

Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

SPC Submission

October 2017

Executive summary and recommendations:

The NSW Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) is the professional body representing principals of government schools and colleges in NSW that have secondary school enrolments. The Council works closely with senior officials from the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Minister for Education and provides advice on matters relating to public secondary education in NSW.

The SPC recommends that the panel:

- Adopts a broad view of student, school and systems success. This includes a greater focus on innovation and the wide range of skills, capabilities and interests of secondary school students.
- Recognises that performance measures for all students in all sectors must take into account that the current Gonski 2.0 funding model allocates for need within sectors and not across them. There is a risk that this will undermine the integrity of any improvement measures that are correlated to individual student, school or sector funding or that compare students and schools across sectors.
- Encourages success measures based on long-term change, growth and improvement. Measuring progress and change in knowledge, skills and behaviours is more important for students and schools than narrow “annual snapshots” based on standardised testing. The panel has the opportunity to recommend a new approach which reflects the need for a broad set of measurements and recognises that mapping outcomes is a longitudinal process.
- Acknowledges the diversity of learning starting points for students, particularly in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, and the impact this has on educational outcomes.¹
- Recognises the value of offering multiple pathways through education for students and their communities.
- Recommends the establishment of an expert educational panel to undertake research into the best practices in student assessment for secondary education. The panel should provide guidance for the design of a broader set of school and system based measures and benchmarks.

1. What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

a) *What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?*

Research undertaken by The Foundation for Young Australians suggests it is more likely that a 15-year-old today will experience a ‘portfolio career’, potentially having 17 different jobs over five careers in their lifetime.² Given this prediction, students need to be equipped with transferrable skills such as problem solving, teamwork, creative thinking and digital literacy to allow them to navigate careers across a range of industries and professions.³ Therefore the diversity of skills and capabilities needed for multiple careers needs to be reflected by what students learn at school.

The development of future-focused skills and capabilities is already occurring in some state secondary school systems (e.g. Queensland and Victoria) with the development of a stronger focus on skills such as creativity. South Australia has developed programs to increase student agency using both the ACARA capabilities and a greater focus on metacognitive skills while in 2018 PISA testing will examine global competencies and in 2020 will assess creativity. In NSW the teaching of work and enterprise skills, when combined with the seven ACARA capabilities, covers a range of skills students require in the 21st century.⁴

Drawing on the Melbourne Declaration (2008) also offers a useful lens for considering the different skills students need to prepare them for the future. For example, Goal 2 provides a sustainable framework for student learning, defining three overarching goals for young Australians: to be successful learners, confident and creative individuals and; active and informed citizens.⁵ This focus aligns with the UNESCO pillars for students to learn to know, do, be and live together.⁶ The SPC believes that the Melbourne Declaration does not need to be rewritten, however it does need to be fully implemented. Ultimately it provides an excellent framework to prepare students for their post-school life as active and engaged global citizens.

Developing the creative and entrepreneurial skills of students is an important feature of a 21st century education, however this does not mean that critical thinking and problem-solving skills become redundant. The SPC supports the continuation of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) as an appropriate way to prepare students for post-school life. The HSC provides a pathway for students to refine and develop analytical skills which will still be relevant in the future. A strong commitment to vocational education and training delivered in schools and in partnership with other registered training organisations must also continue.

If we are committed to preparing students to be lifelong learners in the 21st century, we must also recognise that learning and assessment is more than simply literacy and numeracy. The SPC recommends that the panel adopts a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes knowledge and learning. This includes providing students with the opportunity to foster both academic and vocational skills in learning, assessment and accessing further tertiary study.

b) *How should school quality and educational success be measured?*

School quality and educational success should be measured through what we value. Traditionally, governments and system leaders have valued what can be easily measured and published. The SPC believes Australia has adopted a very narrow view of the assessment of student performance, school quality and educational success because it was easier and more cost-effective to do so.

Despite considerable evidence about the importance of personalisation and diversity, the majority of “success measures” rely on “test measures” that are “proxies” for individual, class and school learning. They are based on assumptions that averages and standard deviations represent the actual distribution of the student population. Many of the tests are rescaled each year to match historic data distributions. This includes the HSC and university entry assessment where there are no standards or benchmarks beyond ATAR cut-offs. This approach does not allow the statistical distribution to be varied for an exceptional cohort or distribution.⁷

Educational success should also focus on distributions of data. An immediate action to address this would be to present external and internal data in “band distributions” rather than averages. This would enable the data to be used to inform and educate the media and parents about which groups of students are doing well and which groups need additional support. A second action relates to educating the wider community and education professionals on the difference between “correlation” and “causation” in statistical measurement and to recognise that, in times of disruption and rapid change, the need for leadership (not just management) is critical. Secondary students and their teachers have changed and thus educational success is about seeing the direct link between their performance against standards and benchmarks and their own learning. In the longer term, the SPC wants a stronger focus on progress and improvement as measures of success for students, teachers and schools. The tendency of past governments to use “similar schools” comparisons based on narrow factors such as ICSEA does not recognise that by comparing a school and its cohorts to that school over time presents a much fairer view and answers the question “how is our school good?” rather than the lazy “how good is our school?”⁸ This has resulted in an overall loss of confidence by parents and voters in the Australian education system. Instead, the SPC believes we should be asking “What do Australian schools do well and how do we know?”

With the exception of literacy and numeracy, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) has delegated the decision to teach and assess the full range of capabilities to schools and school sectors. This approach allows schools to contextualise their teaching and learning programs to the needs to students. However, this has also resulted in an overreliance on measuring success and determining post-school pathways through standardised tests such as NAPLAN, ATAR scores and achieving minimum literacy and numeracy standards in NAPLAN.

The SPC believes there is a need for a more sophisticated range of measures. For example, successful schools have used the external data provided by federal and state governments to triangulate their own school based data. Internal school data provides an insight into attendance and transition patterns, engagement, wellbeing, participation in extra-curricular programs, post-school destinations, mandatory A-E grade reporting, competency checklists, health reports and personalised learning plans. When this data is matched with the School Excellence Framework, teacher standards and capability benchmarks one gains a much deeper understanding of the components of school quality and educational success. It is unfortunate that these measures are highly valued by schools yet have been poorly used by systems to show school progress. Summative measures are no substitute.

The SPC encourages the design of more coherent and forward-thinking data sets for use in schools. This should be supported by professional learning to enhance understanding and encourage the better use of school based data sets to measure success and impact. Looking outside the education sector to business and NGOs also offers an insight into different ways of collecting and analysing data. Examples include:

- Evidence of the importance of using “small data” with individuals, schools and targeted groups of students;⁹
- Sophisticated technology-based data analytics that observe, track and plan for behavioural

patterns; and

- Computer “key stroke” analysis for assessing work flows, information seeking and problem-solving skills.

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

System level solutions are essential to supporting ongoing improvement. The focus of government data which measures schools and school systems as being “above or below average” has a negative impact on public opinion, especially in a country where many adults do not understand the concept of “average”. The SPC also notes the significant (and growing) correlation in NSW between student results in high stakes testing and the family occupation and education index (FOEI). The FOEI is a robust, evidence-based measure of relative advantage and a reliable predictor of relative student performance. The SPC recommends that the SES formula used for the nongovernment sector be replaced with the Australia-wide use of a FOEI across all sectors.

Using FOEI as a method to allocate equity funding to schools will also allow better monitoring and evaluation. This is particularly important in relation to the expected impact of the federal government’s decision to reduce the federal funding for government schools to a maximum 20% of the SRS.

- a) *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?*

There is a need to ensure that equity funding is located in schools and managed by schools. This recognises that each school and student cohort is unique and allows school leaders to use funding effectively to implement targeted and intensive programs to improve the learning outcomes for all students. Examples of effective and efficient programs that have been implemented in schools include:

- Evaluative thinking
- School planning using products, practices and milestones
- Results/Outcomes based accountability¹⁰
- Action research
- Project logic and action planning
- Design thinking/appreciative inquiry

There is growing inequality in student and school performance on high stakes testing and a divergence between high and low SEA (ICSEA) schools. There is little use of evidence that shows what individual schools and their students do well. In NSW, there are few improvement measures that are used effectively across schools and there is reliance on aggregated data, rather than data that tracks the learning progress of disadvantaged, exceptional and vulnerable students.

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

The SPC believes principals and teachers should make the decisions about the ways they can improve practice and outcomes in the context of their school. This should be supported by access to professional networks, high quality research and system based support. The NSW government school planning and reporting process reinforces this approach.

Based on the work of Simon Sinek, individual schools access data which maps the progress and improvement being made across a range of student, school and community measures.¹¹ Schools report their progress annually, conduct an annual self-assessment against School Excellence Framework benchmarks and undertake external validation once every 3-5 years. The state-wide data from 2015-2018 has not yet been aggregated, however the SPC recommends the panel visits a number of secondary settings in NSW as case studies of the quality of the school improvement practices.

ii) *What works best for whom and in what circumstances?*

It is important to recognise the diverse nature of schools. The “equal treatment of unequals” does not result in improved practice and outcomes. However, what does work is being able to target resources to where they are most needed. There are significant challenges in providing access to a diverse curriculum, especially for students in rural and remote communities. The SPC supports system based solutions including Distance Education, Aurora College and specialist units for students whose learning needs cannot be met in mainstream classes.

Student feedback through school and system-wide surveys such as Tell Them from Me suggests that time needs to be made within the secondary curriculum for “passion projects” where students choose both the project and the means to demonstrate their own learning. The SPC recognises the value of student self-assessment and peer assessment in engaging secondary students with their own learning. A greater focus on personalised learning and assessment is central to meeting the diverse needs and interests of students.

iii) *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 governance of assessment, evaluation and performance measurement has been poorly managed in Australia, creating significant risk for students and schools. This is evidenced by the ongoing questions by teachers and researchers about the design and difficulty of the 2017 NAPLAN tests and the variable requirements for meeting teacher standards across the country.

The increasing number of external organisations marketing products to schools relating to professional learning, coaching modules and assessment tools also raises governance concerns. While some have strong evidence-based platforms others are deeply contested. The SPC believes strongly in school and profession-led learning design and in developing the skills of teachers in the implementation and analysis of assessment and learning data. This approach has the advantage of being both relatively cheap and bespoke to context. The SPC has concerns about the proliferation of commercial products and recommends that the expert panel establishes a quality standard for these products linked to the ACARA capabilities, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and the Australian Principal Standard.

The SPC also recommends that the review panel asks the proposed expert panel to investigate the development of tools and continua (such as the NSW Literacy Continuum) to assist teachers to measure the longitudinal patterns of student learning, change and performance in each of the ACARA capabilities. Where states have these tools, they should be shared nationally.

Further, the SPC supports additional, high-quality professional learning for teachers at proficient, highly accomplished and lead levels of the Teacher Standards in addressing Standards 3, 5 and 6 in relation to assessment, evaluation and data analytics.

- iv) *How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulations and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting an application of investment?*

In order to answer this question, the SPC defines these terms in the following ways:

- Compliance - regulations, school registration, “transparency”, accountability. These tools align with the management practices of the last century and are the same management practices that have failed to improve student performance because they focus on management and school operations rather than instruction. Efficient and focused management is important but not sufficient in creating improvement.
- Improvement – targets, standards, quality assurance (validation), ACARA capability benchmarks, monitoring, reporting. These tools align with the instructional and professional focus of the work schools need to do to meet the requirements of the National Education Agreement. Targets in relation to attendance, engagement, retention and achievement have been part of school planning and reporting for almost 15 years.

The SPC recommends that the panel takes an “improvement” focus towards the critical enablers and key points of leverage suggested for secondary education.

- v) *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?*

Evidence from NSW secondary government settings indicates that where schools design teaching and learning programs suited to their context there is a positive shift in learning practices and outcomes. This evidence supports the capacity of schools (and groups of schools) to design and evaluate their own approaches to instruction and learning. Recent NSW educational reforms, including a commitment to more localised decision making, have encouraged secondary schools to be more innovative in their instructional strategies including introducing project based learning, enterprise learning and collegiate curriculum delivery in the senior school.

The SPC recommends caution in relation to the uncritical adoption of “fads” (e.g. The Shanghai method) and suggests principals and teachers should have input into the evidence base for successful secondary school initiatives in teaching, learning and assessment.

3. Are there barriers to implementing these improvements? If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

The SPC suggests the following potential barriers need to be considered:

- A history of failed implementation of so-called “good ideas” in Australian education. This includes a lack of courage by politicians and bureaucrats who are risk-averse and negatively disposed towards innovation.
- If students are to avoid becoming “Black Swans”¹² we need governments to take risks to improve how we measure and define success and school performance.
- The introduction of additional “red tape”, compliance and intervention that works against the features of innovation and improvement.¹³

- A history of placing unequal value on different pathways through and beyond school. Focusing on an ATAR based university entry as the only post-school pathway damages the Australian economy in the short to medium term.¹⁴
- A history of short term, “top down” initiatives (especially in assessment) focusing on high stakes, external testing and compliance. Successful reforms in other countries have focused on student learning, intervention and empowerment.¹⁵
- A history of uninformed discussion about Australian education focusing on “finding the people to blame.” This results in both confirmation bias and “teacher bashing” by individuals and groups with vested interests.
- A deep cynicism within the teaching profession about the failure of governments to plan change in collaboration with school leaders and educational experts. There has been little questioning about why the appointment of business leaders, bureaucrats and politicians to educational boards has not been balanced with appointments of individuals with deep educational expertise.
- A culture of self-interest in the identification and active promotion of “one fix-all solution.” The distractors in secondary education include, but are not limited to:
 - School autonomy
 - The teaching of phonics
 - Descriptions of critical and creative thinking as “soft skills”
 - Minimum Band 8 NAPLAN or equivalent requirements for the award of the HSC

¹ Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd, ‘Uneven playing field: the state of Australia’s schools’, (2016) Centre for Policy Development. Accessed online: <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/The-State-of-Australias-Schools.pdf> (date of access 17 October 2017)

² Foundation for Young Australians, The New Work Order (2017) <http://www.fya.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2015/08/fya-future-of-work-report-final-lr.pdf>

³ Mitchell Institute, Preparing Young People for the Future of Work (2017) <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Preparing-young-people-for-the-future-ofwork.pdf>

⁴ General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, see: <http://v7-5.australiancurriculum.edu.au/generalcapabilities/overview/general-capabilities-in-the-australian-curriculum>

⁵ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, ‘Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians’, (2008). Accessed online: http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf (date of access 17 October 2017)

⁶ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, ‘Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians’, (2008). Accessed online: http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf (date of access 17 October 2017)

⁷ Todd Rose, The End of Average: how we succeed in a world that values sameness (2016) HarperOne: San Francisco

⁸ Tammy Campbell, Selected at seven: The relationship between teachers' judgments and assessments of pupils, and pupils' stream placements, (2014) University of London: Institute of Education, <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/21491/1/qsswp1410.pdf>

⁹ Pasi Sahlberg, ‘Small data for big change: what does it mean for teachers?’, (2017) The Alberta Teachers’ Association Magazine, Summer Issue: 18-20.

¹⁰ Mark Friedman, ‘Results Based Accountability: producing measurable improvements for customers and communities.’, (2009) paper presented at The 3rd OECD World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy. Accessed online: <http://www.oecd.org/site/progresskorea/44120813.pdf> (date of access: 17 October 2017)

¹¹ Simon Sinek, Start with Why: how great leaders inspire everyone to take action, (2011) Penguin Books: London.

¹² Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 'The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable', (2007) Random House: New York.

¹³ Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly and Saad Rizvi, 'Oceans of Innovation: The Atlantic, the Pacific global leadership and the future of education', (2012) Institute for Public Policy Research, https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2012/08/oceans-ofinnovation_Aug2012_9543.pdf?noredirect=1

¹⁴ John Halsey quoted in Eliza Borrello, 'Is Australia too focused on sending country kids to university', Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) report, published 27 September 2017. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-27/is-australia-too-obsessed-with-sending-country-kids-touni/8989940>

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas cited in David Hopkins, 'The Past, Present and Future of School Improvement and System Reform', paper presented at the ACEL 2017 National Conference, 4-6 October 2017.