



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

Submitter: South Australian Department of Education and Child
Development
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: SA

Summary

The South Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Review to Achieve Excellence in Australian Schools.

We are committed to ensuring that South Australia's education system is world class. Ensuring that funding is invested in reforms that demonstrably lift student performance is central to this effort.

There is a complex relationship between funding, policy and improvement in educational outcomes and substantial differences between early childhood services, schools, sectors and jurisdictions. A challenge for all governments across Australia is ensuring that future national reform priorities are capable of being adapted to local contexts and build on what is already working in our school systems.

The themes of this submission are:

1. Nationally agreed outcomes help focus the work of all governments and provide a common understanding of quality education; the challenge is how to deliver on national commitments in a nationally diverse educational landscape.
2. More effective and efficient allocation of funding can be achieved by understanding how the drivers of improvement at a classroom, school and system level are best applied to different levels of school and system performance.
3. Investment should focus on systemic lift rather than programmatic approaches. Improvement effort should be transparent and evidence-based, but effort should not be expected to be uniform unless there is a compelling case.
4. Compared to other sectors, there is scarce investment in the national research infrastructure. Any national research program should have a strong focus on the translation of evidence into classroom practice.

National priorities should continue to focus on high performance and increasing educational equity. All South Australian sectors share the view that in challenging economic times priority should be given to strengthening the teaching of the general capabilities and developing and sharing the pedagogical approaches required to achieve this.

Main submission

What should 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?

Defining educational success

There is strong agreement between all three South Australian schooling sectors that the goals and articulations in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians remain relevant as a benchmark for enunciating education success for young people.

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

- successful learners;
- confident and creative individuals; and
- active and informed citizens.

The Declaration clarifies what these goals look like in practice and provides a common narrative for all governments in Australia.

At a school level, the dimensions of educational success are defined in the learning areas and general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum.

What students need for their future is a combination of core content knowledge and high-level skills. In their years of schooling, young people should be equipped to be literate and numerate, competent communicators, confident users of information technology, creative problem solvers, capable of critical analysis, able to make ethical choices, and proficient at understanding different cultures. These capabilities are embedded in the Australian Curriculum, and are recognised internationally as essential 21st century skills.

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Measuring educational success

There is a clear gap between what is measured through benchmarking and national standards and the measures required to assess the attainment of '21st century skills'. All South Australian sectors support more national collaborative work to develop

these measures of the general capabilities. South Australia considers that building these skills in students is a critical investment in South Australia's future industries.

South Australia has existing markers for measuring educational success and is currently expanding these to enable broader measurement of school quality. In South Australia's public education system, success is measured using a Standard of Educational Achievement. This Standard makes clear the expected level of progress and achievement for every child and student in public preschools and schools.

The Standard is supported by information in relation to curriculum standards, expected achievement, data sets and progress indicators. The Standard is an effective tool for teachers and leaders because it can be used for measuring progress, negotiating next steps in teaching and learning, as well as setting individual student goals. It also forms the basis for rigorous and transparent accountability processes.

The Strategic Plan of the Department for Education and Child Development commits to measuring more aspects of children's learning and development including their capabilities, health, engagement and wellbeing. This will represent a comprehensive range of indicators for children from birth until adulthood, to allow priorities to be set and to support continuous systemic improvement.

The Strategic Plan also describes the indicators of quality that should be evident in every South Australian public school:

- achievement growth for every student;
- an absolute focus on teaching and learning over administration;
- funding that is aligned to the needs of every student, in every class;
- high quality leaders and educators; and
- policy, strategy and practice that is based on global evidence of what works.

The Department for Education and Child Development is using global expertise to develop a comprehensive measurement of these dimensions using a 'balanced scorecard' to guide a holistic and detailed assessment of school performance, taking into account its context. The scorecard will more sharply focus on school improvement planning processes to respond to student achievement, quality teaching and leadership at each school. It will also support differentiated systemic responses that better direct effort to where each school in a system is, relative to where that school could be.

Impact of measurement

All South Australian education sectors agree that it is not possible to ignore the impact of measurement and reporting on school leaders and teachers. The aim should be to make the best use of existing data collections, identify opportunities to do this collaboratively and develop new measures where appropriate. Given the financial costs and administrative burden associated with measurement, collections

should have a clear purpose in supporting school improvement, system accountability or engagement with parents and the community.

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

South Australia believes that improving outcomes for Australian students and narrowing the achievement gap for disadvantaged students begins with solid investment in the early years. However, within the scope of this review, South Australia suggests a number of areas with the potential to drive improvement across schools, systems and nationally.

Effective teaching and learning strategies

The South Australian government recognises that the quality of teaching makes a difference. In government schools, the Teaching for Effective Learning (TfEL) Framework is the required pedagogical practice for ensuring the quality of teaching and achieving sustainable improvement in student learning outcomes.

The TfEL Framework comprises four domains which encompass the importance of leaders and teachers seeing themselves as learners and continually developing their professional expertise (Domain 1 – Learning for effective teaching), as well as continually striving for excellence in their pedagogical practice with learners (Domains 2, 3 and 4: Create safe conditions for learning; Develop expert learners; Personalise and connect learning). Effective teaching and learning strategies are elaborated further within the TfEL Framework to focus teachers and leaders on improving student learning outcomes.

Another important strategy to improve student learning outcomes is to ensure that teachers use a clear and consistent approach to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting.

Collaborative practice is identified in current research as a significant feature in high achieving schools and systems. It is a required practice across schools operated by the Department for Education and Child Development in all geographical locations. The Learning Design, Assessment and Moderation Strategy is underpinned by this research and involves all teachers developing their learning design capacity through professional discourse.

When teachers engage in collaboration about learners' current progress there is a positive impact on:

- consistency of teacher judgement about the level of learners' achievement; and
- the relevance of the content, teaching strategies to use and how best to address the specific needs of learners.

Teachers collaboratively designing learning and assessment tasks which intellectually challenge and engage all learners is known to lead to higher standards of learner achievement.

Research also indicates that building learners' self-efficacy (self-expectations) has a substantial impact on their subsequent achievement and that the link between the two is reciprocal. That is, achieving genuine success has as much impact on subsequent learner self-efficacy as self-efficacy has on subsequent achievement.

An embedded culture focused on the quality of teaching and learning in the school must be evident if ongoing improvement in student learning outcomes is to be achieved.

Evidence based approaches to school improvement

Future reforms should also focus on systemic levers that underpin improvement and avoid reliance on input controls. South Australian schooling sectors support funding arrangements that allow systems and schools to respond to context specific improvement goals as the cornerstone to improvement of student outcomes.

There is a large body of evidence on the core drivers of school improvement and a National School Improvement Tool was released in 2012. However, in South Australian public schools effort is now underway to refine our understanding of which interventions are best applied at each level of school and system performance in the context of the McKinsey & Co. framework for school improvement.

This also has implications for national priority setting, indicating that while all jurisdictions should be focusing on transparent and evidence-based interventions, effort across Australia may not need to be uniform. A national framework that guides effort by all systems, without relying on prescriptive input controls, may be useful in focusing on what matters.

South Australia suggests that evidence-based improvement approaches be discussed nationally. Better targeting of improvement effort enables more efficient and effective use of funding in all schools.

Building the national evidence base

In March 2016 the Productivity Commission commenced an independent review into the evidence used by the early childhood and school education sectors. The report identifies as important: the development of research priorities; a high quality education research program; and a focus on the translation, communication and implementation of high quality evidence.

There is a significant lack of funding dedicated towards the generation of high quality education evidence and translation of it into policy and practice (when compared with other sectors such as health). Without dedicated investment, the evidence base

to support education leaders and policy makers is unlikely to meet the demands on students to engage in a changing world.

Moreover, a broad education evidence base, characterised by considered, valid and reliable measures that track progress and significant changes over time, should not sit in isolation from evidence available on health and social welfare. It should be possible for education data to be linked to health data and welfare data in a meaningful way. Although it may not be able to identify causal relationships, linked data can provide insights into educational disadvantage and make correlations between school outcomes and life outcomes.

In South Australia, the Department for Education and Child Development will establish an expert advisory panel to ensure that policy, strategy and investment actions lead to and sustain improved student outcomes over time. The advisory panel will comprise Australian and international experts and will enable decision makers to provide evidence-based direction and support to South Australia's highly devolved system of schools and preschools.

Targets and transparency

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Education Agreement (NEA) articulates current shared objective of Australian governments that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy. Common outcomes are prescribed in the National Education Agreement (supported by measurable performance indicators), including Closing the Gap targets for Aboriginal children and young people.

South Australia argues that future consideration of transparency and accountability measures should review existing frameworks, particularly those in the National Education Agreement, for how well they have driven governments' commitments to transparency and accountability.

The purpose of nationally agreed outcomes is to enhance public accountability and maintain focus on reform and improvement. South Australia contends that a small number of agreed outcomes, objectives and targets are most effective to focus reform efforts. However, broader indicators may be developed that demonstrate the health of the Australia's schools overall and provide a focus on the 'whole child' rather than a narrow range of standardised testing outcomes.

Future national reform directions should be similarly focussed and agreed on by all jurisdictions. They should build on or strengthen existing national work, unless there is a compelling case for changing course.

National institutional arrangements

Clear consideration needs to be given to where national institutional and governance arrangements are warranted. National arrangements should reflect where responsibility for education sits in our federated system.

It might be warranted to retain institutions at different levels (national / state or territory) but to examine whether arrangements (criteria, standards, frameworks) should be nationally consistent. It is more important to achieve the right balance than to implement 'one size fits all' models, although South Australia believes that developing a differentiated, segmented response to issues within schools should be addressed first.

South Australia acknowledges the positive impact of the Teacher Standards and Principal Standard in providing a framework for professional development and practice. Consideration could be given to how well these standards support teaching of the general capabilities.

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

Both the Melbourne Declaration and the National Plan for School Improvement, which South Australia agreed to implement under the National Education Reform Agreement, sought to drive high performance while also focusing on ensuring that Australian education systems increase in equity. These remain relevant aspirations. South Australia suggests that emerging areas for action should focus on both of these areas.

Below South Australia provides examples of focus areas which may assist in achieving both of these ends.

Teaching and assessment of the general capabilities

Strengthening the development of the general capabilities is critical to the national innovation and skills agenda. Further work to identify effective teaching strategies must be underpinned by sound measures and assessments of the full range of the skills covered by the curriculum is needed.

The heads of the three schooling sectors in South Australia have agreed to work collaboratively to develop a framework to foreground the capabilities in student learning from the early years until post school and ensure they are valued, tracked and evidenced in ways that are fit-for-purpose.

In the Department for Education and Child Development, these approaches will also receive support through the current STEM Strategy and the Internationalisation Strategy currently under development. The Multicultural Education and Languages Committee is also developing a statement on languages, multicultural education and the internationalisation of education.

Achieving this will also require the development of innovative pedagogical approaches and shifting long term teaching practices.

Understanding the impact of non-school factors

It is also important to have models that support the attribution of funding to outcomes, whether this is direct or indirect. For example, funding directed to the early identification and treatment of risk factors for vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts of learners can improve ongoing educational outcomes for these groups, but may not be clearly or easily quantified.

It is impossible to ignore the significant contribution of investment in early childhood development to education outcomes. A focus on greater continuity of, and enhanced engagement in, learning through early childhood pedagogy, teaching of concepts, skills and dispositions for learning and executive functioning across early childhood and the early years of school establishes the fundamentals for successful school transitions.

Since 2013, South Australia has published data on the wellbeing and engagement of middle years' students and has supplied customised data for the students at every school. There is scope to consider how national leadership in this area can improve learning.