



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

Submitter: The Excellence Centre
Submitting as a: Academic person or institution
State: NSW

Summary

1. We need to own that education is not 'value neutral' (as per the work of Professor Brian Hill)
2. Therefore, teachers need to be trained into an explicit awareness of beliefs and values within education, so that they can have a more certain understanding of character - and for them to then learn how to better engage students with the question of what will they do with what they learn about. This will improve engagement within the learning process, and thus outcomes (c.f. the Grattan Institute 2017 report)
3. We should review the current English model of training teachers more in schools, with Master Teachers supported by contracted tertiary providers, to enable applied good practice to be central to teacher training.

Main submission

- What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?
 - The general goals of Australian education (e.g. from the Melbourne declaration) seem to be still generally apt. However, we believe that there needs to be a re-dressing of balance towards a focus on character, as well as knowledge and skills (e.g. Charles Fadel et al 2015, who define the character domain as “how we behave and engage in the world” p. 67). Furthermore, we believe that the basis of character education for students should be more in line with the recommendations made in the Review of the Australian Curriculum by Donnelly and Wiltshire (2014) – for example, that students have more exposure to “essential knowledge [through] direct instruction” (p. 5) and the “imbalance in the Australian curriculum” that means that students are not taught sufficiently about the “impact of Western

civilisation and Judeo-Christianity on Australia's development, institutions and broader society and culture." (p.5) Part of this impact has been a strong vision of hope and purpose as human beings, and we see that discussion of such deeper issues is rarely addressed in Australian curriculum. In line with the emphasis on character, we suggest that this will help promote more resilience and wellbeing in students, and self-harm prevention.

- How should school quality and educational success be measured?
 - To quote Professor Emeritus Brian Hill, as teachers we test for competency, but teach for commitment – but the latter cannot happen without accepting that education is not neutral, and we need an affirmation of character values that teachers can invite students to consider as they teach the requisite knowledge and skills. That is, in State run or Independent schools, teachers should be free to declare their values in an invitational mode, rather than pretend that they or their subject is 'value-neutral'. This would enable students to more openly and fairly assess the basis of their character commitments.
 - What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions? And, what works best for whom and in what circumstances?
 - (a) we note the well-established funding gap for learning support in Independent schools compared to State schools; (b) in line with the recommendation for a more explicit basis for character being part of student learning, we believe that teacher training must therefore re-introduce the character of the teacher more explicitly, as part of the teaching training process; (c) and for this to be done by increasing the amount of training that is completed within schools with Master Teachers (as per the current English model); (d) that we reconsider the use of volunteers within schools given the aging, and therefore multi-experienced and available population in Australia. For example, hospitals make consistently valuable use of volunteers, so why not schools? There could be funding to train volunteer coordinators and to support infra-structures for volunteers; and (e) that we pay more attention to students' transition from school into further education and the workforce through funding for staff to assist in Year 13 transition programs.

- 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?
 - As per the current English example, having stronger cluster school groups (and there needs to be clearer pathways for schools in all sectors to establish clusters) adopting struggling schools, as determined by the external review processes. An example in NSW is how NESAs are analysing schools in terms of 'risk' and therefore, the level of support and review that is needed to assist with improvement.
- 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?
 - As above re teacher-training being more school based, and focussed on identifying Master Teachers training student teachers, with support from the Tertiary Sector: this would require a review of teacher-training that brings it back to a much stronger and clearer focus on good practice in the classroom. Schools (starting with some pilots within clusters, or large enough to be independently engaged with the training process) would need funding to develop the process, and tertiary institutions contracted to meet the needs of the trainee teacher, through the training schools. This would also suggest some shift in funding from the tertiary institutions to the schools, in this area of teacher training.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

- If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?
 - There is a gap in between many tertiary-based teacher-training programs and what is needed for strong teaching practice in beginning teachers. Teacher-training academic theory is often too removed in how it is conceptualised and taught, compared to what is demonstrable in successful schools. Accepting at least some pilots in this area may need negotiation with those who have existing structural interests in teacher-training, both within the existing tertiary institutions, and in some education unions. Similarly, weaker schools would need clear processes in learning how to accept help from a stronger cluster of schools.