

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS MEETING THE NEEDS OF PARENTS

From the Executive Director

The latest Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) *What Parents Want* survey findings¹ are a timely reminder at the start of the 2019 school year that the success and sustainability of independent schools rests with their ability to meet the needs of parents and their children. It also serves as a reminder to our public officials that school education public policy should give paramount importance to parents' aspirations for the education of their children.

The long-running *What Parents Want* survey involved over 3,600 parents in 2018 with children at 115 Queensland independent schools. It is a good news story for independent schooling confirming the programs and underlying philosophies and values of independent schools are meeting the needs of parents. Parents have voted with their feet with enrolments in Queensland independent schools increasing by 25,000 since the first *What Parents Want* survey was undertaken in 2006.

The recent ISQ survey of community attitudes towards independent schools² also indicates a high level of support for school choice and independent schools – 9 out of 10 parents supported a parent's right to choose their child's school and a majority of the community support independent schools.

These surveys point to a positive future for independent schooling, however, schools need to be mindful of changing community attitudes and parent expectations.

What Parents Want confirms parents are looking beyond test scores and prioritising schools that foster a much broader range of qualities and skills that prepare children for the future and develop their sense of personal and community responsibility. Parents clearly have high aspirations for their children and expect more than the 'one-size-fits-all' industrial model approach to education.

Parents clearly recognise the future facing their children, in terms of the world of work, global mobility and personalised learning will be challenging and very different



PARENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TODAY, THAN 12 YEARS AGO, TO EXPLORE ALL AVAILABLE OPTIONS BEFORE MAKING AN INFORMED OPINION ABOUT THEIR CHILD'S FUTURE.

What Parents Want Key Findings,
February 2019

from what they themselves have experienced. They want to give their children the best opportunity through education to thrive into the future.

What Parents Want, for the first time, analysed parent attitudes by their generational status³, giving a glimpse of the differing attitudes of Generation Y parents. They appear to be more willing to 'shop around' for schooling options and find social media much more useful as a source of information on schools than other parents.

1 See <https://www.isq.qld.edu.au/advocacy-representation/what-parents-want-survey>

2 See https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Advocacy_Representation/Research_Reports/Community%20Attitudes%202018.pdf

3 The survey results were for the first time analysed for Baby Boomer parents (born 1946 to 1966), Generation X parents (1966 to 1986) and Generation Y parents (1986 to 2006). Overall, 88% of parents surveyed were Generation X, 7% Baby Boomers and 5% Generation Y. Not unexpectedly, Generation Y parents represented 18% of the parents of Prep students surveyed, whilst Baby Boomers comprised 12% of the parents of secondary students surveyed.

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About independent school parents

- **83% of parents rely on their salary/wages to pay school fees**
- **Just 5% of parents get support for the payment of school fees from other family members**
- **65% of parents plan ahead to pay school fees**
- **23% of parents considered changing schools in 2018 (compared to 7% in 2006)**
- **The main reasons for considering changing schools were financial, child unhappy or unhappy with school management**
- **Nearly 25% of parents start thinking about school choice either before the birth of their child or from birth**
- **65% of parents consider schooling options at least two years before the child commences schooling**
- **The most influential sources of information for parents about schools are family, friends and colleagues**
- **Other parents with children at the school, school open days and school websites and social media are also important sources of information**
- **Parents most value one-on-one school visits and school open days when considering a school**
- **They want to meet the principal, classroom teachers and students when they visit a school**
- **46% of parents who register their child on a school waiting list, do so at more than one school**

Generation Y parents will be the dominant parent group in schools within a decade. Schools need to be mindful that they are more likely to consider all three schooling sectors, as well as relying more heavily on friends, family and colleagues for information about schools and are likely to be more influenced by a school's external appearance and facilities when making a choice.

The key factors parents rely on to choose an independent school have been remarkably consistent over the 12 years of *What Parents Want*. The most influential factor – preparing students to fulfil further potential in later life – has been the most important factor influencing school choice in each of the four surveys.

Consistently ranking highly in the 2018 and previous surveys are the high quality of teachers, good discipline and the school seeming to be right for a child's individual needs.

For the first time in the four *What Parents Want* surveys, strong academic performance did not feature in the top ten factors influencing school choice on a Likert scale. Whilst it is still ranked as relatively important (11th on the scale), careful consideration will need to be given to this surprising outcome.

It could be argued that good educational outcomes are inherent in the most influential factor – preparing students to fulfil their potential later in life. However, good educational outcomes will mean different things to different people and may not just be about academic results.

It might also be argued that parents are placing less emphasis on academic results in the traditional sense given the diversity and many pathways open to students in terms of moving into tertiary and further education after school.

This may reflect the changing nature of the independent schooling sector. In 2018, 55% of students in the Queensland independent sector attended schools with a Socio-economic Status (SES) score of between 95 and 105. Whilst the parents of these students have high aspirations for their children, data would indicate that a lower proportion move straight to university after Year 12⁴.

One of the more interesting findings from the 2018 *What Parents Want* survey is the increasing influence children themselves are having on school choice. Over half of parents indicated they were "highly" influenced by the child's opinion (38%) or "totally" influenced by a child's opinion (15%). Not surprisingly, the child's influence was higher for secondary students. The child's influence was also stronger for one-parent families and lower income parents. However, Generation X and Y parents were less influenced by the child's opinion than Baby Boomers. Nearly 80% of the parents of boarding students said the choice was totally or highly influenced by the student.

Could we see a time when school marketing and information is targeted at students rather than parents?

Some issues which have dominated public policy debate on schooling are not considered influential by parents when exercising school choice. For example, small class sizes do not feature in the top ten factors influencing school choice.

Similarly, NAPLAN results do not feature in the key factors influencing school choice. It is also interesting to note that the *My School* website is not

4 See <https://qed.qld.gov.au/publications/reports/statistics/schooling/learning-outcomes/next-step> for information on the number of Year 12 students moving onto tertiary education.

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a key source of information on schools for parents compared to information gained from family, friends and colleagues and even school websites and social media.

However, *What Parents Want* does confirm that the quality of teachers and teaching methods and philosophies are important factors in school choice. These issues are rightly the subject of current policy debates.

What Parents Want provides valuable insights about the aspirations of parents for the education of their children. It also provides rich and detailed data on how parents make the important decision of school choice.

Independent schools take pride in the partnership they develop between the school, parents and children which is backed up by extensive research confirming parental engagement in their child’s education has a positive influence on their learning outcomes and wellbeing.

It is through a detailed understanding of what parents want that independent schools will continue to prosper and grow making an increasingly significant contribution to the education of students in a diverse and vibrant education system.

Best wishes to all independent schools for a successful 2019.



DAVID ROBERTSON
Executive Director
Independent Schools Queensland

Sector Growth

In 2019, the Queensland independent sector welcomes four new schools:

CARBROOK ANIMAL ASSISTED LEARNING CENTRE (Logan)

ENKINDLE VILLAGE SCHOOL (Townsville)

THE RAINFOREST SCHOOL (Mission Beach)

TROPICAL NORTH STEINER SCHOOL (Mossman)

Opening date to be confirmed.

In addition, Autism Queensland has opened a new campus in Cairns. Carinity has taken over the operation of Shalom Christian College in Townsville, whilst the Mungalla Silver Lining School will commence on Shalom’s former site at Crystal Creek.

Several independent schools have extended their operations in 2019 including The Sycamore School (Years 7 and 8), Redeemer Lutheran College – Biloela (Year 11), Cairns Hinterland Steiner School (Year 11) and Birali Steiner School (Year 7). Arethusa College’s Windsor campus will now cater for Years 7 and 8.

EVIDENCE OF THE BENEFITS OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



MARK NEWHAM
Director (Education Performance & Improvement)

It is commonly argued that early childhood education is essential but less often articulated is who is it best for and in what format. Most Queensland independent schools offer early childhood services, usually via a kindergarten providing an approved program for four-year-olds.

These services are supported by, and respond to, a range of recent reforms including the National Quality Framework and Universal Access.

The National Quality Framework aims to deliver an integrated and unified national quality and regulatory system for early childhood education and care across most preschools, long day care, family day care and outside school hours care services.

The Framework seeks to drive improvement through activities including:

- a quality assessment and rating system
- a regulatory authority in each state and territory that administers the National Quality Framework, including approval, compliance monitoring and rating of services
- a national body, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, which works with the state and territory regulatory authorities.

The current National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda expects all services to be assessed and rated every three years (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

The first *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education* was agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in November 2008. This, and subsequent agreements, have provided funding to states and territories to support quality early childhood programs for all children in the year prior to entering primary school. This funds 600 hours per year (or 15 hours per week) with delivery by a qualified early childhood teacher (Universal Access). The most recent agreement has been extended for 2019.

The importance of early childhood education is reflected in the findings of the report: *Through Growth to Achievement: The Report of The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (Department of Education and Training, 2018).

FINDING 2

Early childhood education makes a significant contribution to school outcomes. The transition between preschool and school education should be seamless. Ongoing reforms that lay the foundations in the early years for future learning, and close the learning differential between advantaged and disadvantaged students, are essential to ensure all children have the best start in life.

Aligned with the above reforms has been work on the capturing of children's developmental progress at school entry. This is through the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). This is a collection of data on students in Prep. Independent schools that participated in the AEDC in 2018 would have received their profiles in November, with community level data available soon. The use of AEDC data will be explored later in this paper.

It is into this already congested policy field that the federal Australian Labor Party (ALP) has announced that families will be provided with free access or subsidised preschool for children as young as three if the ALP wins government at the next federal election.

Under the proposal, children would be able to access 15 hours a week of education in the two years prior to primary school.

It would be free for three-year-olds attending state-government-run preschools (where available), with the Government providing an extra subsidy for three-year-olds obtaining preschool education at a private childcare centre.

The total cost over a decade would be \$9.8 billion with the change for three-year-olds not expected to begin until the beginning of the 2021 school year.

In making the announcement, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said that in regard to Australia slipping down the global education rankings, it is "... not because of a lack of innate ability, it's not the fault of the kids, it's not the fault of their parents, their hard-working teachers and educators. It's because we do not have universal access to preschool programs, it is because Australian children are starting school less prepared than children their same age in other countries. Today, nearly one in four Australian children, 22 per cent, start without the foundational skills to be successful learners.

Children who complete two years of preschool program perform better in later school results in literacy and numeracy – it is a fact.

Is it? The ALP announcement reflects a recommendation from the *Lifting Our Game* report. This report was the result of the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions* and was publicly released in January 2018. The report makes 17 recommendations related to early childhood education interventions and funding for the years before school (0–5 years) for Australian governments to consider.

One of the recommendations advocated that "Australian governments progressively implement universal access to 600 hours per year of a quality early childhood education program, for example preschool, for all three-year-olds,

with access prioritised for disadvantaged children, families and communities during roll out" (p. 12).

Evidence on outcomes of early childhood education

To support its recommendations the report cites research and states that:

"A significant body of international evidence demonstrates that early childhood education has a positive impact on school outcomes. For example, a consensus statement from The Brookings Institution concludes:

Convincing evidence shows that children attending a diverse array of [preschool] programs are more ready for school at the end of their [preschool] year than children who do not attend [preschool]. Improvements in academic areas such as literacy and numeracy are most common" (p. 40).

Interestingly, another consensus statement from the same Brookings Institution paper concludes that:

"Convincing evidence on the longer-term impacts of scaled-up pre-k programs on academic outcomes and school progress is sparse, precluding broad conclusions. The evidence that does exist often shows that pre-k-induced improvements in learning are detectable during elementary school, but studies also reveal null or negative longer-term impacts for some programs" (p. 9).

The *Lifting Our Game* paper also cites research from the *Effective Provision of Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE)* study (UK). The EPPSE study found that students who attended preschool were more likely to go onto higher academic study. Criticism of the validity of these findings focuses on the lack of an appropriate control group for the study, particularly when the findings claim that attending **any** preschool

program predicts higher academic results. Additionally, the study did not specifically focus on three-year-olds.

The *Lifting Our Game* paper also cites US research and in particular, The Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Longitudinal Study/ Child Parent Centre Program. It argues that they are influential in the early childhood literature because they provide compelling, experimental and longitudinal evidence of the benefits of early childhood education.

"All three studies provided high quality early childhood programs to children who were at risk of poor outcomes due to neighbourhood poverty, family low-income status or other forms of social, economic or educational disadvantage. Additional wrap around interventions such as home visits, health and nutrition services and parental education programs were also provided.

The studies operated in different US locations between 1962 and 1986, with data being collected at multiple points through to adulthood, comparing outcomes for those who participated (program group) with the control group (no program group).

All three studies concluded that the interventions had significant and long-term educational benefits for the children who participated. Key benefits included:

- improved school readiness
- higher achievement at school
- improved commitment to school and reduced absences
- decreased special education placements
- fewer grade repetitions
- increased high school graduation rates" (p. 43).

These studies emphasised the importance of the programs being of high quality and featuring a range of structures to support the children and their families. These wraparound

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AEDC and the ISQ School Review Service

The ISQ School Review Service may assist schools with specialist support to review their AEDC data. Schools can access ISQ programs, such as Research in Schools to support schools to implement research-based best practices in response to their AEDC data. Schools can be supported by ISQ mentors to implement their action plans in areas highlighted by the AEDC data. The AEDC data may align with a strategic focus for the school such as improving transitions to school for young learners, reviewing processes for supporting individual student needs in the early years, or implementing pedagogy with a developmental focus for areas of need identified within the school through reflection on the AEDC data.

services are not easily replicated and therefore might not be of particular relevance when compared to many programs in Australia.

Indeed, Farran and Lipsey (2015) state that:

“The Perry Preschool, for instance, consisted of 2½ hours every morning in instruction and a 1½-hour weekly visit with each family in the afternoons – for two years, starting when the children were 3 years old. The Abecedarian program is even harder to replicate. Children entered the program as infants and remained until they went to kindergarten. The program ran 50 weeks a year for 8-10 hours a day. There was a paediatrician and nurse practitioner on site. Even the Child and Parent Center (CPC) program in Chicago, often cited as a more recent example of long-term benefits, has children who were enrolled as 4 year olds and remained through kindergarten after which there was follow up through 3rd grade. Parents were provided workshops and were required to volunteer in the classrooms. In addition, the classrooms were supplemented with free health care.”

The most recent US evaluation of a scaled up voluntary state funded pre-K program was in Tennessee (TNVPK). *“The five-year evaluation looked at the longitudinal effects of TNVPK on pre-kindergarten through third grade achievement and behavioural outcomes for a sample of 1076 children, of which 773 attended TNVPK classrooms and 303 did not. Both groups have been followed since the beginning of the pre-k year. Children in VPK classrooms made initial strong gains and were perceived by their teachers at kindergarten entry as being better prepared. The achievement of the control children caught up to that of the pre-K children by the end of kindergarten. In second and third grades achievement trends crossed over, with academic achievement for the pre-K children becoming worse than for the control children”* (Farran and Lipsey, 2015).

Therefore, it appears the evidence for universal preschool for three-year-olds is not as clear cut as many advocates claim. While there is evidence of some gains being made, particularly for disadvantaged children, the overall results are mixed. This makes the

recommendation from the *Lifting Our Game* report even more pertinent when it recommends that:

“Australian governments progressively implement universal access to 600 hours per year of a quality early childhood education program, for example preschool, for all three-year olds, with access prioritised for disadvantaged children, families and communities during roll out.”

This is reinforced in a *Critical Review of the Early Childhood Literature* by The Australian Institute of Family Studies which found: *“The evidence is clear that disadvantaged children have the most to gain from high-quality (early childhood education) programs, and disadvantaged children (including those from low SES, CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] and Indigenous families) would therefore benefit from the provision of high-quality three-year-old preschool”* (p. 52).

Additionally, *“what is evident from this summary of the existing evidence about the effects of preschool programs in Australia is a distinct lack of evidence about the potential benefits, or lack thereof, of extending universal preschool programs to all three-year-old children”* (Warren et al., 2016).

Further, the *Lifting Our Game* report makes the point that:

“In order for the effects of quality early childhood education to last and be maximised over time, preschool cannot be viewed in isolation from subsequent years of schooling. Children’s early learning trajectories depend on the quality of their learning experiences not only during preschool, but also after. Further, there is a need to ensure a seamless transition from preschool to school education, including adequate transmission of information on individual students and considered efforts by schools to build upon the early childhood education foundation” (p. 56).

It is in this transmission that the AEDC can assist.

The AEDC involves teachers in completing the Australian version of the Early Development Instrument (AvEDI) for each child in Prep year by entering children's developmental information into the online census in each of the five domains considered vital to early childhood development, namely physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), and communication skills and general knowledge. Any vulnerabilities in children's developmental progress have implications for children's social and academic learning and may predict challenges ahead for the child's ability to engage fully with the school curriculum, their teachers and their peers.

A Research Snapshot, *The predictive validity of the Early Development Instrument (EDI): Predicting later cognitive and behavioural outcomes*, (Australian Government, as cited in Pascoe and Brennan, 2017) found that of the five AEDC domains, the "language and cognitive development" and the "communication skills and general knowledge" domains are the best predictors of scores on NAPLAN assessments.

Queensland independent schools may use the AEDC data to understand the developmental needs of children in the early years. School leaders and teachers, together with their community partners, could consider ways to support the learning, health, wellbeing and general development of all students. The AEDC information was published in confidential School Profiles released to each participating school with five or more Prep Years students in November 2018. The AEDC School Profile will show their individual school results and schools can compare their 2018 data with their own data recorded for previous collection periods, if the school has

participated in past AEDC collection periods. The school can also compare its data with the overall community-level data for the area where the school is located and if interested could compare its data with a cross-section of other communities.

As mentioned, the community level data will be released in March and it will provide even more information to allow the monitoring of trends that have previously indicated that there has been little improvement in the proportion of children developmentally vulnerable across the three previous AEDC collections. These trends indicate that around one in five children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains in their first year of schooling.

Reflection on the AEDC and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Reflection on a range of topics in connection with the AEDC will also support teachers to reflect on their practice regardless of their career stage as teachers. The Australian Professional Standards can be interpreted through teachers' consideration of the AEDC data for their school and their reflection on professional learning, practice and engagement can facilitate teacher growth and inform improvements in teacher quality. Some possible reflection points are provided below from the AEDC Reflection Guide linked to a professional standard, however the reflection may relate to more than one Australian Professional Standard for Teachers (APST).

Example: Reflection Question 1

How well do I know the development of the students in my class?

APST 1.1 Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students

Example: Reflection Question 2

What can I learn from parents/carers about their children's development and learning?

APST 3.7 Engage parents/carers in educative process

Example: Reflection Question 3

How can the school environment be adapted to meet the developmental needs of school starters?

APST 4.2 Manage classroom activities

Example: Reflection Question 4

What values and assumptions frame the way I interpret AEDC data and other school and community data?

APST 5.4 Interpret student data

Example: Reflection Question 5

What targeted pedagogies and practices can I employ to support students' holistic developmental goals?

APST 3.1 Establish challenging learning goals

Conclusion

In an area that will continue to receive political attention, as we approach the looming federal election, the AEDC provides a unique and rich data resource to support early childhood development across the country. It is up to schools to explore the data to better understand the needs of their school community and to create opportunities for cross-communications between schools, community members and allied services.

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Independent Schools Queensland Ltd
ACN 614 893 140 ABN 88 662 995 577



**Independent Schools
Queensland**

choice & diversity

Head Office

Level 1, 96 Warren Street, Spring Hill Q 4000
PO Box 957, Spring Hill Q 4004
P (07) 3228 1515 E office@isq.qld.edu.au

Professional Learning Centre

Level 5, 500 Queen Street, Brisbane Q 4000
P (07) 3228 1507 E events@isq.qld.edu.au

www.isq.qld.edu.au