courses are also planned for principals. For instance, newly appointed principals are put through a 360 degree feedback programme after one year as a school leader. After 3 years as a principal, there is again another round of 360 degree feedback programme. Overseas learning programmes are also planned for principals, usually for those with at least 4 years experience as principals.

The Sabbatical Scheme for Principals was introduced in Jan 2003 by MOE as part of the continuous improvement and development of principals to ensure that school leaders continually meet new challenges with fresh insight and perspectives.

We can however, learn from other educational systems. Schools overwhelmingly, need to be flexible and agile. There is a need to respond to student and community needs swiftly.

History has repeatedly taught us that federally mandated projects or initiatives, are not only are a costly activity but have few if any sustainable outcomes for students.

The only benefit is shortly term political coverage that quickly dissipates.

High performing educational systems have several key often neglected factors that significantly impact on student outcomes.

Overwhelming, high achieving educational systems are trusted, supported and highly valued by the parents, political systems and communities.

This level of trust is not evident in the Australian culture.

For example, the World Bank researchers used the PISA data — which includes questions about student backgrounds, learning experiences, and school systems — to see what about Vietnam makes its students so much better than its wealth would

indicate. They found that investments in education and “cultural differences” can explain about half of the point difference.

A lot of the cultural differences had to do with student characteristics. In general, Vietnamese students were more focused and took their schoolwork more seriously. They were less likely to be late for school, had fewer unexcused absences, and skipped fewer classes. They spend about three more hours per week studying outside of school than students in other developing countries. They’re less anxious about maths, and more confident about how they’re going to use it in the future. There are more differences. Parents in Vietnam were more likely to be involved in their children’s academic lives, and help or fundraise at the school.

Another universal constant in high performing systems, is there appears to be universal access to quality early education, as students were more likely than others to have attended preschool.

A robust Australia wide early education architecture, built on a nationally consistent, later school entry age would yield massive social, educational and economic benefits.

The follow-on effects are reflected in the words of Martin Stephen is a former High Master of St Paul’s School

For starters, who on earth thought that age 11 was a good time to transfer to secondary school? The research evidence, in many cases, shows a catastrophic dip in achievement in the first two years there – among boys in particular. It would be far better to make the transfer at 14, when a child is much more mature and is starting to think for themselves about what is best for them.

Australia needs to re-examine the middle years structural provisions for students.

Yet in practice, there remains a tendency for school education to be assessed in terms of the achievements and targets that systems have set themselves, rather than their broader success in laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

For the Australian to achieve equity of excellence for all, the issue of rural and remote needs to be confronted.

The data is overwhelming and clear about the underperformance of these communities.

The solution while not swift, requires capacity building, such as participation, leadership, social supports, sense of community, access to resources, and skills, and their importance in developing and empowering local coalitions.

The feedback from Michelle Chino, PhD and Lemyra DeBruyn, Ph research powerfully states ‘Capacity building for indigenous people needs to go beyond

“action planning” and “engaging leadership,” concepts that are often the first steps in Western models.”.

Sadly, those in most need are still disadvantaged in the disabilities sector. Provisions are at best inconsistent and require intense engagement with the sector to better clarify future directions.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

In 2009 in a paper entitled *Overcoming the barriers to engagement and equity for all students*’ Dr Lucas Walsh and Rosalyn Black articulated both the need and the future direction of education by stating:

There is strong agreement that the solution to disengagement lies in the Redefinition of the learning experience along personalised or student-centred lines. Student-centred learning underpins the practice of the comparatively few schools internationally that combine high student. Poverty with high achievement. These schools have a challenging curriculum that is connected to students’ lives and to the real world.

Finally, on assessment, the independent newspaper summed up the concerns of most educators in Australia by stating:

The pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. Many teachers find themselves doing little else than priming and preparing pupils for the next round of tests. This stifles creativity and is a terrible way to engender a love of learning among children. The system is also counter-productive from an educational perspective. Pupils are increasingly being "taught to the test". They become adept at jumping through hoops but not at thinking for themselves. As an Ofsted report on maths teaching in secondary schools put it: "Although students are able to pass the examinations, they are not able to apply their knowledge independently to new contexts, and they are not well prepared for further study."

At the heart of the problem is the fact that our testing culture appears to be politically, rather than educationally, driven. Government ministers like tests and the constant stream of results they produce because it enables them, in their dealings with the media, to point to rising educational standards.

Not one teacher objects to testing or accountability, but let that testing are purpose and meaning t the learning.

Let it make a difference.

Let us test and report on what really matters – creativity, problem-solving and collaboration. Then, only and only then will it change practice and improve leaning.

Therefore: I suggest that the work currently being carried out by the Australian Curriculum Authority surrounding Learning progressions be expanded to encompass all areas of study and more specifically the general capabilities.

A considerable body of research shows that optimal learning occurs when learners are presented with challenges just beyond their current level of attainment. This is what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the 'zone of proximal development' (Masters 2013, p. 15).