



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

Submitter: The Smith Family
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: NSW

Summary

Young people need a more diverse set of skills and capabilities than are currently taught and measured in Australian schools. Achievement in core academic areas needs to be blended with a greater focus on non-cognitive skills, deeper integration of STEM and increased exposure to vocational and industry-based learning.

Measures of success should reflect students' educational journey over time and track improvements in knowledge, skills, personal development and work-readiness.

A national evidence and outcomes infrastructure is critical to implementing initiatives that positively impact student outcomes. A Unique Student Identifier is foundational for understanding the impact of schooling over time on student outcomes.

Parental engagement is critical for children's learning, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It has not been sufficiently leveraged in Australian educational policies. What works should be a priority for the national evidence infrastructure, as should:

- Embedding parent engagement in schools and systems' culture and practices.
- Building educators' capacity to engage families as learning partners.
- Defining the key components of effective parent engagement and implementing a tool for measuring it.

International evidence shows schools can act as hubs of community engagement to facilitate student and family support services that enhance learning, particularly for disadvantaged students. A review of lessons in this space would inform future directions, ensuring more effective and efficient use of resources to maximise student outcomes.

A greater focus on implementing intervention strategies early in children's development and across the school years is needed, given it is the most efficient way of improving disadvantaged students' educational outcomes.

Post-school and preparing for it needs to be re-conceptualised. We need an integrated model of best-practice career development woven into all aspects of school learning. The VET sector needs a systematic rethink, given quality VET integrated within the education system contributes to higher school completion and lower youth unemployment rates.

Main submission

1. Educational success

Young people need a more diverse set of skills and capabilities than are currently taught and measured in Australian schools. Achievement in core academic areas needs to be blended with a greater focus on non-cognitive skills, deeper integration of STEM and increased exposure to vocational and industry based learning experiences. Key skills, such as critical thinking, innovation and resilience are important for preparing young people for post-school.

Measures of success should reflect a student's educational journey over time, rather than a snapshot in time. Measures should track improvements in knowledge, skills, personal development and work-readiness of all students during their schooling. While the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians established the acquisition of skills and capabilities, such as critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability as core learning outcomes, there is currently no mechanism to measure their achievement. Only a small number of measures of educational achievement are captured nationally. These should be broadened to give a fuller picture of progress in the range of areas needed for life post-school.

Key components of improving student performance are:

- Ensuring all schools are teaching these capabilities.
- There are reliable measures to track outcomes in them over time.

2. Areas for improvement

National educational evidence and outcomes infrastructure

A serious gap in Australia is the production and dissemination of quality accessible information on what works, for whom, under what circumstances, to improve educational outcomes.

There is no systemic way of sharing education evaluation and research efforts. Other policy areas have developed "Clearinghouses" for sharing knowledge and good practice and for accrediting evidence based programs (eg Commonwealth's Communities for Children program). This is absent nationally in education, despite

contributions from organisations such as NSW's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

The lack of national educational evidence and outcomes infrastructure results in significant inefficiencies and the reduced likelihood of effective scalable initiatives being developed and implemented across Australia.

A national educational evidence infrastructure should include:

- Access to an evidence repository on what improves educational outcomes, for whom and under what circumstances.
- Access to tools and approaches that help schools assess needs, identify priorities, select and implement initiatives and track progress over time.
- Undertaking or commissioning evaluations to add to the evidence, including school or system level solutions, (both "in" and "outside of school") that improve outcomes and facilitate more efficient resource use.

The Grattan Institute's contribution in this area is useful, identifying three levels of focus - school, regional and central - to select, share and implement good practice.

Unique Student Identifiers (USI)

Unique student identifiers (USI) are foundational to understanding the impact over time of schooling on student development. The Smith Family's longitudinal data analysis of 38,000 students on its Learning for Life scholarship program, shows the contribution of USIs to informing program refinements, targeting resources and improving students' educational outcomes.

Australian governments endorsed the establishment of a USI in 2009, but there has been limited progress towards this goal. The Productivity Commission noted the benefits:

A nationally consistent system of USIs would offer significant benefits to schools, teachers and families as well as supporting data linkage for education research purposes... (it) would enable tracking of individual student outcomes over time, across jurisdictions and between government and non-government schools. Having access to students' historical academic and administrative records would make it easier and more efficient for schools and teachers to prepare programs and strategies that support students' individual needs. For researchers, USI would provide a straightforward way of accessing longitudinal data on students' outcomes and other personal information (eg disability), which can form an essential 'backbone' of data for conducting evaluations of the impact of specific programs and interventions.

Given the level of mobility, particularly amongst disadvantaged students and its impact on educational outcomes, the value of a USI would be enhanced if applied

across early childhood, schooling and tertiary systems. The power and value of such a longitudinal database for policy, practice and investment decisions, and monitoring Australia's educational progress, cannot be over-estimated.

Data on particular students

Data on particular groups of students' educational and post-school engagement outcomes, (eg those from low SES), is important in improving Australia's educational outcomes, given at an aggregate level some groups have poorer educational and employment outcomes than their peers.

Outcomes data is often not available for key groups on a consistent national basis. This is highly problematic for public policy development.

The former COAG Reform Council published annual reports on national educational outcomes by a range of student characteristics. The quality of these reports ensured their usefulness for accountability and community understanding. The Mitchell Institute's report *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015*, provides outcomes data by SES decile, giving a more nuanced understanding of how young Australians are performing. Such data should be regularly made available through a body such as the "Clearinghouse" (proposed above).

Parent Engagement

Research over 40 years highlights the critical role of parental engagement in children's learning, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental engagement is a bigger predictor of educational outcomes than family socioeconomic background. Students with engaged parents, no matter their income or background, are more likely to graduate from school and go on to higher education.

Parental engagement primarily influences children's orientation to learning, including motivation, engagement and confidence. Parents influence children's beliefs about the importance of education and whether hard work can influence academic progress. Parents influence children's acquisition of early reading and maths skills, problem-solving skills, development as an independent learner, and ability to link school-learning to the everyday.

Parental engagement involves family-led learning and family-school partnerships. Family-led learning involves families working together to create a home environment of learning. This is supported by family-school partnerships, built around positive parent-teacher relationships focussing on mutual communication and support. These relationships enhance family-led learning and improve children's outcomes.

Parent engagement and disadvantaged young people

Research and the experience of The Smith Family shows the educational and employment aspirations of disadvantaged young people and their parents are often high. Knowing how to navigate pathways to their goals and understanding what it takes to progress in education and attain a desired career, is however, often limited. Understanding educational and employment possibilities is difficult when families have little experience of higher education or employment.

Many parents engage in informal learning with their children through everyday activities. However, educators don't always value these activities and many parents don't recognise them as family-led learning. Validation and encouragement of these activities by schools would enhance parental confidence, improve parent-teacher relationships and increase family-led learning.

A significant barrier to the engagement of Aboriginal parents can be the cultural disconnect between parents and teachers. Many teachers lack the skills and confidence to understand the different perspectives on learning of Aboriginal families. This prevents parents from feeling included in the school community, reducing their involvement in their children's education.

Supporting parent engagement

Parent engagement is a tool to help close the achievement gap between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, it has not been sufficiently leveraged in Australian educational policies. Many schools do not yet possess the capacity or means to implement parental engagement strategies in a systematic way and what works at the local/practical level is not sufficiently clear. Given strong evidence of the relationship between parent engagement and improved educational outcomes, it warrants significant national effort.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is leading important national work regarding parental engagement. This should continue as a high priority. What is required includes:

- Institutional reforms highlighting an obligation on schools, states/territories to embed parent engagement in their culture and practices.
- Building the capacity of school leaders and educators to engage as learning partners with families, through initial teacher training and professional development across educators' careers.
- Defining the key components of effective parent engagement within a national policy framework and implementing a tool for measuring it within school communities to track progress over time.
- Making parent engagement a priority research and practice area for the national "clearinghouse".

Community engagement

Research shows success in school is driven by multiple academic and non-academic factors and is more likely when young people's wellbeing across multiple domains is consistently met. Given the complex factors that influence educational and employment outcomes, schools alone cannot create the optimal conditions for learning, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Shared responsibility and cross-sectoral and cross-institutional efforts are required to address challenges within the schooling system. Community engagement involves mutually reinforcing relationships between schools, business, philanthropy, the community, higher education and all tiers of government working to a common goal of student success.

Community engagement mobilises and coordinates the range of resources needed to create the conditions for student learning. At its best, it is not another program, but rather a new way of approaching school education.

Community engagement is particularly important for students at greater risk of disengagement and for improving the preparedness of school leavers to succeed post-school. Community engagement helps show students the value of learning, situating it within the contexts and communities where knowledge is applied. Young people's knowledge and understanding of the labour market, working life and career planning is enhanced when they have the opportunity to develop networks with potential employers. Young adults who can recall four or more career related activities while at school are five times less likely to be not in employment, education and training (NEET) and earn, on average, 16% more than peers who recalled no such activities.

A range of nations and jurisdictions have implemented integrated community-school models to improve educational outcomes of young people. They include Harlem Children's Zone, Community Schools and Full Service Extended Schools. These models see community based organisations building a bridge between schools and their families. The advantages of these models over traditional schools include:

- Opportunity to garner additional resources for schools and reduce demands on school staff.
- Provision of learning opportunities that develop academic and non-academic competencies.
- Offering young people, their families and community members opportunities to build social, economic and cultural capital.

Schools have the potential to act as hubs of community engagement to enhance student learning. However effective community engagement doesn't just happen. Ensuring community engagement is resourced, prioritised and coordinated

appropriately to maximise student outcomes is critical. This includes how to harness and use resources from a range of sectors and organisations in ways that efficiently and effectively improve student outcomes.

International evidence suggests community engagement improves student learning, however Australian evidence is fairly preliminary, as many initiatives have not been evaluated against improved student outcomes. A review of lessons in this space would inform future directions, ensure more effective use of resources and maximise the likelihood of such engagement contributing to improved student outcomes. This should be a priority for the national “clearinghouse”.

Early intervention to maximise outcomes and prevent disengagement

There is strong evidence showing the path towards educational disengagement begins early, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There has been insufficient emphasis on the learnings from Professor James Heckman’s work showing that balanced long-term support for disadvantaged children, beginning in the early years and continuing through school, produces the best educational and post-school outcomes. Such an approach is also cost-efficient.

It is critical more attention is given to implementing intervention strategies early in a child’s development and then consolidated across the school years through the implementation of age appropriate support measures. This is the basis of The Smith Family’s Learning for Life program, which is achieving strong school and post-school outcomes with many highly disadvantaged students. Maximising the benefit of these types of interventions is likely to require greater integration and coordination across other sectors (eg community services, health) which influence educational outcomes.

Post school outcomes

Children start to rule out post-school options at an early age because of the unconscious influences of parents, friends and the stereotyping of occupations. Once limits are set, individuals rarely consider broader alternatives. Earlier interventions within the primary school setting can change perceptions about the world of work and the range of opportunities, building foundations for positive future transitions.

While some schools are beginning to support career development in the primary years, such initiatives are driven on a local level and yet to be integrated within the wider curriculum. A key aspect is to ensure young people are fully informed about the pathways that best match their passions. Education policy has not adjusted enough to the recognition that students work best when their interests are used as a motivator to learn. There is a need to apply this to learning throughout the system.

Once a foundation of career development has been established, learnings need to be sustained and built on. There is a strong relationship between student participation

in career development activities, including direct exposure to the working world, and positive attitudes towards schooling.

There is strong evidence of the value of students having access to high quality career advice while they are forming their post school plans. Unfortunately, current approaches within schools are highly inconsistent and often ad hoc. While good practice examples exist, there is no consistent approach. We need to move towards an integrated model of best-practice, woven into all aspects of school learning, including individual support, parental involvement and partnerships with community organisations to support the diverse needs and aspirations of young people.

Australia needs to re-conceptualise post-school and preparation for it. The current approach is largely premised on a supposition of linear transitions from schooling to post-school qualifications to the full-time labour market.

There has also been an undervaluing (including systemic differences in funding support) and under-utilisation of the VET sector, including its role in keeping students engaged in school. Overseas evidence shows a high quality VET sector fully integrated within the education system contributes to higher school completion rates and lower youth unemployment rates. For this to be replicated in Australia requires a process of modernisation. We align with the BCA's call for a systematic rethink of how we design our tertiary system to best deliver to the majority.