



Catholic School Parents Australia

SUBMISSION

**REVIEW TO ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN
AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS**

November 2017

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

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008)* states the current aspirations and ideals for national education in Australia. The goals are explicit, simply stated and far reaching:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence, and

Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens.

The following discussion outlines ways in which the ongoing challenge to achieve these goals could be better addressed.

The focus of Catholic education is on the whole person (cognitive, social, physical, ethical and spiritual) and provides the varied and needs driven opportunities for each student to maximise their potential. Educational success for students in Catholic education would presume success within all the listed dimensions of a holistic education. And just as it takes a whole village to educate the child, a key theme of this submission will be on the role of parents, ‘the first and most important educators of their own children ... they are educators because they are parents’ (Pope John Paul II, 1994).

In exploring what educational success for Australian students should look like, it also needs to be viewed in the wider context of what Australia needs for our future as we transition from a resource based economy to a knowledge economy. The Mitchell Report, *Preparing Young People for the Future of Work*, highlights the current reality where youth unemployment for 15-24 year-olds is rising, and their employment is often part-time or casual work or for no remuneration to just get a start, and often not in their qualified area of expertise. The report does not paint an encouraging outlook for many twenty-first century school leavers.

One measure of educational success needs to be the ability of all school students to transition to work or study or a combination of both. This requires appropriate school curriculum; high quality teaching staff and school leaders; equitable government resourcing of schools to more fully support the differentiated needs of students; the engagement of parents in their children’s learning; an employer voice which is not dominated by monetary gain; and a shift, led by government and the teaching profession, to a national culture which holds education and the teaching profession in high regard. Last for emphasis is the need for high quality early childhood education for all students, a common characteristic evident around education in high performing countries.

Various sources recommend that as part of their school studies, students should have not only the appropriated content/process knowledge and skills, but also have had multiple opportunities to develop skills such as:

- Innovation - entrepreneurial skills;
- Lifelong-learning skills to function as responsible global citizens;
- Thinking skills;
- Communication, collaboration and teamwork skills;

- Social skills including relationship building;
- ICT skills;
- Skills based around philosophy and the psychology of learning;
- Students as researchers skills (Fielding, 2004); and
- Negotiation and conflict-management skills.

Fundamental to the commencement of each child's learning journey is the need for a rich home life to nurture cognitive and socio-emotional development and participation in high quality early childhood education. Institutional reform is required to establish a culture of parent engagement through embedded practices within school communities. This will require building the capacity of school principals leading school improvement teams (Hopkins, 2013) to skill staff in better partnering with parents around the learning and well-being of their children. A tool currently under development through ACER will assist measurement of parent engagement within schools and this could become a vital gauge of this key precursor to educational success.

A recent OECD report shows that in Australia student disadvantage is a particular detractor from future success, more evident here than in comparable countries in terms of education measures. This is unacceptable and urgent efforts should be enacted to address this disadvantage, such that all Australian students are given the tailored opportunities to a world class education. All students can't be excellent, but they can be successful, and all should have the opportunity to take their place in society after an education that facilitates their immediate/eventual gainful employment – part of Fullan's (2011) *moral imperative*. Schleicher (2017) states that, *'Perhaps the most impressive outcome of world-class school systems is that they deliver high quality across the entire school system so that every student benefits from excellent teaching'*. Further, he states, *'achieving greater equity in education is not only a social justice imperative, it is also a way to use resources more effectively, and to increase the supply of skills that fuel economic growth and social cohesion'*. It is an imperative that more equitable resourcing by government must be achieved more effectively both within and between all Australian sectors of schooling.

A foundational shift required for greater educational success is improved status for education and the teaching profession. Countries which enjoy comparatively greater educational success often place greater value on education resulting in teaching being highly esteemed as a first choice profession of the academically able with entrance pre-requisites to match. These high-performing countries often welcome pedagogical innovation fuelled by cutting edge professional development as opposed to bureaucratically dominated conservatism. For a start, such educational shift in the psyche needs to be led by governments and the teaching profession to make teaching more intellectually attractive and held in higher regard by the wider community.

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

Three proposed areas for improvement will be discussed, these include:

- Innovation around teacher training and on-going professional development of school staff;
- Principal and leadership development and support; and

- Parent engagement in their children's learning.

Innovation around teacher training and on-going professional development of school staff

In order to educate students within contemporary, world class school settings, professional learning which incorporates a range of academic, vocational and broader capabilities need to be offered. For example, it is proposed that pre-service teacher education programs should include units of study and cross-course embedded themes on: parent engagement – strategies for parents to engage/support their children's learning at home; social and emotional development; the teaching of children with special needs; neural networks and neuroplasticity. Repositories of best practice within these themes need to be established and made easily accessible to school communities.

As an example, in 2013, a research project was conducted by Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM), Department of Education and Training (DET) and Australian Catholic University (ACU) into the *Partnerships in Learning Initiative – Enhancing Quality Teaching (PiL project)*. The project which was funded by the Australian Government Smarter Schools National Partnerships (SSNP) reform aimed to enhance pre-service teacher training (PST) by immersing pre-service teachers within a low SES school over a two-year period. Such initiatives for the pre-service teachers included a Community Engagement placement and a Professional Experience Program (PEP) placement in the same school community. The pre-service teachers richly gained from this professional experience, particularly in terms of better understanding the context of local families and community engagement strategies as an ongoing focus for quality teaching and learning. Such programs could be promoted more widely across universities and made available through a repository of resources.

Principal and leadership development and support

Much work has been done around the strategic role that school leaders play in the quality of school education. All systems need to have succession plans that attract highly successful, aspiring leaders whose key focus is a teaching-learning agenda which is centred-around the learning journey of each student and staff member. Positive growth mindsets need to dominate the learning of all stakeholders (students, staff and parents) and the school principal in collaboration with the school improvement team need to be the champions in leading this.

The professional development of aspiring leaders needs to be informed by such research as that undertaken by Jensen and Downing (*Preparing to Lead*, 2017) who studied leadership development in top PISA performing countries (Hong Kong, Ontario, Singapore and Shanghai) and found that, '*they all develop aspiring principals by requiring them to undertake a real change initiative in schools*' focussed on some real teaching-learning challenge as part of a long-term intervention to improve quality. '*Aspiring principals must collaborate, set a vision, solve a problem and share responsibilities – all skills they will need once they are school leaders*'. Their research also found that on-going development of experienced principals needs to match where their career journey is at and be centred-around the development needs of the principals. The aspiring leaders are challenged/supported to build their professional practical knowledge (Butler, 1994) through a supportive process of action learning.

An OECD report (2016) discusses how effective school leaders promote a positive school climate, collaboration amongst teachers, and teachers' professional development which is adapted to student learning needs. These leaders welcome and encourage teacher and parent participation in school decisions, and create ways to involve parents in the life of the school and their children's learning. Effective leaders set high expectations for student achievement while nurturing student wellbeing (OECD, 2016, Paris). Unfortunately, the contemporary image of stressed-out/burnt-out school principals does not attract many aspiring to school leadership as part of system succession planning – this urgently needs to be addressed by governments and systems of education.

Further focus is encouraged around leaders of science, technology, business, economics, education coming together to collaborate towards better understanding how we learn and to make learning real and positively impacting for students. For example, informed principals can lead the way in providing contemporary understandings of the science of learning to assist teachers in improving their craft. To optimise their learning, students need teachers trained in the neuroscience of how learning takes place in order for teachers to better understand the elements needed to create a culture of learning, enhance memory, attention and motivation, and to develop conditions for learning and collaboration to ultimately optimise student learning outcomes. Leading an agenda towards a better understanding of how students learn is important to providing a contemporary and engaging world class learning environment.

Parent engagement in their children's learning

Over 45 years of research (e.g. Pushor; Epstein; Mapp; Henderson; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)) indicates that children will learn more successfully when parents are positively connected and supported in guiding their children alongside educators. Significantly, Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) is in partnership with ARACY and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in a Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) funded research project to identify best practice in engaging parents in their children's learning. Informed by the analyses of cross-sectoral principal surveys, interviews with principals and interviews with focus groups of parents, parent engagement tool kits outlining effective strategies for parent engagement will be developed for principals, teachers and parents.

CSPA endorses key elements of parent engagement as noted by ARACY, these include:

- Required systemic change around parent engagement at all levels;
- The need for schools to be obligated to embed parent engagement practices;
- Informed through both initial teacher education courses and professional development opportunities which include parent engagement skilling, build the capacity of school leaders and educators to better engage with student families; and
- Embedding a national definition of parent engagement and parent engagement survey tool to assist in measuring parent engagement within school communities towards implementing more effective parent engagement practices (ARACY, 2017 (personal communication)).

How can system enablers be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

CSPA proposes that:

- Informed by the AITSL Standards for Teachers, more effective national expectations and standards need to be identified and implemented for pre-service teacher education programs.
- Higher university entrance requirements need to be agreed upon for all teacher graduate programs as part of a plan to raise the status of the teaching profession.
- High expectations around accreditation standards for teachers and pre-service teacher education courses to be implemented as foundations to raising professional quality.
- Principal accreditation at a local-system-jurisdictional level would be more effectively responsive to local/system/cluster needs than a national approach.
- Accreditation of principals and teachers needs to explicitly contribute to effective teaching-learning, professional quality and succession planning.
- Higher national benchmarks for NAPLAN would be more meaningful along with the attainment of required minimal standards of education prior to a student transitioning from school, e.g. as established in WA.
- A local/system approach to Yr.1 testing is more informative and resource efficient than a mandated national approach.
- Each student, their family and their teacher(s) should be informed of the student's tracked learning profile together with pathways to address learning shortfalls and preferred learning options.
- Student-centred reports on learning must be written in language which is easily understood by students and parents.
- In addition to written reports, reporting processes should include meaningful and unhurried discussion as part of an on-going process, not some set event in time.

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

As referred to earlier, over 45 years of research on parent engagement has generated overwhelmingly positive outcomes in support of parent engagement as an influence on student learning. Take for example Emerson *et.al.* (2012) who note the important distinction between *involving* parents in schooling and *engaging* parents in learning, and note that a key to facilitating positive change in a child's academic performance is the engagement of parents in learning outcomes in the home. Further, they state that parent engagement has a positive impact on many indicators of student achievement, including:

- higher grades and test scores;
- enrolment in higher level programs;
- higher successful completion of classes;
- lower drop-out rates;
- higher graduation rates; and

- a greater likelihood of commencing post-secondary education.

Emerson *et.al.* (2012) continue that beyond educational achievement, parent engagement is associated with many indicators of student development including:

- more regular school attendance;
- better social skills;
- improved behaviour;
- better adaptation to school;
- increased social capital;
- a greater sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning;
- greater engagement in school work; and
- a stronger belief in the importance of education.

(Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012).

A Houtenville and Conway (2008) study of 10,000 eighth-grade students in the US found that family ‘*dinnertime engagement*’ had the equivalent effect of \$1000 in per-pupil funding per annum. Bryk *et.al.* (2010) found that schools with strong parent engagement were over time four times more likely to improve student reading and ten times more likely to improve student gains in Maths. These are outstanding gains from cost effective interventions - an observation also made by the current Education Minister in relation to embedding parent engagement practices!

With such convincing outcomes, it would seem that the timing is right to have an explicit focus on implementing strategies that promote parent engagement to lift student performance and with a proposed intended consequence to enhance the status of the teaching. The research and discourse around parent engagement is too compelling to have it remain in educational limbo. The well-researched documentation around *parent knowledge* (Pushor) could be a useful catalyst towards implementing parent engagement practices.

Dedicated resourcing is required to upskill principals, teachers and parents in strategies that facilitate more effective and efficient partnering with parents around their children’s learning, and also to upskill parents with strategies to engage with their children around learning. For example, parent professional learning around good parenting, including the provision of a safe, secure and intellectually stimulating home environment, pre-school reading, and modelling the setting of realistic educational expectations, goals and aspirations, all contribute positively to the school performance of their children. This requires leadership from government, education systems, schools and parent associations, and a deliberate investment of time, leadership and resourcing of parent engagement professional development for principals, staff and parents.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

Various research suggests that barriers to implementing parent engagement strategies in schools include:

- Schools and parents having sufficient knowledge and understanding of preferred parent engagement strategies and the limitations of 'only' parent involvement.
- The limited promotion of parent engagement by schools and the general lack of parent engagement best practice examples.
- The lack of a parent engagement resource repository which is easily accessible to principals, teaching staff and parents.
- The current culture of schooling that lacks strong parent-school partnership.
- The current lack of connect between parent engagement and student achievement.
- A lack of leadership around parent engagement at national and state levels of government.
- A lack of system infrastructure to support sustained and authentic parent engagement.
- A general lack of leadership around parent engagement in schools.

Summary

The tendency of various agencies to all too readily criticise the work of teachers, draw unfavourable attention to teacher quality, and rush to judgment as it were, underplays challenges facing principals and teachers in their day to day work, particularly in environments where commitment, resources and infrastructure fall short of best C21 standards.

The Gonski Review has the opportunity to say to government and the community that teaching is a noble and highly valued vocation and one that is vital to the future of society. The public discourse in the educational space needs to be far more respectful, otherwise the already high drift of young teachers from the profession will continue and school leaders will continue to be in short supply, especially in remote and isolated contexts.

Proposed changes described in this submission to pre-service teacher programs and authentic professional learning of aspiring principals and practising principals could go some way to raising school student performance to that of top-performing countries. It is proposed that pre-service teacher education programs should include units of study and cross-course embedded themes on: parent engagement – strategies for parents to engage/support their children's learning at home; social and emotional development; the teaching of children with special needs; neural networks and neuroplasticity.

Greater equity in education both within and between all sectors of Australian education needs to be pursued by governments with an energetic passion and informed understanding to get it right. We need to adopt Fullan's moral imperative to drive the changes to education that *promote equity and excellence* to attain the principled goal that *All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens* (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008)).

Parents are the first and most important on-going educators of their children and it is proposed that a national commitment to parent engagement promoted at all levels of government and across all

sectors of schooling could be a key to raising the performance of students as well as the status of the profession. Parent engagement is a very cost efficient intervention as noted by the Education Minister, and this submission refers to research which, for example, found that schools with strong parent engagement were over four times more likely to improve student reading and ten times more likely to improve student gains in Maths. This submission also refers to research which concludes that the implementation of effective parent engagement strategies has been shown to deliver: higher student grades and test scores, lower drop-out rates, and a greater likelihood of students transitioning to post-secondary education.

CSPA are proud to be in partnership with ARACY and USQ in a DET funded project which is identifying best practice in engaging parents in their children's learning and which in 2018 will deliver cross-sectoral tool kits outlining effective parent engagement strategies for principals, teachers and parents.

Issues as outlined in this submission have a moral imperative (Fullan) that overrides the current public discourse that persistently suggests that such issues as national testing is where it is at.