



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

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Summary

Education is complex and contested, and framing this review in terms of what works oversimplifies the reality and complexity of school education. The evidence of successful school system reform is that strategies must be planned over a significant period, with concerted and committed effort from all involved. Education systems in Australia are not working collaboratively, and split funding does not help. A 10-year national funding arrangement and strategic plan, with commitment from all governments, schools authorities and professional bodies would help set consistent direction. Evaluating schools based solely on national and international tests ignores the full range of functions of schools; richer more comprehensive data is needed. Stronger collaborative networks of schools and teachers should be supported to allow easier sharing of expertise and resources.

Main submission

The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools has been established to make recommendations on how school funding should be used to improve school performance and student outcomes. It focuses on practical measures that work, from Australia and around the world, to improve results for Australia's school students.

The terms of reference are certainly wide-ranging and ambitious but they are framed by certain assumptions that at the outset need to be questioned. The submission questions revolve around 'what works', around strategies that lead to large-scale improvement in student learning outcomes and school performance, and how funds should be spent to achieve this. Such questions are, frankly, naïve. Works for what desired objectives? For whom? In what circumstances? Using what measures? What evidence of effectiveness?

... education systems are inherently very complex and necessarily address disparate goals. Because no two systems face exactly the same challenges, it is very difficult to draw parallels between them or to see the wood for the trees. To add to this, school

systems are constantly changing, so what worked a few years ago might well have little relevance today. (McKinsey & Co 2010)

The issues paper highlights the complexity of school education and acknowledges the interplay of a number of factors in affecting student learning. The complex interplay of myriad factors or influences on student learning, operating at personal, family, community, class, school, sector, system, state and national levels, make it difficult to demonstrate that particular interventions such as government funding and governance arrangements have identifiable, discernible, measurable effects on student learning.

There are no shortcuts. Many naive attempts at reform have foundered on simplistic reductionist assumptions and superficial solutions, while neglecting the deeper human effort needed. Where systems have embarked on a course of successful school reform, it has taken a long time (5-10 years) and required sustained, committed, coordinated, concerted, cooperative, planned effort from all key stakeholders. Other nations that have successfully reformed their schools systems have worked on 10-20 year plans and have had bipartisan political support. The history of education reform globally shows that if these conditions are not met, the reform fails or, while possibly having short term success, ultimately dies off.

Recommendations from this Review must recognise that 'achieving educational excellence' across the whole of the Australian school system requires the concerted effort of all influential stakeholders: governments at Federal and State/Territory level, government and non-government school authorities, teacher educators and higher education institutions, schools and school leaders, teachers, communities, parents and students, including principals' associations, parent bodies, teacher unions, employer and industry representatives. And this concerted reform effort needs to be made consistently over at least a five-year period, if not more.

Education is by its nature aspirational. Clearly governments from all over the world believe that education is essential in building a better society and economy, as education is almost without exception a major priority in both developed and developing countries.

The starting point for the review should be the purposes and expectations of schooling in Australia. We need to be clear about the goals and expectations of our education systems. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians sets out two foundational goals for school education:

Goal 1:

Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2:

All young Australians become:

- A. successful learners
- B. confident and creative individuals C– active and informed citizens

It is clear that these goals are concerned not only with developing the skills, knowledge and understandings of young people to participate fully in society, but also as a crucial means of social reform to deal with social problems.

Schools and teachers face conflicting and often unrealistic demands from many stakeholders pushing for reform—business, employers, higher education, government, community and social agencies. And so there are regular calls for drug education, safe schools, citizenship education, financial literacy, water safety education, more emphasis on science and technology, employability skills, interpersonal skills, physical education and health etc.

Education’s challenges tend to be addressed by many people working hard in fragmented ways, with many ideas, technologies, techniques, etc. These are overwhelming for change-fatigued teachers. Educators need a more rigorous systematic approach to improvement through better implementation. The work of Anthony Bryk and the Carnegie Foundation suggest that one of the key foci for education systems is to foster collaboration through school and teacher networks, to encourage the systematic sharing of expertise and skills. Some work has been done in Victoria on different models of schools networks, but more systematic effort is needed. This could be a national approach whereby leaders and teachers can share ideas and resources online and organise to work together.

Excessive reliance on comparative international and national tests to judge the health of the Australian schools education system completely misses the point of the richness, complexity and social context of Australian schools and school communities. The publication of NAPLAN results on MySchool is mostly non-constructive. Detailed data is already given to parents, schools and systems for purposes of planning and improvement. Publication of these results serves no useful purpose. As well, there need to be measures to recognise other functions or purposes of schools. These could derive from parent, teacher and student surveys, or school reviews. Some of this could be published, if appropriate.

Schools are not given credit for the full range of outcomes required by the national educational goals; the comparative measures do not reflect the full raft of school outcomes; often narrow outcomes are over measured. But valid assessment of broader outcomes is important; the full range of outcomes and goals of education must guide which data is collected.

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Structural barriers to achieving sustained school reforms are the confusion in funding responsibilities between the Commonwealth and State governments and the

superficial level of cooperation. While there have been some welcome moves toward national approaches, the continued split funding systems work against true collaboration. There needs to be a commitment to national collaborative approaches amongst all the schools authorities, government and non-government. Ultimately there needs to be a central independent funding body that pools all government funds and redistributes according to agreed needs-based formulae.

Another significant barrier is the inequality of educational opportunity because of geographical and social segregation, and differences in capacity of communities to support schools through private funds. Over time this must be redressed.

A major barrier is the superficial short-term nature of reforms, often driven by political imperatives. There should be a national consensus on the directions of Australian schools, a national charter and 10-year plan which goes beyond the national goals, with bipartisan support from all levels of government and from non-government sectors. It should be executed and overseen by an independent statutory body, probably the same as the schools funding body, and it must have strong representation from teachers, principals, parents and employers. To form such a plan and body, there needs to be broad consultation with stakeholders and commitment from schools authorities and professional bodies.