

Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submission Questions



Summary

Educational excellence is best achieved in Australian schools by ensuring schools have the autonomy to implement appropriate curriculum, select staff and engage directly with the community.

Improvements in student outcomes should be driven by continuing reforms in the areas of teacher quality, early learning, personalised learning, internationalisation and building 21st century skills and technological capability in students.

There should be a rigorous Australian Curriculum with a focus on depth rather than breadth. The Australian Curriculum should be regularly reviewed.

Education targets should be long-term, consistent and stable. Existing measures to monitor school outcomes at the national and system level are adequate. The future focus on measuring school success should be at the individual school level, in the context of the school.

Support should be given to schools to implement evidence-driven school improvement processes.

Continued support for choice and diversity in school education is required to provide equity, enhance competition, promote innovation and lead to better student outcomes. Australia's schooling system should embrace and enhance school autonomy to drive gains in student improvement.

Collaboration between schools and across schooling sectors can result in sharing knowledge and best practice. Funding needs to be available to schools and researchers for larger scale investigation into quality teaching and leadership.

Schools must be appropriately resourced if we are to achieve continual school improvement. Parental investment in schooling should be encouraged.

Support for independent schools through initiatives such as the Australian Government's Students First Support Fund is vital in implementing school improvement in order to achieve educational excellence.

Submission Questions

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?**

Australia's results in NAPLAN, declining performance in the PISA and TIMSS combined with ongoing employer "dissatisfaction with the levels of literacy and numeracy of school leavers", as reported by the Australian Industry Group, require continued focus on literacy, numeracy and STEM.

Australia's education system also cannot ignore the changing economic and employment landscape beyond the school gate. Reports by groups such as the CSIRO, CEDA and the Foundation for Young Australians all identify the changing skill composition required by future workforces, and therefore the ability for young people to be excellent communicators, with high levels of intercultural and interpersonal competence.

However, within this broader context, independent schools continue to perform at a high level as well as serve the needs of a broad range of students. According to analysis from PISA 2016, independent schools outperformed all other Australian schools in Reading, Science and Mathematics (OECD 2016).

Autonomy to implement an appropriate curriculum, select staff and engage directly with the community means that independent schools can prepare students effectively for a globally competitive market and equip them to be creative, active, informed leaders and citizens.

The federal and state and territory governments confirmed their expectations for the education of every Australian child in the *2008 Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians*. These high-level objectives were then translated into a nationally consistent curriculum, the Australian Curriculum, by ACARA.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) supports a nationally consistent curriculum from Prep to Year 10 that broadly identifies what our nation agrees all Australian students should know and what skills and capabilities they should acquire and master as they progress through school.

As the Australian Curriculum is the key policy document to identify the knowledge skills and capabilities students should learn at school, it must be continually reviewed and refined to ensure it supports deep learning and evaluative teaching practices while maintaining the relevancy and currency of student learning.

Providing schools and teachers with more room within the curriculum to innovate by reducing the level of content prescription should be considered. Independent schools have a long and successful history in implementing processes and practices that meet the needs of diverse learners, recognising that all learners, at times, potentially need their learning to be differentiated. Schools require the autonomy and support to be able to differentiate to meet the needs of all learners. Personalised learning and targeted support responds to every student's unique characteristics, strengths and learning needs.

- **How should school quality and educational success be measured?**

How one school defines success will be quite different to another school, based on the culture and values of the communities and students they serve. Educational success for every student is central to school quality, however how this is achieved does not need to be standardised. Any measure of school quality should not influence the ability of schools to determine autonomously the most suitable approach to meeting the needs of all learners.

Whilst recognising the importance of national measures (such as NAPLAN) to monitor the progress of educational attainment, the focus should be at the individual school level with a suite of methods of measurement at the system and school levels. ISQ does not support school or system comparisons, league tables or misuse of targeted educational data to draw broad conclusions about school success.

Existing measures to monitor school outcomes at the national and system level are adequate and the temptation for additional prescriptive national measures should be avoided. Independent schools already take part in local, national and international testing programs. This includes NAPLAN and, in the area of early childhood, locally based reports are available through the Australian Early Development Census.

The future focus should be at the individual school level, in the context of the school.

In contrast to centrally managed and operated schools under government and religious system arrangements, in the independent schooling sector the school governing body is pivotal in defining and driving school success. ISQ has commissioned research and developed a suite of governance materials to support and develop the capacity of school boards to articulate their vision for school success and how they measure, evaluate and report on their progress towards it.

In terms of providing support to schools to focus on school quality and educational success, appropriate frameworks need to be provided. ISQ's *Self-improving Schools (SIS)* program provides an evidence-driven school improvement process focused on improving student outcomes. Schools are able to review their data, design appropriate long-term interventions and site-specific evaluation strategies to measure progress.

ISQ is also currently developing a tool for independent school governing bodies to assess, review and monitor the strategic direction of their school.

This type of tool highlights the need for evidence-based frameworks to guide the focus of schools particularly to help them identify the key factors that contribute to the success of their school and how to measure and evaluate educational attainment in their particular context.

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?**

There is sufficient data and research available at the state, national and international levels to evaluate and create a single repository of evidence for schools to draw from to implement the most effective learning interventions in the classroom. Professor John Hattie's Visible Learning project provides one analysis of what interventions have the greatest impact on learning outcomes. The Evidence for Learning Teaching and Learning Toolkit also made early progress in this area by listing the cost, impact and validity of 34 different approaches, based on global evidence, to lifting learning outcomes in schools.

Taking such research findings and translating them into scalable and adoptable school-wide programs that influence and shape teaching pedagogy and practice in the classroom is a gap that needs to be filled. This was one of the findings of the Productivity Commission's recent inquiry into establishing a [national education evidence base](#).

ISQ in its recently released paper, [Queensland's Education Future: Continuing the Reform Agenda](#) identifies nine priority areas which should be the focus of future school reform efforts to drive improvements in student outcomes.

Ongoing changes and the use of schools funding is required to:

- facilitate greater school choice, autonomy and diversity
- meet the demand for new schools
- continue an agenda of school improvement
- further enhance teacher quality
- strengthen early learning outcomes
- improve student outcomes and personalised learning
- foster internationalisation and global citizenship
- build 21st century skills and technologies

Choice and Diversity

The world's most influential assessment of education performance found that school choice matters. PISA tested 15-year-old students in 72 countries in 2015 and Australia's independent school students ranked among the world's best – first in Reading, second in Science and fifth in Maths. According to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), schools have an impact on student outcomes, confirming “there were differences between schools that could have important implications for parents in terms of which school to send their child to” (PISA 2015: Reporting Australia's Results, ACER 2017, p.220).

Choice and diversity are the hallmarks of the independent schooling sector. Independent schools enable families to select schools that best serve their child's needs and enable families to choose a school that best promotes the values they believe are important.

Continued support for choice and diversity in school education is required to provide equity, enhance competition, promote innovation and lead to better student outcomes.

Teacher Quality

Extensive research confirms that quality teaching is the single most powerful in-school influence on student achievement.

Raising the status of teaching as a career choice will attract the most suitable school leavers and career change professionals into teaching and they will be retained through appropriate career paths and professional learning opportunities.

Skilled school leaders drive educational excellence

Quality school leadership is key to achieving educational excellence in every school. Programs such as ISQ's Aspiring Principals should be supported to assist leaders to understand the specific skills required to operate most effectively and to drive educational outcomes.

Structured and ongoing coaching and support to principals new to their leadership role should also be provided given that effective leadership requires effective induction and ongoing professional development.

Continuous school improvement guided by evidence of student need leads to excellence in education outcomes

Systems around the world are focusing on continuous school improvement to improve outcomes for students in achievement, well-being and engagement. Schools everywhere are using evidenced-based learning to improve school performance.

Independent schools use data and evidence to ensure excellent educational outcomes for all students. A wide range of support tools and resources, as well as professional learning to assist schools to draw on educational data to develop strategic and operational school improvement plans, is provided by ISQ.

Such support tools and resources should be available for all schools.

Building capacity at the school level by providing support for tailored evidence-based strategies will lead to improvement at the system level.

Recognition is required that school leaders are best placed to know what is needed locally, taking into consideration school characteristics and circumstances.

Early Learning

There is ample evidence to confirm the importance of early learning on student outcomes.

A long-term commitment to early education is needed to get the foundation right for all children.

Personalised Learning

Maximising the learning outcomes and well-being of all students and providing access to a high-quality education that is free from discrimination is the responsibility of all schools. Personalised learning and targeted support responds to every student's unique characteristics, strengths and learning needs.

All schools need to ensure that every learner's needs are met to maximise student outcomes. Continued support must be provided for those students with the highest support needs.

This should include further collaboration with relevant Government agencies (such as Health, Communities and Education) to promote consistent, evidence-based practices to enhance student well-being in schools.

Internationalisation and Global Citizenship

Young people need a global skill set to be competitive in the global marketplace. Students will require intercultural understandings to work with people from many different cultures. Schools that make internationalisation an integral aspect of their teaching and learning are better placed to provide students with the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to be global citizens.

A coordinated and integrated approach to schools engaging in internationalisation is needed to benefit all students. This is important given that for the first time in 2018, PISA will assess the global competence of 15-year-olds around the world.

21st Century Skills and Technologies

Education systems worldwide have also developed frameworks with an increased emphasis on developing the 21st century skills and attributes students need to prepare them for higher education and work in a complex and rapidly changing world.

If schools are to truly prepare students for technological advancements, teacher capability needs to be supported through professional development, particularly for digital technology. Teachers need to move from: knowing how to passively use the technology, to: knowing how to teach creative use of the technology. Funding is needed to support teacher release for professional development to allow this to occur.

A co-ordinated, cross sector commitment to STEM education in schools is also needed with more targeted, ongoing support for teacher upskilling, and long-term industry partnerships instead of short-term projects.

Rigorous Curriculum and Assessment

Top performing education systems around the world tend to have a curriculum that is rigorous with a greater focus on depth than breadth, and an alignment of the assessment to the curriculum priorities.

There should be regular reviews of the Australian Curriculum with a focus on reducing the level of content prescription.

- **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?**

Cross sector sharing of case studies and evaluation of what works and what does not should be encouraged. All schools should also have access to the evidence hub as a valuable resource. School education research should be a coordinated national priority by the Australian and state and territory governments through the Education Council.

- **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?**

There should be rigorous ongoing evaluation of the multitude of targets, standards, accreditations and regulatory mechanisms as to their relevance and contribution to improving student outcomes. Where there is no evidence of a direct link to student outcomes, they should be discontinued.

Targets should be long-term, consistent and stable. Too many in the past have been set in response to narrow issues and there has been inadequate monitoring in many cases.

Whilst the requirement for schools and systems to evaluate their impact is recognised as important, system enablers must be contextualised to the individual school level and should avoid unintended consequences of transparency and accountability provisions.

They should not increase the administrative burden on individual schools at the expense of teaching and learning or limit the opportunity for schools to develop suitable instruments to determine their own progress.

Benchmarks of educational success should consider student progress and gain, equally with achievement.

- **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?

Autonomy can lead to excellent educational outcomes

Educational excellence comes from skilled school leaders and teachers having the flexibility that comes with autonomy to meet the needs of every student.

Autonomy is a hallmark of independent schooling. The defining features of autonomy include:

- ability to select local school leaders and appoint teachers
- relationship with parents/families as partners
- capacity to enter partnerships
- freedom to set long-term strategic goals and resource allocations for the school
- setting the school's achievement targets
- opportunity to exercise independent views.

Autonomy, as explored in the 2016 ISQ discussion paper [Autonomy and School Leadership: an Independent Schooling Perspective](#), ensures those who know the most about the school are empowered to collaborate and make the key decisions to guide progress within their community. Autonomy creates opportunities for increasing high-quality education offerings that are responsive and carefully tailored to individual and local needs.

Jensen & Clarke (2013) highlighted that empowering leaders with the autonomy to act on their abilities can bring considerable results, giving school autonomy a role in developing effective leadership in schools.

Australia's schooling system should embrace and enhance school autonomy to drive gains in student improvement.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

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

Some of the barriers to ongoing school improvement include -

- the targeting of funding into initiatives and programs that lack an evidence base
- constant changes in education "priorities" often driven in response to narrow issues at the expense of a focus on fundamental literacy and numeracy skills
- a focus on ranking schools rather than celebrating the success of each individual school in its given context
- prescriptive interventions at the expense of school autonomy and allowing professional school leaders to get on with the task of providing quality education and improved student outcomes.

Collaboration between schools and across all schooling sectors is one of the keys to sharing knowledge and best practice so that all schools benefit. Maximising the learning outcomes and wellbeing of all students and providing access to a high-quality education is the responsibility of all schools. Systemic improvements in school education requires a long-term commitment to collaboration and continuing the reform agenda.

Policy and funding accountabilities driven primarily by student performance will limit the ability of schools and schooling systems to collaborate within regions and across jurisdictions to ensure best educational practice is shared.

There needs to be funding available to schools and researchers for larger scale investigation into quality teaching and leadership in every learning area and for a broader range of students. Lack of funding for educational and practitioner research limits the quality, reliability and ultimately scalability of the findings and slows the transfer of new knowledge and expertise within the education sector.

Schools should also be supported to enable teachers and leaders to collaborate and conduct their own research into highly effective practices to determine what works best.

Whilst recognising that this Review is not considering the issue of funding for Australian schools, it is a timely reminder that if we are to achieve continual improvement in schools, they must be appropriately resourced not only in terms of the quantum of overall funding support but also on an equitable basis. For independent schools, on average 58% of recurrent funding is provided by parents and the community. Such parental investment in schooling should be encouraged.

In terms of driving improvement and educational excellence, ISQ (and similar bodies in each State/Territory) play a significant support role for the independent sector in the implementation of reforms and initiatives. The Australian Government has recognised this important role and provided funding directly to Associations of Independent Schools through its Students First Support Fund to ensure that independent schools receive the necessary support and assistance in implementing school improvement. We would strongly recommend the Review affirm the importance of such arrangements for independent schools as an appropriate mechanism to ensuring that barriers to implementing improvements are overcome.