INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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About ISCA

ISCA is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISCA represents a sector with 1,104 schools and 594,200 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISCA's major role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors.

Many Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include the Independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas, special schools for students with disability and boarding schools to educate children from rural and remote areas. There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that seek to practise an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Rudolf Steiner or Montessori schools. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

About this submission

ISCA prepared this submission in response to the Australian Government's Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools. The submission responds to the Terms of Reference, Review Themes and Submission Questions as identified in the Review's Issue Paper.

Further information about the Australian Government's Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools can be found at https://www.education.gov.au/review-achieve-educational-excellence-australian-schools.

Summary of key points

- Australian students need to develop the capabilities, skills and knowledge to engage successfully in all facets of their life.

- Quality and success may look very different in different contexts; there is no one size fits all measure. Success is not just about academic achievement, it may manifest in a variety of ways.

- Non-cognitive attributes and qualities, extra-curricular activities, and parental engagement are important components of strong student outcomes.

- Investment that supports teacher and principal capability, fosters a quality curriculum, sets ambitious standards and leaves schools free to adapt their program and priorities to respond professionally to the needs of their school community, within a framework of high level accountabilities, is most likely to lead to better performance system-wide.

- Top down recommendations of specific strategies or programs do not work for all schools. Local decisions can focus on the specific needs of students and through evidence-based research identify how to meet their students' requirements.

- Schools, school leaders and teachers need to allocate time and resources to research, trial and share evidence-based practices that are relevant to the school's needs and context. Teachers require greater awareness of how data-use practices can expand students' opportunities to learn and how misinformed use of data can limit opportunities.

- Autonomy provides Independent schools with the flexibility to determine where resources are best utilised for their student community.

- Strong collaborative networks across schools provide opportunities to engage in professional discussions around what strategies and practices are having a positive impact on student outcomes.

- Continuous improvement is preferable to the search for a magic bullet.

- Long-term bipartisan political agreement will enable the development of education policy with a common, focused commitment to action to be developed and implemented.

What does 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?

Barber (2015) has stated, "It is important that at school students learn the knowledge, master the skills and develop the attitudes that will enable them to succeed in the 21st Century. But we should not think of school as being solely about preparation for the future but also about building a community of work and learning, a productive place where today matters because every day matters."

Each student needs to develop the capabilities, skills and knowledge to engage successfully in all facets of their life, both individually and in relation to others. Their skills and capabilities need to be individual for personal development including in order to participate in economic growth (OECD 2017) and also civic in order to contribute as active citizens (Ghazarian et al 2017). These attributes need to be adaptable and transferrable across a range of educational, social, geographical, and professional contexts.

Accordingly, the Australian Curriculum must be flexible and adaptable to the needs of learners and their contexts, to be relevant in their pursuit of fulfilment as learners now and in the future.

The curriculum needs to emphasise the importance of foundation literacy and numeracy skills as the building blocks for all further learning. These skills are the basis for students to develop capabilities for deep, reflective learning, collaborating with others and sharing ideas, and looking beyond operating in explicit traditional subject areas. The focus of Australian schools, whether in curricula, extra-curricular or beyond should reflect, promote, and enable these aspirations.

In addition, evidence about the importance of developing attributes and qualities beyond the purely academic comes not only from education research but from other fields such as neuroscience, psychology and economics. The evidence from this research consistently shows that the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of students underpins academic achievement and success in life - confident, resilient children with a capacity for emotional intelligence perform better academically and are well placed to develop responsible and satisfying lives.

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

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Quality and success may look very different for different cohorts of students in different contexts; there is no one-size-fits-all measure. Success is not just about academic achievement, it may manifest in the wellbeing of students, the active participation in voluntary roles and responsibilities, the ability to demonstrate interests and passions and develop healthy relationships. The temptation to measure success simply based on a narrow point in time snapshot should be avoided.

Research findings are limited by what is measurable. School quality is often measured by student results in national and international tests and end-of-school grades. While it is important to have such measures of academic achievement, each of them has been designed with a particular purpose and therefore gives only a partial, incomplete picture of the quality of schooling. The goals of schooling are broad, involving the education of the whole person, yet most of the measures available and used in research studies are confined to academic achievement, and often a limited definition of academic achievement.

The value of test results, such as NAPLAN, as a measure of school quality is limited by their focus on discrete narrow skills and minimum standards. While literacy and numeracy are essential foundational skills, they are not wholly sufficient for individuals to succeed in life, and while the achievement of minimum standards is an essential component of quality, it is only a part of the whole.

Another factor in interpreting the research evidence is the complex and amorphous nature of the concept of school quality, consistent with a broad view of the goals of schooling which encompass both academic and non-academic outcomes. Robinson (2015) provides a useful approach to understanding the concept of quality by breaking it down into different dimensions reflecting four basic purposes of education.

- Economic: education should enable students to become economically responsible and independent.

- Cultural: education should enable students to understand and appreciate their own cultures and to respect the diversity of others.

- Social: education should enable young people to become active and compassionate citizens.

- Personal: education should enable young people to engage with the world within them as well as the world around them.

On this basis, success is clearly contextual and multifaceted. Measures of educational success and school quality tends to focus on student growth and progress.

> Success is about preparation of 'well-rounded' students who are confident and aspire to be successful in whatever they do. It should be measured by how well schools prepare students for participating in society, in their day-to-day living, their health and wellbeing, and their ability to adapt and function in new situations.

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?

Independent schools provide for students of all abilities, including students with special needs, and serve a wide range of communities from remote and disadvantaged Indigenous communities to socially, culturally and ethnically diverse metropolitan communities.

Independent schools address the needs of their students efficiently by using funding innovatively to target areas of need. The autonomous nature of Independent schools allows flexibility in determining where resources are best utilised in the interests of their student community.

Government reforms can also provide a valuable source of additional funds to enhance or support existing programs such as the National Partnership for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education or to target new areas such as Digital Literacy and STEM initiatives. This additional support ensures schools are able to support initiatives that extend beyond the day-to-day core business of a school.

Investment that supports teacher and principal capability, fosters a quality curriculum, sets ambitious standards and leaves schools free to adapt their program and priorities to respond professionally to the needs of their school community, within a framework of high level accountabilities, is most likely to lead to better performance system-wide.

What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?

PISA results indicate that teacher quality in all its dimensions – selection into and the quality of initial teacher education, continuing professional development, teacher salaries and teacher professionalism – is the mainstay of excellent individual schools and a high performing school system overall. Using PISA data, Mourshed et al (2017) show that a blend of teacher-directed and inquiry-based learning results in the strongest student outcomes.

Schleicher (2013) has summarised this approach; "Top school systems pay attention to how they select and train their staff. They watch how they improve the performance of teachers who are struggling and how to structure teachers' pay. They provide an environment in which teachers work together to frame good practice. And when deciding where to invest, they prioritise the quality of teachers over the size of classes... they provide intelligent pathways for teachers to grow in their careers".

Much of the work undertaken by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership over recent years including in the areas of Teacher Standards and certification and Initial Teacher Education Standards and accreditation, is likely to support improved systems, practice, and outcomes for student learning.

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

Effective leadership has been identified as the second most important school-related factor influencing student learning (AITSL 2017). A school's culture and values, and the extent to which these connect the student body, have a substantial influence on student achievement, largely through motivation and support. The role the principal plays in setting the school climate is pivotal. A good school principal will set a tone for the school which encourages professional collaboration and a strong sense of community and sets challenging goals.

A high-quality curriculum will set clear expectations of progress and high standards; it will emphasise both substantive content knowledge and essential competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, and accessing and analysing information, and it will be aligned with assessment to enable diagnosis of each student's learning needs. In the highest performing education systems, the curriculum tends to be rigorous and not too expansive or prescriptive, with manageable content taught well and in great depth.

Assessment linked to the curriculum is an essential means of identifying the progress and learning needs of individual students. For educators, assessment is an integral and essential skill for their teaching and their students' learning. Its educational purpose is primarily diagnostic, to assess individual student learning needs so that teachers can adapt their teaching accordingly (Goss et al 2015).

Teachers need to be skilled at both formative assessment, which enables them to support students' progress, and summative assessment, which allows them to judge student learning at the end of a program of work. Increasingly, in addition to developing a complex knowledge of how students typically develop skills and progress, teachers and schools need the skills to analyse and use the data that comes from assessment to inform their teaching. Such knowledge will enable teachers to support the learning of students at whatever point of development their learning may be.

Schools with greater levels of parental engagement have been shown to be the most effective. There are many ways in which parents can be involved, from encouragement and support for academic work, to contact with teachers, to participation in school social, extra-curricular or administrative activities, to the payment of school fees. One theme emerging from the research literature is the benefit of parents' involvement in the home context, through reading activities and help with homework.

Significant research suggests that it is the demonstration of the importance parents attach to education in general that has a positive influence on student achievement. The messages children receive about the importance of schooling increase their competence, motivation to learn, and engagement in school. There are strong links between students' perceptions of how their parents' value learning and their educational outcomes.

Research on the benefits for students of participation in extra-curricular activities underlines the value of non-cognitive skills and attributes. Studies have found that structured extra-curricular activities are important for development and growth, especially during adolescence, and are associated with lower

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

rates of anti-social and risky behaviour, lower rates of academic failure and lower dropout rates. Research shows a clear link between extra-curricular participation and levels of connectedness, engagement and satisfaction with school. These activities can include music, sport, and special interest clubs and activities.

> Independent school communities value the autonomous nature of their school. Research indicates the importance of schools having control over staffing decisions as well as autonomy for curriculum and assessment, and resource allocation within the school. Schools that operate with this type of autonomy have been shown to achieve stronger student achievement than the average (Hanushek et al 2012).

Schools need to have a degree of autonomy to build the capacities of their leaders and teachers through the development of skills and competencies, to foster teamwork and focus on improving instruction. Reflection by individual teachers and groups of teachers, developing school aspiration and connectedness, developing purposeful actions, pursuing deeper investigation through collaboration requires time and guidance. Schools need to be able to take time to build the capacity of staff, engage with the school community, and identify where they may need in-school support.

What works best for whom and in what circumstance?

Many elements of quality are dependent on context and are influenced by factors such as stage of schooling, geographic location, social and economic environment, and systemic arrangements. Many of the general conclusions legitimately drawn from large-scale studies and big data, while relevant to system-wide decisions and policies, will not necessarily be applicable for individual students or individual schools.

For example, decades of research establish a clear relationship between family background and education achievement when data is aggregated to the school and system level, yet the generalised data has no explanatory or predictive value for individual students. Individuals vary in their capacity and readiness to take advantage of what schooling offers and each student's educational progress will depend on a host of factors, including their innate ability, personal attributes and family support (with family income playing a very minor role) as well as elements of their schooling experience (Marks 2015).

> Schools need to be flexible and agile, able to work on key issues and needs that affect their student community. Top down recommendations of specific strategies or programs do not work for all schools and can often add pressuare to participate in something that is not well suited to their context or community.

Local decisions, whether at the individual school level or regional level can focus on the specific needs of students and through evidence-based research identify how to meet their students' requirements.

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

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 Productivity Commission's Education Evidence Base Inquiry report highlighted "creating an evidence based approach to education policy and teaching practices and turning best practice into common practice are also required to drive better value for money and improve the outcomes achievable from any given level of expenditure."

Schools and school leaders need flexibility to allocate time and resources to allow teachers to research, trial and share evidence-based practices that are relevant to the school's needs and context. This includes the development of a purposeful action plan that allows the development of clarity and precision of practice, of transparency and monitoring of progress, the opportunity to trial and reflect on what is working or not working for students (Fullan and Quinn 2016), and can be communicated clearly to the school community.

Many Independent schools have developed contextual evidence-based research and follow-up practices with expertise and support provided through the Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Opportunities to share research and outcomes is an important aspect in developing a collaborative culture within and across schools. Whether it is targeted research sharing through an online repository, the dissemination of research findings through papers/summaries or providing opportunities for networking/workshop days, the AISs play an important role in assisting and enabling Independent schools to share best practice.

Independent schools, teachers, and leaders would welcome opportunities to undertake and engage with collaborative research across schools and sectors, particularly those that serve similar students and communities.

Ultimately the first step will be about seeking information from schools about what will work for them depending on whether they are able to lead research inquiry or whether they would benefit from linking with other schools who are leading this work.

Where appropriate, strong collaborative networks across similar schools provide an opportunity to engage in professional discussions around what strategies and practices are having a positive impact on student outcomes.

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

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 with most fields of complex public policy, it is unlikely that there will be education policies that are immediately easily implementable and will automatically lead to large improvements or gains in outcomes. Continuous improvement is preferable to the search for a magic bullet.

However, there are some elements that should form the basis of government policies and school emphases.

At the very least, policies should be based on evidence which rigorously indicates how they will contribute to student learning (Productivity Commission 2017).

Significant research (Singhal 2017, Schleicher 2017) indicates that government policies which can make a difference to student learning and outcomes include:

- Investment in student learning in the early years, particularly with relation to developing skills and capabilities in basic literacy and numeracy as the foundation for learning.

- Structures that emphasise and support quality teaching.

- Development of a learning culture for all students that emphasises the importance of effort, growth and teacher support rather than innate talent or other background characteristics as the important factors in student learning, development and success.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

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

Fragmentation of policy at the system level along with overload and duplication of accountability measures at different levels of government make careful, considered and sustained action difficult at the school level.

Schools are experiencing heightened pressure from governments, school communities and from the general public about what their work should be and how it should be measured. The expectations on schools to undertake an expanding role in society can dilute and distract from their core business. Support for the profession and the provision of time to allow schools to be successful (whatever success may look like for their context) is imperative in building a successful education system.

What is required is bipartisan agreement, an overarching vision for education that builds trust within schools, teachers and school leaders to make local decisions about addressing difficult questions regarding students' learning. A balance is required between broad systemic goals and the opportunity to respond to local needs and priorities. Too much external accountability is de-motivating and intrusive, too little limits accountability and transparency.

The opportunity presents itself when developing the new Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians to engage with all levels of education - providers, key stakeholders and the community to discuss what educational goals we want for our children and how we can all work together to a common end with a focused commitment to action. How we get to this end may look very different depending on the characteristics of the school, the community it serves and their student needs.

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