



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

Submitter: Rooty Hill High School  
Submitting as a: Principal  
State: NSW

### Summary

Executive summary and recommendations:

Rooty Hill High School invites the panel to visit the school and makes the following five recommendations, all of which are explained below:

1. Governments should set broad goals over 3-5 years for Australian education and should use a small range of high leverage national social impact measures to measure return on investment. The focus should be less on school performance and more on the strengths of Australian education – what do we do well and how do we build on that?
2. Governments should focus school and student measurement on change over time, especially for secondary education. We have far too many output targets and not nearly enough data about the baseline skills, capabilities and dispositions of children entering high school, especially those who transition below grade benchmarks (up to 80% at RHHS). Understanding and providing evidence for changes and outcomes in knowledge, skills, behavioural and attitudinal data is important.
3. Governments should be courageous in recommending a greater disposition towards innovation in defining the success of secondary school students in terms of Goal 2 of The Melbourne Declaration. They need to invest in individual students and their communities by providing multiple academic, vocational and personalised pathways through and beyond secondary schooling.
4. The panel needs to articulate to government and voters that performance measures must take into account that the current Gonski 2.0 funding model allocates for need within sectors and not across them. This affects the integrity of any aggregated data.
5. The government should establish expert educational panel with broad views on assessment and performance measurement to undertake research into the best

practices in assessment for secondary education, including measures of student and school progress. While influential names in Australian business are often nominated to panels, this panel should reflect the industry and schools.

### Main submission

Review to Achieve Excellence in Australian Schools: Rooty Hill High School-NSW

1. What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?
  - a. What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school?

The language used by many people to justify the secondary curriculum follows the theme that the skills and capabilities students develop in schools are taught to prepare them for the future. This is actually a myth. Secondary school students at RHHS need skills and capabilities for the present – a present in which many of our students have part time jobs, participate in sports, play musical instruments, use sophisticated ICT, volunteer, manage mental health issues for themselves and their families and, increasingly many live and learn in a diverse, disrupted and complex communities. The learning they take from all these experiences adds to their growth and development.

At RHHS we support continuing the subject based NSW Higher School Certificate that allows students choice of their subjects and a chance to follow their interests and passions. Deep study of the discourse of the subjects studied in the senior years is critical for our students in developing the higher order knowledge and skills required for further study and, while many universities continue the lazy process of selecting students by ATAR, their diversity and outreach programs increasingly focus on developing higher order thinking, analytical, problem solving and communication skills.

As a comprehensive high school we value the rich and multiple pathways available to senior school students through the NSW HSC – full academic programs, vocational programs and school based traineeships- all of which support the retention of students while creating engaging and futures focused learning opportunities.

Internationally, there is pressure for secondary students to leave schools with more than an end of school academic credential. There is a demand for students to be able to articulate and demonstrate a broad range of dispositions. These dispositions are already taught and learned by secondary students in the subjects they are studying – it is just that we, as a country, have failed to value them and have instead taken a reductionist approach to assessment and reporting at the end of school. The desire for a simple (or simplistic) measure, whether that is the ATAR demanded by universities and controlling the senior curriculum or the ridiculous minimum

standard of Band 8 or equivalent in Year 9 NAPLAN, we have “dummied down” the message to voters, students and their parents to be one of “fear and failure”.

The seven ACARA capabilities provide a benchmarked framework for teaching skills, capabilities and dispositions and, when combined with the four additional requirements for NSW schools including work and enterprise skills, cover the majority of 21st century skills advocated by influential research and advocacy groups including the Foundation for Young Australians, The Mitchell Institute and the OECD, that will assess 15 year olds for both global competencies and creativity in the next 4 years.

If students (and their parents) are to value the importance of developing a broader range of skills, capabilities and dispositions, the government and school systems need to value them in learning, assessment and accessing further tertiary study. This panel has the opportunity to recommend significant innovation in the measurement of student and school improvement across a much broader range of measures, using both “big” and “small” data.

b. How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Measure what we value: What are the broad goals of secondary education and what would our national “success criteria” be if we were to join other successful education systems in measuring and valuing fewer, high leverage strategies? If what we have done in the past hasn’t worked, should we have the courage to change and do something different? As a school we have 3 strategic directions and six success criteria (key performance measures) in the school plan. We aim to improve and, in recent years to innovate, by doing fewer things and doing them very well. We want to know and measure what we do well and to build on our strengths. Every one of our students has a personalised learning plan and an online learning hub onto which students load evidence of their learning against the ACARA benchmarks. Our teachers triangulate the self-assessment done by students with internal subject based grade data and external data to determine if students are making progress.

Critically review the external testing programs: Despite considerable evidence about the importance of personalisation, diversity and the importance of measuring growth and improvement, the majority of Australia’s educational “success measures” rely on “test measures” that are simplistic, context free “proxies” for individual, class and school learning. They are based on assumptions that the items test what students have learnt and that “averages” and “standard deviations” represent the actual distribution of the student population. Many of the tests are rescaled each year to match historic data distributions and, even with Higher School Certificate and university entry assessment (ATAR) there are no standards or benchmarks that allow the statistical distribution to be varied for an exceptional cohort or distribution. If NAPLAN results continue to be used we want the results of

all students to be on the one scale from Year 3 to Year 9 instead of manipulating the data with "bottom bands" that are statistically constructed year to year.

Focus on distributions of data: One of the immediate actions that could be taken by ACARA, systems and schools would be to present external and internal data in "band distributions" rather than averages so the data can be better used to inform and educate the media and parents about which groups of students are doing well and which groups need additional support.

Transparency: A second action that could be taken immediately is to educate the professional and wider community on the difference between "correlation" and "causation" in statistical measurement. Correlation is not causation. Secondary students and their teachers have changed – they want to understand learning and assessment. For them, transparency means that they can see the direct link between their performance against standards and benchmarks and their own learning.

Focus on Progress and Improvement: At RHHS we want our school and policy makers to have stronger focus on progress and improvement – for students, teachers and schools. We believe the school most like our school is our school last year and our school next year and we have realised this belief by tracking school, cohort and individual data over time against benchmarks, including the NSW DoE School Excellence Framework; the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and the NESA course performance descriptors to set the benchmarks against which we measure change. These tools are highly valued by schools but have been poorly used by systems to show school progress.

At RHHS up to 80% of our students in any cohort enter Year 7 below grade average and many finish school still below "state average". How will our government value these future voters, their teachers and the community if leaders cannot provide evidence of improvement and progress?

The need for more sophisticated measures: With the exception of literacy and numeracy, the NSW Education Standards Authority has delegated the decision to teach and assess the full range of capabilities to schools. The strength of this approach is to allow schools to contextualise their pedagogies and teaching and learning programs to the needs to students. The great weakness of this approach is the over-reliance by NESA and others on NAPLAN and the Higher School Certificate examination, by universities (who say they want creative, collaborative and engaged students) on ATAR and the NSW Department of Education on NAPLAN in Years 7 and 9 and, from 2020 Year 12. Our school has chosen to use the external data provided by federal and state governments to triangulate the data held in the school, not just rely on external macro, snapshot data analysis. It includes (but is not limited to) attendance patterns, participation data, engagement data, wellbeing data, enrolment and transition data, participation in extra-curricular programs, post-

school destination, mandatory A-E grade report data, observational data, competency checklists, health reports and personalised learning plans.

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

RHHS and its community would like to ask the Reference Panel and the government to be deeply courageous in acting for current secondary students who will become young adults and future voters in the next 5 years.

In the longer term and based on the evidence of growing inequality in student and school performance, we would like the federal government to fund all schools up to 80% of the resource standard and determine the distribution based on the NSW Family Occupation and Education Index. This will help the government understand its own impact on and progress towards improving the broad goals for education across the country.

We would ask the panel to recommend to government that, instead of using multiple narrow targets, that governments at the state and federal level identify the purpose of education using the Melbourne Declaration and then identify 2-5 overarching goals or purposes and national success criteria for the next 3-5 years that will change the negative narrative about Australian schools. We would recommend, for example:

- Strengths – we will identify the strengths of students, schools and Australian education and build on those strengths, measuring improvement over time.
- Equity – we will commit to reducing inequality between our schools and create equity of opportunity for all Australian students
- Expertise – we will recognise and build the expertise of our teaching workforce by increasing the number of teachers at highly accomplished and lead on the APST,
- Impact – we will find new ways of understanding, identifying, measuring and sharing the impact of programs, initiatives and schools on student outcomes
- Learning- we will understand, assess and produce evidence of learning progress and improvement for students and schools
- Confidence- we will increase the confidence of voters in secondary schooling and Australian education
- Value – we will measure what we value, focus on depth of learning and increase the perceived value of Australian secondary education within and beyond Australia by measuring the return on investment and the long term social impact.

- a. How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently?

What does not work is the “equal treatment of unequals” and what does work in large systems like NSW is being able to target equity resources and opportunities to schools and groups of students.

At RHHS we use “effectiveness” as a measure of impact, change, growth and progress. We use “efficiency” as a measure of the cost/benefit or value proposition of choosing one strategy over another. We want to make our own choice of strategies, professional learning and measures of progress to address school and systems targets and strategic directions. Our capacity to do this in the last 3 years has resulted in awards for innovation (2016 and 2017), publication of our work as case studies in books, the ACARA case studies and the Australian Learning lecture.

At RHHS we would ask the panel to do 3 things with schools funding:

1. Focus on equity – make sure all students have access to universal, targeted and intensive learning programs designed to meet their learning needs
2. Focus on continuing the deep and broad complexity of academic, vocational and passion based subjects that characterise a first world educational experience and
3. Focus on working with schools and groups of schools to identify strategies and opportunities for creativity and innovation.

If the NAPLAN and My School data patterns for the last 5 years are accurate there is a growing inequality in student and school performance. There is little use of evidence that shows what individual schools and their students do well. In NSW there is a heavy reliance by government on aggregated external test data, rather than data that tracks the learning progress of disadvantaged, exceptional and vulnerable students.

The systems approach contrasts strongly with the ways schools have used equity funding efficiently and effectively to create and evaluate the impact of universal, targeted and intensive programs. A variety of change and evaluation approaches have been tested in schools and, having used Outcomes/Results Based Accountability, evaluative thinking and deep action research, we would recommend that the government stops asking schools for their data and asks schools how they understand, interpret and make meaning of data and evidence.

- i. What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there?

Rooty Hill High School (RHHS) is a successful comprehensive high school in western Sydney with 1125 students from socially, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The school is an SVA Powerhouse school and a two time winner of the Educator Magazine Most Innovative Schools in Australia Award. The school has a strong reputation for its capability driven curriculum, personalised learning,

professional practice and evidence informed learning. The purpose of this school is to deliver its moral contract with parents, families and students to ensure each student has the opportunity to do his or her best and to leave this school as an educated 18 year old. At RHHS our focus is on instructional and relational pedagogy. We have designed teaching and learning programs that respond to our context and create change. We believe, and have evidence to support the proposition that Principals and teachers should make the decisions about the ways each school should improve its own practice and outcomes, supported by professional networks, access to high quality research and, where applicable evidence based systems support.

In NSW, evidence of progress and improvement across a range of student, teacher, school, cultural and community measures is available at each school using data collected as part of the NSW government school planning and reporting process. This data is validated against a variety of benchmarks. At RHHS we endorse this approach because it recognises complexity, diversity and high quality judgment.

ii. What works best?

We need to understand and do assessment better in our schools, in our states and at a federal level. We need to open assessment practices to scrutiny. Secondary students need to understand themselves as learners and have the capacity to articulate their strengths and areas for further learning.

Student feedback through school and system-wide surveys such as Tell Them from Me sends a strong message to government. It suggests that far too much of the secondary curriculum is mandated and that time needs to be made within the secondary curriculum for “passion projects” where students choose both the project and the means to assess and demonstrate their own learning.

b. What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place?

If the panel is sincerely committed to innovation and solutions for a complex question, we recommend that far greater trust is put in schools to develop, assess, evaluate and share professional, student and school learning. The most appropriate external governance for our school is one where government sets broad goals evaluated by “national success measures” and then reports publicly and annually on progress towards aggregated benchmarks, not individual schools.

The government (through ACARA, AITSL and other agencies) should investigate and fund the design of tools, benchmarks and continua (such as the NSW Literacy Continuum) to assist teachers to measure the longitudinal patterns of student learning and performance against those benchmarks. Where states have these tools they should be shared nationally.

There is significant risk for our students in the uncritical adoption of “fads” promoted by particular schools, school systems, for profit providers, well-meaning but ill-informed lobby groups or countries. Good governance would stop this.

At the same time schools and systems need to ensure Australia’s teachers have a deeper understanding and opportunities for professional learning at the highly accomplished and lead levels of the Teacher Standards in addressing Standards 3, 5 and 6 in relation to assessment, evaluation and data analytics.

- c. How can system enablers be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting an application of investment?

Effective management used to depend on compliance with regulations, school registration requirements and externally imposed accountability measures. Compliance has a place.

By contrast, an improvement and innovation focus, supported by quality assurance and validation (not inspection) is a critical enabler especially if it builds on strength, uses strategic goals, employs “standards” for measurement and embraces systems thinking. The tools of improvement align with the instructional and professional focus of the work schools need to do. We note that we already have “success criteria” in relation to attendance, engagement, retention and achievement.

- d. Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement?

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3. Are there barriers to implementing these improvements? If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

Yes, so many and we are happy to discuss but would rather save our word limit for recommendations.