

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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2020 QUEENSLAND ELECTION

From the Executive Director

The 2020 Queensland election will be held on Saturday 31 October with the outcome in the 93 contested Parliamentary seats determining our State Government for the next four years¹.

The next Queensland Government will have the critical task of overseeing the State's economic, health and social recovery from the impacts of COVID-19. It will also have the opportunity to consider the changes in the way we live, work and learn as potential drivers of reform and change in education.

Under the Our Schools – Our Future program Independent Schools Queensland recently commissioned Professors Jim Watterston and Yong Zhao from the University of Melbourne to consider the future of schooling and the positive opportunities for change as a result of the pandemic. Their Issues Paper *A Catalyst for Change*² identifies six key areas for transformation of education – the purpose of schooling; the curriculum; assessment; student agency in learning; digital literacy; and the role of the teacher.

The Professors believe the independent sector, free of the systemic constraints in other sectors, "is well placed to

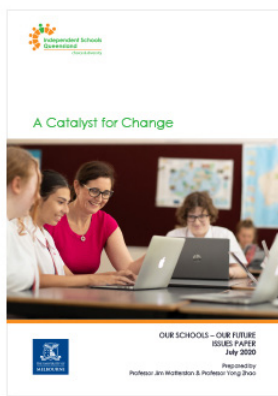
lead the nation" in the quest to create the contemporary and fit-for-purpose schools that every child is entitled to attend. They argue that one of the revelations out of COVID-19 has been that "when all staff are engaged and there is a compelling reason, we

can collectively change the traditional schooling experience, for better or worse, virtually overnight".

They assert that "we need to use the new-found COVID-19 inspired capacity of the profession to take ownership and implement reforms that were required long before we had to adapt our thinking to the challenges of the pandemic".

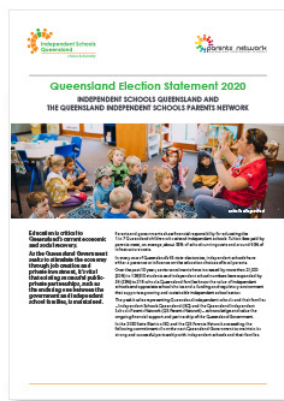
A Catalyst for Change will be essential reading for the Minister for Education in the next Queensland Government. Existing legislative and regulatory frameworks governing school education will need to be closely examined to ensure they are flexible enough to allow innovation to occur and reflect contemporary understanding of the role of the school, teacher and learning as well as how, when and where learning can occur.

ISQ's June 2020 report *Economic Significance of Independent Schools to the Queensland Economy*³ will also be essential reading for the Minister for Education (and the Treasurer). There will not be a more important time for the Queensland Government to continue its strong support of the independent schools sector not only because of its significant contribution to the economic health of the State but for the valuable role that independent schools play in the community in building social and human capital.



1 Queensland now has fixed state government terms with elections held every four years with election day on the last Saturday of October. See the Queensland Electoral Commission website for further details – <https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/election-events/2020-state-general-election>
2 Available at https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_OSOF/Catalyst_for_change_2020.pdf
3 Available at https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_ReportsSurveys/Economic_Significance_Independent_Schools_2020_Key_Findings.pdf

2020 QUEENSLAND ELECTION



In 2017-18, the Queensland independent sector supported 33,560 full-time jobs paying nearly \$3 billion in salaries and wages, contributed \$5 billion to the State Gross Product and saved taxpayers over \$1 billion.

ISQ's State Election Statement⁴ calls on the next Queensland Government to invest an additional \$60 million capital funding⁵ each year of the term of the government to support non-state schools to meet demand for new schools and classrooms and to provide stimulus to support Queensland's economic recovery from COVID-19.

Research by ISQ shows that for the sector to maintain existing levels of education choice for families, a further 21 new P-12 independent schools and 622 extra classrooms at a cost of \$1.25 billion will be needed by 2036.

The additional capital funding will supplement the annual capital spend of over \$300 million from private sources each year by independent schools.

ISQ is also calling on the next State Government to maintain the current value of State recurrent funding at 2020 levels as schools not only recover from the financial stresses of COVID-19 but provide significant fee relief for families which have been financially impacted by the pandemic and other natural disasters such as the drought.

Maintaining funding for students with disabilities, universal access to kindergarten and a modest increase in funding for Special Assistance Schools which cater for disengaged students should also be part of the next Government's commitment to supporting choice and diverse schooling options across the State given the value placed on independent schools by parents and the increasing number of disadvantaged students being catered for in independent schools.

Failure to adequately support the independent sector will ultimately mean costs to Government and the taxpayer as they will have to directly

and totally fund the building of additional state schools and met the higher recurrent funding costs per student. In the independent sector, on average, parents met about half of the recurrent costs of schooling for their children through their investment of after-tax dollars on school fees and other support for schools.

Many years of research have confirmed that the most powerful in-school influence on student achievement is the classroom teacher. We need to continue to build the teaching and learning capacity of our most valuable resource in education – our teachers. ISQ is calling on the next Queensland Government to commit to provide \$16 million⁶ over four years to maintain the successful Advancing Teaching and Learning Program which supports the non-state sectors to build the capacity for excellent teaching and learning across the diverse range of independent schools.

Schooling across Queensland is being impacted by scientific, learning and technological advancements, as well as community expectations and socioeconomic and employment trends. COVID-19 has shown how agile schools need to be to respond to unprecedented change. School autonomy underpins the independent school sector and gives schools the ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances and to meet the needs of their students and communities.

A streamlined, supportive and enabling regulatory environment is vital to ensuring independent schools continue to innovate and achieve the best possible outcomes for their students.

ISQ is calling on the next Queensland Government to continue to recognise that school autonomy is an important driver of quality education. Regulatory frameworks that preserve independent school autonomy should be a

4 Available at https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_CorpDocs/2020%20State%20Election%20statement.pdf

5 The independent sector's share of this additional capital funding would be around \$27 million.

6 The independent sector's share of these funds would be approximately \$7 million over four years.

Key Commitments Sought from the Next Queensland Government

PARTNERING TO SUPPORT CHOICE AND DIVERSITY

FUNDING CERTAINTY: Maintain the current value of total state recurrent funding by freezing the state share of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) for non-government schools at the 2020 level of 22.45% for each year of the next term of government.

PARTNERING TO GENERATE ECONOMIC BENEFITS

CAPITAL FUNDING: Invest an additional \$60 million each year over the term of the next government to assist the non-government sector meet demand for new classrooms and provide capital stimulus to support Queensland's economic recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in addition to an ongoing annual allocation of some \$55 million for capital assisted projects and external infrastructure.

PARTNERING TO DELIVER VALUE TO SOCIETY

QUALITY TEACHING: Commit funding of \$16 million over the period 2021 to 2024 (\$4m each year) for the independent school sector to continue the successful Advancing Teaching and Learning program – including amongst other things, professional coaching, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) certification and research in schools.

PARTNERING TO STIMULATE EDUCATION INNOVATION

NON-STATE SCHOOLS ACCREDITATION BOARD: Engage with the non-state schooling sector to reassess and confirm that the essential mission of the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board is enabling and supportive of growth and innovation in independent and Catholic schools, in line with the founding purpose for the Board.

For the Independent Schools Queensland and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network 2020 Election Statement visit https://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_CorpDocs/2020%20State%20Election%20statement.pdf

fundamental objective of Government. Further, regulatory frameworks should be aligned between the Australian and Queensland Governments in order to reduce red tape and overlap.

A key election commitment being sought from the next Government is engagement with the independent sector to reassess and confirm that the essential mission of the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board is to enable and support the growth and innovation of the sector, in line with the founding purpose of the Board.

As outlined in the new ISQ publication *The Value of Independent Schools*⁷, Queensland's independent schools are valued members of the state's education system. They provide important community connections, educational innovation, and value to society as well as economic benefits.

Each State election presents the opportunity for the major political parties and Parliamentary candidates to confirm their support for a strong and vibrant independent school sector. The 2020 State election is critical given the role the next Government will have to play in leading the recovery from the impacts of COVID-19. A strong and vibrant independent schooling sector can and will make a significant contribution to that recovery. It will be up to the Government to put in place the funding and regulatory support to ensure this eventuates. ISQ looks forward to working with the next Government and to the support of all candidates in the coming election.



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⁷ Available at http://rms.isq.qld.edu.au/files/Weblive_CorpDocs/The%20Value%20of%20Independent%20Schools_2020.pdf

SUSTAINABLE IMPROVEMENT MEANS CHOOSING COHERENCE



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Schools are busy places. And by its very nature, busyness brings to the surface problems that need fixing. Without even an ounce of intention, it is easy for any organisation to find itself launching multiple initiatives simply in response to day-to-day challenges (Masters, 2016).

As well as being busy, schools are complex places. While a car engine is complicated – with many parts doing many things – it can nevertheless be pulled apart and put back together again. A new plug can replace an old plug and the machine can operate better than it did before. Schools are not like this. Being complex, rather than complicated, means being “characterised by interactions and interdependencies”. It may be nice to think that one can target a specific issue, solve it, and see student outcomes improve. However, the reality of experience is that the interplay of students, teachers, leaders, parent, and the wider system, all need to be considered. Linear thinking rarely works in a complex system with human relationships involved (Timperley, 2020, p. 2).

That said, during the recent remote learning experience, schools did a remarkable job of cutting to the core. They had to – as John Hattie said it was “more of a triage situation” where “teachers can’t do the normal” (Hattie, 2020a). Because the nature of time and space meant schools lacked the capacity to do all the things they had once done, the difficult and important questions were asked and answered on what was essential and what could be left behind.

Unfortunately, while there have been many calls not to lose the learning from COVID-19 remote learning, “the research on previous outages (hurricanes, earthquakes, strikes, wars) is that we forget the good things and hustle back to the comfort of the old” (Hattie, 2020b). The conditions that

lead us to countless priorities and overloaded systems (Sharratt, 2019) have not disappeared now classrooms have reopened. Indeed, the ways things were existed because, in some shape or form, it served a need.

What is different is we have had a lived experience of what can be achieved when everyone pulls together in one direction. That does not mean, however, that what previously existed to enable the underperforming outcome has gone.

Focusing, Visioning, Planning and Deciding

To respond to this challenge and to accomplish school success, leaders need to focus their schools’ energies (Baker, 2019). Or, to put it another way, schools need to have a coherence of priorities, with all things working towards the same thing. Institutionally, this means leaders doing the hard work of “aligning the focus of improvement work across [all] levels of the school” (Timperley, 2020), something that Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker would argue begins with vision:

No matter how great a school is now, it can’t move forward if it doesn’t have a vision of a better future, something to move toward. A vision is really a conversation people have about what they hope the future will hold. A clear vision strips away illusions of the current culture, serving as an antidote to the subtle slide back into old ways.

(Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019, p. 14)

If a school lacks a shared narrative that makes the work feel worthwhile, this can be changed – but it may take a while because the best cultural change approach is relationship-based trust. And slow and purposeful is as fast as this sort of transformational leadership can go (Grunert & Whitaker, p. 78). As Dr Paul Browning says:

Setting a compelling vision is worthless unless someone wants to follow; and no one will follow a leader, particularly into the unknown, if they don't trust him or her. Trust is the critical ingredient that goes hand in glove with vision.

(Browning, 2015, p. 6)

While there is no quick-fix to building trust, there is no shortage of first steps. Browning argues that we should first “admit mistakes” (p43). Michael Hyatt argues it is about keeping your word, and John Maxwell adds that one should “see the best in your teammates, and communicate that you value them” (Hyatt, 2016; Maxwell, 2014). Whatever the strategy, the signs that it is working are the same:

- professional learning is seen as development, not indoctrination
- networking and sharing is seen as collaboration, not competition
- identified goals are valuable, not ignorable
- the improvement agenda is owned, not imposed.

That is, it's about shifting the narrative from compliance to commitment, and it's about school leaders taking

responsibility for telling those new stories (Timperley, 2020; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019).

This level of intentionality demands planning and deciding – but let's be clear, school leaders do not always have to get it right. John Claudius Loudon's 1824 book, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening*, coined a famous idea that gets quoted regularly in chess manuals today, namely:

Any plan at all, even a bad plan, is better than none; because those who set out on any plan will, in all probability, sooner discover its errors, if a bad one, and correct them, than those, who set out on no plan, will discover the want of one, and form a good plan.

(Loudon, 1824, p. 1144)

Jeff Bezos of Amazon in his oft-quoted 2016 Letter to Shareholders had this to say about making decisions:

Most decisions should probably be made with somewhere around 70% of the information you wish you had. If you had to wait for 90%, in most cases, you're probably being slow.

(Bezos, 2016)

Later in that letter, however, Bezos goes on to argue that “true misalignment issues” need to be recognised early and immediately escalated. In other words, if a team can commit to a vision and disagree about how to reach it, that can be resolved over time through course-correction as it comes; those sorts of decisions are movable and so should be taken as needed, not

delayed in constant hope for a better plan. However, if the decision leads to a different vision, that can be costly and often results in the one who “has the more stamina” carrying the decision (Bezos, 2016). That is where the battles should be fought.

Maintaining a coherent improvement agenda

Maintaining a coherent improvement agenda is made difficult simply by the continuous work required to have one. Once school leaders establish coherence and commit to a rigorous focus on what will make the school better, so will come regular and reasonable requests that detract from it.

There will always be new external requirements that demand compliance. In a school that values coherence, the leaders ask ‘How could this align with our current improvement plans? How can it be leveraged to improve our school? What will we need to not only comply, but benefit from this process?’ Leaders then communicate and share the resulting narrative with all members of the school community.

For example, the evidence processes required for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) has required a more intense focus from all teachers. Nevertheless, independent schools are using this external change as an opportunity to uncover and amplify quality teaching that benefits all students. School leaders who create a clear narrative for teachers, ‘translating’ the compliance messages within an improvement narrative are taking the complexity of demands and crafting a simple story. Fullan and Sharatt call this translation work “Simplexity” – a vital role any school leader plays to maintain coherence and build

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SUSTAINABLE IMPROVEMENT MEANS CHOOSING COHERENCE CONTINUED

confidence in the value of change within their school communities.

A second way that a coherent vision may be gradually eroded, is the temptation to make the means to achieving a goal, the goal itself. For example, if a school is choosing to centre their strategic agenda on improved academic outcomes, part of the plan might be to build the capacity of teachers in assessment practices and invest in some new learning environments. What is important is understanding that increasing teachers' expertise and the classroom's new functionalities are not the goals – improved student outcomes are. High-coherence schools adopt evaluative processes that ensure they are regularly checking if the actions they are taking are making the difference they need. A shared understanding of what success looks like, combined with an authentic willingness to test the value of everything, ensures limited resources are used efficiently. Earl and Timperley (2015) are clear that "having a continuous cycle of generating hypotheses, collecting evidence, and reflecting on progress, allows the stakeholders an opportunity to try things, experiment, make mistakes and

consider where they are, what went right and what went wrong, through a fresh and independent review of the course and the effects of the innovation." Evaluative thinking is key to maintaining organisational focus.

Change Fatigue

The dynamic nature of schooling means that the temptation will arise to introduce new ideas or approaches that may have a benefit for the school. Furthermore, it is not unusual for such initiatives to have passionate advocates within the staff body who may be willing to lead the new effort over and above their direct responsibilities. Mike Flint was the private pilot for the world's most successful investor, Warren Buffet. In a famous conversation between the two, Flint showed Buffet his Top 25 career goals. Buffet had Flint circle the Top 5 as a signal that these were to be the priority. Surprisingly, the remaining 25 were not labelled 'Secondary Goals', instead they were entitled 'Avoid-At-All-Costs'. Buffet's point was that these other good things are the most likely to rob one of the ability to achieve their priorities (MacKay, 2017). Put

another way, "The difference between successful people and really successful people, is that really successful people say no to almost everything"; Steve Jobs says much the same, "Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things" (Buffet and Jobs, as quoted in Schwantes, 2018). Jim Collins goes so far to say, "You need to have a 'stop doing list' to go with your 'to do' list" that operate at a ratio of 1:1 (Collins, 2017). While it might seem unrealistic, concentrating efforts is critical to getting momentum.

Perpetual cycles of change can be the antithesis of sustainability. A school culture where new activities are not given sufficient time to bed down and be measured for impact, may lead to increases in staff cynicism. They may become unwilling to spend time with a genuine innovation because they're doubtful that the leaders will support the implementation longevity required to activate real benefit from the change.

To combat this challenge to coherence, Eric Abrahamson argues for something he calls 'creative recombination' – a process that entails "knowing what you already have" and "knowing how you can reuse, redeploy, and recombine these existing elements" to achieve new goals – with the recombinants being "people, networks, culture, processes, and structure" (Abrahamson, 2004).

Such an approach carefully considers the legacies of more mature staff and leverages them, rather than obliterate them, in pursuit of the new. It might mean, as Michael Fullan (2001) suggests, including potential opponents directly in the change conversation:

All successful organizations in a culture of change have been found to a certain extent to seek diversity of employees, ideas, and experiences while simultaneously establishing mechanisms for sorting out, reconciling, and acting on new patterns.

Perpetual cycles of change can be the antithesis of sustainability. A school culture where new activities are not given sufficient time to bed down and be measured for impact, may lead to increases in staff cynicism.

This is why I and others have said that investing only in like-minded innovators is not necessarily a good thing. They become more like-minded and more unlike the rest of the organization while missing valuable new clues about the future. By supporting the like-minded, leaders trade off early smoothness for later grief. If you include and value naysayers, noise in the early stages will yield later, greater implementation.

Conclusion

One of the many lessons learnt in the COVID-19 remote learning experience was that, when it was necessary, schools could fundamentally change and transform at speed. Tired processes could be abandoned, and new innovations and skills could be trialled and embedded. Part of the reason for this success was the external forcing of a central purpose. There was a collective understanding and commitment to a 'main thing' and many historical bulwarks were left as teachers jointly charged at the line.

As schools return to on-campus teaching, it may be worth noting how powerful a coherent improvement agenda can be. With all parts pulling in the same direction, mountains can be moved. Challenges to unity of purpose will arise as the weeks come, making it more critical that school leaders take the opportunity now to consider their priorities moving forward.

In the design of ISQ's 2021 Teaching and Learning professional development suite, ISQ has made sustainability and strategic alignment core components of all support. While the program range is wide (including Lesson Observations, High-Performing Teams and Cultural Leadership, amongst others) all offerings are tied to the vision to support schools as they enact the research-based practices that improve student outcomes. This is because ISQ is committed to supporting every school to meet the

needs of every student. The strength of a school is secure where there is a highly effective teacher in every classroom. ISQ will continue to support school leaders through the 2021 programs to maintain coherence and enable excellent teaching and learning.

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