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

Submitter: The Association of Independent Schools of NSW
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: NSW

Summary

It is critical that any reform which aims to drive improvement in schools is able to accommodate the diverse range of contexts in schools. Schools must be empowered to identify the needs of their communities and develop strategies for improvement which meet those needs.

The AISNSW recommends that the Australian Government focus on a school improvement strategy which is driven at a local level by schools and their communities. This strategy would build on the existing processes in place at some schools, and support schools with emergent processes.

Schools would be engaged in an ongoing process, informed by data, of building student capacity in the range of skills and attributes that they will require to succeed in the future. This will involve engagement with their parent community, investment in teacher capacity to support effective teaching for learning, and a contextualised understanding of what additional support students will need to succeed. While most schools are engaged in this process to some extent, a focus on continuous improvement is critical.

School improvement is driven by best practice rather than compliance. External accountability requirements should support schools in delivering better outcomes for students. This Review provides an opportunity, not for the creation of additional accountability requirements, but to embed authentic school improvement practices.

Main submission

Introduction

The AISNSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools.

The AISNSW recommends that the Australian Government consider the introduction of a school improvement strategy which is driven by school communities. Schools should be engaged in an ongoing process, informed by data, of building student

capacity in the range of skills and attributes that they will require to succeed in the future. This will involve engagement with their parent community, investment in teacher capacity to support effective teaching for learning, and a contextualised understanding of what additional support students will need to succeed.

Independent schools in NSW are diverse: they are located across the State, they vary in ethos and values, and they service vastly different communities. Many independent schools are small with almost half enrolling fewer than 200 students, and approximately one-third enrolling fewer than 100 students. Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education, while others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

The student body served by independent schools is diverse and growing, with 8% more students enrolled in independent schools in 2016 than there were in 2012. Emergent data from the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data for Students with Disability indicates that approximately 17.1% of independent school students have disability, with most of these supported within quality differentiated teaching practice. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolling in independent schools in New South Wales is increasing, with a rate of 42% growth over the five years from 2012 to 2016.

It is important for schools to consider how and where they can improve to best meet the needs of the students they serve, and it is reasonable for the Australian community to expect that schools should be striving to improve student outcomes and support the diversity of students prepare for the future. Whole school improvement processes, including a focus on teacher capacity, are key drivers in delivering improvements to student outcomes.

The AISNSW also acknowledges that a significant reform agenda has been undertaken in recent years, which has contributed substantially to the current educational landscape. The outcomes of this Review rest on the foundations of these earlier reforms at a National and State level which include:

- the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and development of high-quality NSW Syllabuses by the NSW Education Standards Authority;
- the development of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals;
- the introduction of teacher accreditation processes;
- stronger accountability and visibility of student performance through the National Assessment Program; and
- the introduction of sector-blind needs-based funding.

This context of recent and major reforms has produced a range of policy levers which can be used to support a high-quality schooling system, where clearly articulated standards around learning, teacher quality and school quality are complemented by an improvement mindset in many schools. It is critical that further reforms, including around transparency and accountability, empower schools to engage with their own context—the needs and aspirations of their school communities, their ethos and values, and the resources they have available.—rather than simply impose additional accountability processes.

Research confirms that quality teaching practice is a major contributor to improved outcomes achieved by students, particularly disadvantaged students. The importance of quality teaching has been highlighted in numerous reports, including the Review of Funding for Schooling. There is a sound evidence base which has developed to understand the importance of quality teaching, and articulate what such practice might look like. Supporting teachers to deliver quality practice will be key to achieving ongoing improvements in student outcomes, however those outcomes might be defined. Other school practices which have been shown to deliver improvements in student outcomes include the following behaviours:

- use data and evidence in the context of the school's own community to inform approaches and strategies for raising achievement;

- focus on the capabilities of teachers, cultivate teacher professionalism, make provision for teachers to have adequate time for preparation, planning, assessment and collaboration with colleagues;

- create a school climate that is positive, orderly and supportive, that values diversity and achievement;

- attend to the early development of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills in young children, identify individual learning needs early and provide appropriate support;

- create a school environment where high expectations are set for all students;

- develop a broad program of high quality extra-curricular activities and encourage student involvement;

- focus on student wellbeing, foster a positive schooling experience based on values and character strengths such as motivation, resilience, curiosity, optimism and self-control; and

- value and promote parental involvement in the school.

None of these practices can be replicated by the introduction of a convoluted and inefficient compliance approach to school improvement. They require contextualisation, whole-school engagement, quality teaching practices,

individualised learning and a clear understanding of the goals and needs of the school community. They also require adequate time on the part of both principals and teachers, time which may currently be spent on compliance related activities.

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

A successful school is a place where students are able to learn and develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to succeed. Successful schools are engaged in an ongoing improvement process, informed by data. They build the capacity of teachers, and are committed to ongoing improvements in content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and teaching practices.

Students will need to leave school with a range of skills and attributes in order to successfully navigate the world they encounter. They will need to be prepared to engage in employment, further training or higher education. They will need not only literacy and numeracy skills, but what have been described as 21st Century skills, including collaboration, critical thinking, creativity and communication.

The NSW Syllabuses, based on the Australian Curriculum, articulate what students should have the opportunity to learn during schooling.

Students, families and school communities will have expectations of what defines success for students beyond the material contained in the syllabuses. These expectations are consistent with the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals, which articulate the objective that all young Australians will become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Schools play an important role in generating social cohesion, and the development of active and informed citizens is therefore a key sign of success for schools, but one which is not easily measured.

Beyond the diversity of ways educational success for students can be understood, evidence also shows that physical, social and emotional wellbeing of students underpin academic achievements and success in life.

Schools must be empowered to understand the needs of their communities and develop strategies for improvement which meet those needs. It is critical that any reform which aims to drive improvement in schools is able to accommodate the diverse range of contexts in schools.

Depending on the school community, schools may focus on leadership, resilience, religious knowledge and understanding, building a service mindset, creativity or lateral thinking. Vocational Education and Training courses play a role in supporting students develop work ready competencies while at school.

While definitions of educational success for students are varied, most available measures focus on academic achievement, often defined in a limited way. While measures such as NAPLAN, attendance data, transition rates or marks from leaving exams like the HSC may produce nationally consistent data, they inevitably only capture a small portion of what students are learning at school. Such measures do not have the capacity to factor in the differing starting points of individuals, or to capture the often complex range of capabilities, skills and knowledge that schools are working to deliver.

Measures of student outcomes are an important part of the school improvement process, but the best are contextualised and take a holistic approach to understanding student outcomes.

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

New schools will have very different needs from very established schools; schools which have engaged with school improvement will need different support to those schools which are just starting to formalise their improvement processes. The different values of different school communities will shape priorities.

While there is a large body of work which attempts to unpack and understand drivers of success or improvement in schools at a systemic level, the contextual variation of schools and school communities means that this work needs to be tailored for implementation.

Differences such as leadership style, school ethos, teacher capacity and student cohort are major variables which can impact on whether a program or process is successful, even where it has been successfully used elsewhere. Schools leaders and teachers need to be empowered to understand what works in their context and how to effectively adapt practices which have been developed elsewhere for their own use. The leadership of principals is essential in creating an environment within schools that fosters the use of evidence-based practices, and understanding and articulating the needs and aspirations of the school community they serve.

A range of mechanisms are already in place to share professional practice. These include professional clearinghouses and networks, and resources such as AITSL's Illustrations of Practice. The AISNSW has facilitated a number of opportunities for researchers and educators to come together to share research findings and learnings, the most recent being the Research Symposium 2017: Bridging the Research to Practice Gap. As well as providing a forum for schools to share their research, the Research Symposiums also play a role in educating school leaders about research inquiry.

Not all schools have the same capacity to undertake and share original research, but there is a wealth of practice within schools relating to strategies of improvement which warrant sharing.

There have been many projects in recent years which have attempted to deliver improvements across a range of areas, from teacher quality to literacy and numeracy. The most successful of these projects have identified evidence based elements which can be implemented in a sufficiently flexible response to allow for the variations which exist between schools, including the ability for schools to work towards identified needs. Specific strategies or programs which are imposed on schools from above do not always work for all schools, particularly where such strategies or programs are not suited to a school's context or community.

Just as school improvement processes work best when they are driven, contextualised, and owned by the school community, these communities are also best placed to consider the priorities and standards which they will work towards.

This is not to say that measures of progress at a jurisdictional or national level aren't appropriate. There is a place to use, for example, NAPLAN results at a state and territory or national level to understand how the education system is operating regarding literacy and numeracy skills. At a school level, assessment on literacy and numeracy to inform learning should be the focus.

There are a range of approaches which can be used by schools to understand their progress over time. These approaches will have a range of features, likely including a range of measures, availability over time, context-specificity, and drawing on the sources of information available to the school.

The development of non-cognitive skills and attributes are an important part of schooling, and are of high priority to many independent schools. Some schools will focus on improving particular skills or areas of the curriculum identified as a priority by their community.

Some schools would benefit from guidance around how to develop a school improvement process that is suited to their context, and this may be an area that would benefit from additional attention.

The AISNSW is currently developing a program which partners with schools to support school improvement in their context. This program is evidence based, and is responsive to the strengths and needs of each school as the process of reviewing, refining or developing school improvement strategies is undertaken.

Importantly, this program involves a cyclical process which includes identifying strategic priorities, undertaking professional learning consistent with these priorities, and evaluating and reviewing progress.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

A major barrier to the successful implementation of improvement processes would be a convoluted and inefficient compliance regime. Compliance with accountability requirements is not the same the same as engaging in authentic school improvement. School improvement should be driven by the use of best practice, contextualised to and owned by school communities.

Schools are subject to oversight from a range of places. First and foremost, schools are accountable to the families and students they serve. Both Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments have their own reporting and accountability requirements in place, both for recurrent funding and then also for any additional programs that schools are involved in. Independent schools also have to meet a vast range of reporting requirements in the operation of their daily business, and as not-for-profit entities schools are also accountable to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission. The NSW Education Standards Authority determines the registration and accreditation of NSW independent schools, and so schools are also accountable to NESA across a range of areas.

The Review Panel is urged to consider the numerous processes that are already in place to deliver and measure school quality and educational success. Rather than focusing on the introduction of additional measures which may duplicate existing processes without providing additional assurances, this Review could provide an opportunity for the Australian Government to consider the benefits of empowering schools to implement a school improvement process which is relevant and authentic to their context.

While it is critical for Governments to have assurances that schools are providing education of a reasonable standard and quality, it is important that schools which are already offering high-quality schooling are able to extend their practice and offerings, pushing the forefront of research and innovation.

All schools need to provide quality education, but the need to meet compliance requirements should not be preventing high-performing schools from doing more.

Funding and regulatory requirements that offer schools space to extend practice will contribute to the development of a dynamic evidence-base. An evidence-base which reflects the varied contexts of schools, which is constantly developed, and which allows new ideas to be tested will contribute to ongoing improvements to schooling in Australia.

In order to achieve this, the current regulatory environment must be examined. The time of principals, school leaders, and teachers is most valuably spent on improving outcomes for students. The existing range of accountability requirements are administratively burdensome for both teaching and leadership staff. Future

accountability requirements should be designed to support schools to provide high quality education, leading to improvements in student outcomes.