



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

Submitter: Sydney Catholic Schools
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: NSW

Summary

Sydney Catholic Schools operates a system of over 150 Catholic schools in metropolitan Sydney. It is a high performing system with a record of successful provision for young people from Kindergarten to Year 12, across the spectrum of social and economic advantage and disadvantage. It has been among the pioneers in the area of school review and improvement in Australia. We are committed to ongoing improvement in the educational opportunities of our students, and like all systems, take a keen interest in making the most of the resources available to us. While we applaud the intent of this review, as will be seen from the material which follows, we are concerned that the review focus is insufficiently wide to do justice to its intent. We hope that our contribution might stimulate some further reflection in areas such as the overarching intentions we have as a nation for the education of our young people as human beings and citizens, not just parts of the economy. We would want to make a strong claim for the importance of values and attitude education in any education system. Above all we would be resistant to any further increase in the top-down controlling mechanisms of Australian education which are sapping the life and imagination out of the work of highly committed and professional teachers.

Main submission

INTRODUCTION

Sydney Catholic Schools operates a system of some 152 Catholic schools in metropolitan Sydney. It is a high performing system with a record of successful provision for young people from Kindergarten to Year 12, across the spectrum of social and economic advantage and disadvantage. It has been among the pioneers in the area of school review and improvement in Australia. We are committed to ongoing improvement in the educational opportunities of our students, and like all systems, take a keen interest in making the most of the resources available to us. While we applaud the intent of this review, as will be seen from the material which

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Drawing on its own extensive work in the area of learning and improvement, Sydney Catholic Schools has responded to each of the focus questions of the review panel. Our response is provided in the sections below. In general terms our response is critical of the narrow approach implied by the questions used by the panel, and in particular of the absence of an underpinning and explicit view of the vision of education against which judgements about efficiency and effectiveness might be considered.

Section 1: 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?

Sydney Catholic Schools believes that the issues paper is far too narrow in its scope. Employment and further education are not the only purposes of education - and may not even be the most important ones. As parents, educators and citizens, our aspirations extend to such matters as meaningful lives, physical and mental health, growth promoting families and citizenship- just to name a few.

Answering the question of what students should learn in the absence of a comprehensive and shared national vision for the education of our children could simply become a collection of disconnected ideas that will lead to an incoherent national provision. Sydney Catholic Schools, for example, has a "Statement on Authentic Learning" which provides a strong conceptual framework for its own work. This can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/SCSALSTATE>. The Melbourne Declaration of 2008 enunciated a much broader view of our aspirations for young Australians, and would be a good starting point for consideration, as we near the ten year anniversary of its publication.

Educators in Sydney Catholic Schools named, in particular, the following capabilities as foundational to preparing our students for the future:

- Resilience
- Perseverance
- Love of learning
- Positive self concept and efficacy

- Critical thinking
- Connection to community
- Emotional literacy
- Creativity
- Problem solving
- Ability to self assess
- Executive skills such as response inhibition, working memory, emotional control, task initiation, sustained attention, planning/prioritising, organisation, time management, flexibility, metacognition, goal directed persistence and stress tolerance.
- Wellbeing and positive mental health
- Fundamental motor skills
- Positive physical health

The focus in the issues paper, and in this question, on “capabilities, skills, knowledge” ignores attitudes and values. Even in a secular society these play an important role. This is a domain in which the Australian Curriculum remains relatively silent.

SCS would want to see explicit attention to the values and attitudes dimension of the growing individual. This would include such elements as:

- Moral and ethical literacy
- Tolerance , inclusiveness, acceptance
- Global, social and environmental awareness
- A value for truth
- A sense of justice
- A priority for peace and nonviolence
- A pride in citizenship
- An attitude of hope in the future
- A commitment to engage in society

How should quality and educational success be measured?

At the risk of stating the obvious, the only measure of success that is named in the issues paper is external testing. This is, of its very nature, a very narrow set of procedures which will measure only a very narrow set of outcomes. Depending on our vision for education as a nation (see above) this is unlikely to suffice as an indication of our success as educators, or our students’ success as learners.

As was the case with our commentary on the outcomes of learning, a view about what constitute appropriate measures of success will depend on both the purposes

of the measures and their intended audiences. There is a wide gulf between broad-brush measures of success used periodically for accountability (such as NAPLAN) and the fine-grained observation and tracking that teachers use to inform their plans for individual students. Both have a role to play, but we fear that the former has caused a devaluing of the latter.

These issues are treated in some detail in Sydney Catholic Schools work on Authentic Assessment which can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/SCSAASTATE>.

Specific feedback from educators in Sydney Catholic Schools appears below:

- The ultimate measure of success is the extent to which student learning needs and capacities have been addressed by the learning encounter.
- The crude use of league tables, means and band performances is a disincentive to learning, and fails to recognise both the different starting points of learners, and the different contexts in which they learn. Where standardised test scores and the like are used, more subtle measures of learning growth are needed.
- Judgements about quality should not be limited to what is easily measurable. They should address the full range of our aspirations as educators: knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- There should be a role for students' self assessment in judging success
- An appropriate place should be given to teacher professional judgement, depending on the uses to which the data is to be put.
- Students with disabilities need to be able to experience success within the curriculum.

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

How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students?

- What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes?
- What evidence is there to support taking these actions?
- What works best for whom and in what circumstances?

Protracted national debates about the ongoing funding of schools have meant that schools and systems are unable to plan for the longer term with any confidence. While this review is explicitly not directed at the funding base, without adequate funding and clarity about future funding, consideration of how funding might be used will be futile.

As was the case in the previous two items, responses to this series of questions will depend on how we understand the words effective and efficient. In colloquial terms

it seems to be seeking advice about how we get the “best bang for the buck”. This implies that we identify what we know works, and then support its implementation. There is a significant, authoritative body of educational research by people like John Hattie, Robert Marzano and Viviane Robinson that identifies teaching and leadership strategies which are effective with respect to the more “traditional” outcomes of schooling. The research base needs to be tested for its contextual validity, but it still constitutes a solid foundation for teacher and leader development. There would be merit in exploring how to make these strategies better known and more widely used. There is much less work in the affective domain, and in the broader range of outcomes signalled in earlier responses. Supporting research in how to make a difference in these areas would be a good use of funds.

In specific, Sydney Catholic Schools identifies the following possibilities for increased effectiveness:

- The constant flux in curriculum, now complicated by an Australian Curriculum which is national only in the broadest sense, places significant demands on teachers. In NSW this is exacerbated by syllabuses which have been acknowledged as overcrowded. When we add into the mix initiatives like state based literacy and numeracy continua (and now national progressions) the landscape is in a constant state of change. As a system we have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in supporting new syllabuses in recent years - not counting work at school and teacher level. More curriculum stability and less national/state duplication would be a great start to freeing up resources.
- National, state and system authorities have an endless appetite for data. Its collection and dispatch absorbs huge amounts of teacher time (eg Nationally Consistent Collection of Data about students with disabilities) which actually impacts negatively on teacher preparation and delivery.
- Leadership development is a major priority. Again, we have a national body (AITSL) and a state body (NESA) operating in the same space, with a high degree of overlap and duplication.
- Teachers’ work has been intensified as a consequence of increasingly being “available” due to factors like email and Learning Management Systems, and to increased accountability, requirements for accreditation and the like. What we know about effective professional learning communities is that they require time and space - both of which are squeezed by other agendas. It would be timely to review teachers’ work practices in Australia by comparison with those in other places to see how to deepen professionalism and expand opportunities for learning.
- There needs to be more support for teachers as they transition from the University to the classroom. This would enhance their capacity and lessen attrition due to the demands of being often thrown in at the “deep end”.

What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place to ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time?

The first thing to do will be to promote the adoption of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the higher levels. Uptake of higher levels of accreditation has been slow (in our system at least). The second thing to do would be to assist teachers to navigate their way through the resources that are already available both nationally and internationally. AITSL already has an excellent and growing resource. Systems and professional associations have developed resources. More resources are not the answer.

There are countless examples of good practice, and good practitioners in every school and system. Resourcing ways of making these accessible to colleagues more widely would be helpful. Similarly, the use of feedback in appraisal or coaching environments would help to identify and support good practice, and respond to areas where improvement is needed through the use of professional learning plans. If school leaders are to act as catalysts for educational renewal both within and beyond their own schools, they will need to be relieved of some of the administrative burden of their roles.

How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

This question is effectively an assertion that targets and standards, in and of themselves, are resulting (or can result) in improvement, or are worthy of particular attention. On the evidence of the effects of the last ten years of growth in accountabilities (eg stalled growth in NAPLAN), there is little to justify this assertion. We would want to distinguish between appropriately implemented and understood standards (which can lift performance) and targets, which can often seem to be arbitrary, and more a tool of political expediency than a real sense that they will improve learning.

Moreover, the question seems to assume that the answer to improvement lies in ever tighter controls on schools and teachers. The emphasis on targets and testing, and the investment in time required to achieve these, may in fact draw teachers away from teaching. Countries like Finland place far greater reliance on the teacher's judgement and have far fewer external accountabilities and still outperform us. There are surely lessons here.

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing? - What are they and how could they be further developed?

The strong reaction in this category reflected a number of our earlier comments. If teachers had more time and space in their work to actually focus on students and learning (as opposed to accountabilities) it would make a significant difference. We continue to be challenged by ways of engaging with families and community. Further investigation of success strategies in this domain would be helpful. Developing teachers' skills in data use for instructional decisions should be a priority. There is an emerging and growing trend towards the use of blended and virtual provision. We suspect that the capacities of the technology are ahead of schools' capacities to use it skilfully. The ways in which insights from neuroscience can be applied in schools need explicit research and evaluation. Behavioural programs such as SPBL (School Wide Positive Behaviours for Learning) are essential to student learning. Children will not learn and succeed if behaviour is poor and learning time is compromised.

Section 3: Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

As has already been stated, the work of teachers has become increasingly intensified and bureaucratized. This not only soaks up instructional time, it saps instructional imagination and passion. Without the enthusiasm and skill of teachers, no structural changes can succeed. At a recent cross sectoral, statewide symposium in NSW, the single biggest plea from the educators present was to let teachers get on with teaching.

Some examples of this include the continual, politically motivated changes to education eg; literacy/numeracy continua to learning progressions, phonics testing etc.

This helps to explain why teachers reach for the pre-packaged type of teaching strategy. This type of resource can be dangerous. Not only do they deskill teachers, but student learning is restricted by highly controlled teaching practice that does not allow teachers to personalise learning for their students.

As a general observation, the almost exponential growth in complex social and emotional needs with which schools are being expected to deal (in the face of retreating health and welfare sectors) is a major obstacle to learning. It is not the primary function of schools to deal with these issues. The health and welfare sectors need to be charged with a far greater responsibility here.

What good educators have always done is make sense of the environment they are working in. We learn from each other. We need to find ways to continue to build a culture of learning not compliance. We need educators to help learners make sense of the world they are living in. Educators do this by continuing to learn themselves and by collaborating with others.

We really need to unleash teacher energy and creativity - not drive improvement from the top down alone. One way of doing this would be to provide seeding grants that will facilitate school and system leaders to pilot and trial projects that are responsive to the needs of their own contexts; that can be implemented incrementally and that, if useful and sensible, will gain traction without being imposed.

A major challenge for teachers is managing the diversity of student needs within the school context and effectively implementing a variety of teaching and learning programs that accommodate individual needs. This is where ongoing professional development and collaborating with colleagues is essential.