



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

Submitter: Steiner Education Australia
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: NSW

Summary

Key measures to help ensure an excellent education which successfully enables all students 'to live well in a world worth living in':

- Review the place of NAPLAN testing, replacing with a more flexible, responsive, teacher driven /school based testing regime, based on a student's readiness to take the test. This enables greater ability of government to link into the emerging era of global thinking on education, which places prime focus on student engagement, well-being and identity instead of increased efforts for higher achievement. Less focus on NAPLAN (and use of 'big data') gives more chance of teachers giving equal **time** in the primary years to academics, arts, physical, practical activity and social-emotional learning.
- Equity is central to school improvement. To increase equity of educational outcomes in Australia: avoid early tracking of children based on academic ability; focus on inclusiveness, early intervention and preventative care at the local school level. Governments must ensure funding for qualified special needs teachers and assistants is provided.
- Divert funding from accountability procedures such as high stakes testing to professional learning and development of teachers.
- There must be more explicit mechanisms for governments to be
- accountable to teachers, students and parents for ensuring equity of educational outcomes for all and to ensure necessary resources are provided to all schools to support achievement of outcomes demanded by the system.
- Financial resourcing is also focused on providing professional development on the use of small data to drive school improvement at the local level.

- Priority is given to drawing on a wide base of educational research to inform policy. It is imperative that the degree to which alternative educational ideas, programs and institutions can be openly developed and tested is not restricted.

Main submission

The key recommendations from Steiner Education Australia (SEA) are:

1. The uncertain, volatile future for young people is qualitatively different to our own past. Within this context, we need to start a national conversation on the bigger questions of 'education for what purpose' as an urgent priority.
2. Standardised testing and narrowing of curriculum has not resulted in improved student learning outcomes. We need to review the place of NAPLAN testing, replacing with a more flexible, responsive, teacher driven /school based testing regime, based on a student's readiness to take the test.
3. Linked to point 3: Australia needs to link into the emerging era of global thinking on education, which places prime focus on student engagement, well-being and identity(OECD,2017) instead of increased efforts for higher achievement (Hargreaves&Fullan,2012).
4. Give equal **time** in the primary years to academics, arts, physical and practical activity.
5. Equity is central to school improvement(Sahlberg,2017). To increase equity of educational outcomes in Australia: avoid early tracking of children based on academic ability; focus on inclusiveness, early intervention and preventative care at the local school level. Governments must ensure funding for qualified special needs teachers and assistants is provided.
6. There has been a shift from government to governance where performance data is used as a means to govern systems and manage teachers through accountability demands which formulate strategies for education reform. The unintended consequences of this has been de-professionalisation of the teaching profession; over emphasis on teachers as being to blame for poor education outcomes; and teachers moving away from holistic approaches which include arts, drama, music integration.
7. We need a new wave of accountability where there are meaningful vehicles for teachers and schools to give an account of themselves rather than being 'held to account' (Lingard, 2017; UNESCO,2017). We need to 'cut the red tape'. There needs to be more explicit mechanisms and pressure on governments to be accountable to schools, teachers and students to ensure necessary resources are provided to all schools to support achievement of outcomes demanded by the system(Lingard,2017).

8. Divert funding from accountability procedures such as high stakes testing to professional learning and development of teachers. Teachers are thus supported in driving school improvement, the definition of which is expanded to privilege school based equity goals – ensuring students’ home backgrounds do not determine school performance(Sahlberg,2017) - as well as student well-being goals.
9. Financial resourcing is also focused on providing professional development on the use of small data to drive school improvement at the local level (Sahlberg,2017; Masters,2017). Through the responsive and collective use of small data, focussing on smart use of formative assessment, schools are empowered and accountable for evaluating practice and student ‘growth over time’ progress. To really understand what makes students learn well and under what conditions, it is small data collected and analysed at the local level which will lead to improved outcomes. Genuine critical reflection, professional dialogue and school based teacher research will do this, but it takes time, and funding needs to reflect this.
10. The hope to achieve educational excellence by a ‘what works’ paradigm, focusing on big data - with the federal government investing \$14.3m over 3 years to establish the National Education Evidence Base (NEEB) - needs to be reviewed. The fact is that there is no systemic development of research informed policy analysis which is independent from government itself in Australia(Ladwig,2016,); ‘edu-businesses’ – such as Pearsons - play too great a role in policy framing(Hogan et al.,2015); there must be sufficient funding for independent education research to be carried out ,eg, through universities; and from the perspective of alternative educational movements, such as Steiner, it is imperative that the degree to which alternative educational ideas, programs and institutions can be openly developed and tested is not restricted.

Elaboration of key points

As will be highlighted in the response below, it is now accepted from researchers, educators and commentators that the world needs a new kind of learner (OECD ,2017; Pink,2005; FYA,2017). The 21st century is asking for new qualities: a blend of professional rigour with creativity, imagination, flexible thinking that embraces complexity; emotional intelligence and a compassionate sense of what it is to be human in this increasingly digital age. This future needs story tellers, empathisers, and carers. These are the skills that can't be automated or outsourced easily. Within this landscape, the future is also asking for young people with the capacity to see a positive future which young people believe they, themselves, can create. For children heading towards this unknown future, to possess those skills enables

flexibility in options, and the ability to contribute in a meaningful way to the future society.

We believe Steiner education has something to offer this review in its conscious approach to developing young people for the future. Steiner pedagogical approaches foster deep conceptual understanding and creativity through: focus on taking time for deep engagement in and love of learning; giving equal time to academics, arts and practical life activities, as we believe that arts integration into the academic curriculum enhances student learning outcomes; development of imaginative thinking as a core focus in the primary years as a key foundation for development of a 'living thinking'; using storytelling and narrative as a cognitive tool; giving time in the early years for creative play, engagement in practical life activities, and environmental/nature/physical activities before more formal academic work which begins around 7 years of age(very similar to the Scandinavian pedagogical model); cooperative rather than competitive approach; and engendering in young people a sense of social responsibility for the future.

As Sahlberg (2017, p.26) states: 'If we are serious about children's well-being and health, then we need to change what we expect them to do in school every day'. We believe also if we are serious about preparing our children for the future as described above, then we need to radically change what we expect them to do every day. We are asking our children to do too much too soon and too fast in our schools(Sahlberg,2017). There is no time to deepen learning through sustained engagement in topics. Narrow focus on high stakes testing has obviously backfired as a strategy to improve student learning outcomes as NAPLAN results, and international PISA results flatline, Scores matter, but they are the indication not the definition of a good education. With increased time spent on practising for tests, and leaders' time working on ways to increase scores, these scores may go up and schools may show 'value-added', but are the students better educated? Are they receiving this broadly based and culturally rich experience in schools that lay the solid foundations for continued engaged, purposeful lifelong learning in an uncertain future (Ravitch,2010; OECD 2017)?

An unintended consequence of high stakes testing and powerful global measures, such as PISA, is that they have a strong impact on what we think is important in education, with the result that they end up serving as proxy measures for teacher, school or school system effectiveness. As is well documented in the research, teachers shift focus on lower order thinking skills and adjust teaching to test content (eg. Polesel et al.,2014; Au,2008; Lee et al.,2014; Ravitch,2010; Masters,2017; OECD,2017).

As Lingard (2017, p.4) states: 'Performative accountabilities create feedback loops in which the most rational and legitimate objective is to change practice in ways that

improve what is measured - leading to perverse outcomes that do not further the broader purposes and expectations of communities.'

An example is the competing tension created in the delivery of the Australian curriculum. The Melbourne Declaration (successful learners, active and informed citizens and creative and confident individuals) is a powerful aspirational statement which underpins the Australian Curriculum – and aligns well with a futures-based educational strategy. It is at odds, however, with the narrow-based focus on improving national rankings in international tests and improving NAPLAN scores. Despite efforts of principals to keep it low key and efforts by teachers to protect students from the stress involved, the reality is teachers do move away from holistic approaches (encapsulated in the Melbourne Goals) which include arts, drama and music integration, for example.

We therefore strongly advocate for a total change to the way national assessments are conducted in the interests on refocussing the agenda on learning, student growth over time and broader understandings of what constitutes 'success'.

We advocate for returning the responsibility for assessment to teachers (Wilson,2016).

One suggestion by academic Rachel Wilson, is the creation of a national question bank which relates directly to the Australian curriculum and the achievement standards. Teachers can log in and generate their own tests as they cover the curriculum - at appropriate level of difficulty. They can be printed (better in the Steiner context) or completed online. Tests can be done at random times. Marks can be entered online and directly referenced to the national standards. The teacher receives a dashboard reading. This approach can fit into the normal teaching program and, as suggested by Wilson (2016), has greater assessment validity due to removing test anxiety and associated performance factors. A similar approach is offered by Masters (2017) who advocates for a rethink of the use of NAPLAN towards a monitoring of each student's progress against challenging personal targets. Sample-based testing rather than census –based testing is another alternative.

The main point is that the tests do not have to be done by all students in Australia at one point in time, instead the tests are given when the teacher feels the student will most benefit.

The above links to the concept of accountability. We have moved from government to governance; from professional notions of accountability to performative notions of regulation and compliance (Lingard,2017) with increased levels of anxiety and well –being issues reported in many studies and reports (eg. UNESCO,2017; Lingard et al.,2017; Lee,2014; Hardy,2015; Polesel,2014). Further, there no discernible

improvement in equity of educational access. and, as mentioned, no sustained improvement in national standards.

We need to urgently consider alternative accountabilities that are enacted in schools and school systems(Lingard,2017), going beyond a narrow focus on what is measured, to provide more meaning. This alternative 'rich accountability' is multidirectional in which 'school systems, governments, and communities are also held to account for their various responsibilities to schools, teachers and students' (Lingard,2017, p.16). Components of this reverse accountability include: Building a sense of professional responsibility and trust in principals; resisting external standardised testing culture focussed on competition and comparison, which has a negative effect on teachers' work, instead utilising sensible , broad measures such as sample-based testing ; putting pressure on governments to ensure necessary resources are provided to all schools; constructing two-way school-community horizontal relations of accountability through which narratives about expectations and desired outcomes from schools can be shared (Darling-Hammond et al.,2016).

Conclusion

The proposed measures above, in response to the Gonski Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Schools, aim to rebuild teaching as a profession and teacher agency. Through a more intelligent approach to accountability, systems, schools and teachers have the agency to ensure creativity, risk-taking and time for deep learning. Equal time given for the academic, creative and practical arts ad social-emotional education will foster deep learning and enhance student well-being. It is these measures as well as a government that is truly accountable to schools for providing the means to ensure equity of educational outcomes, which will help ensure an excellent education which successfully enables all students 'to live well in a world worth living in'(Kemmis,2017).

Many of the recommendations, above have been a cornerstone of Steiner education as practiced in Australia and globally for nearly 100 years. Steiner education continues to evolve and develop through research and it is hoped that continued research, sharing and dialogue between all spheres of education in Australia on what matters most in education is encouraged by governments and genuinely helps to inform policy.

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