

Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base

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The Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) is a professional body that represents the interests of principals, deputy principals and assistant principals from government secondary schools across Australia. ASPA works with the profession to shape a paradigm of leadership and learning in order to create a better, preferred future for all students in Australia's government secondary schools.

We are committed to ensuring that high quality government secondary education is provided to young people no matter what their geographic, social or personal circumstances.

Introduction:

This response must be read in the context that any significant change will be reliant on effective teaching and effective school leadership. These have been identified as the two major influences in improving outcomes for students in schools. The concern about the quality of teachers has been addressed through the TEMAG recommendations and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers but the quality of school leaders must be addressed.

Greater autonomy was touted as a way to improve student outcomes, however, an August Report from the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia titled "Education and Health Standing Committee IPS Report Card - The Report of the Inquiry into the Independent Public Schools Initiative" found no significant improvement in student outcomes in schools with greater autonomy.

Firstly we must clarify what autonomy is: "Autonomy is transformational and contextual. Professional, operational and personal autonomy for school leaders enables them to improve school and student performance in collaboration with their school community. It requires school leaders to understand the changing global environment and to have 'the freedom to innovate and the capacity to act'. With autonomy, the capacity of school leaders to transform, personalise learning, embed partnerships, optimise teacher performance and drive sustainable school improvement is enriched and shared through networks of professional support".

Secondly there must be autonomy over the things that will have an impact.

“Autonomy and accountability go together: greater autonomy in decisions relating to curricula, assessments and resource allocation tend to be associated with better student performance, particularly when schools operate within a culture of accountability”. (PISA IN FOCUS 2011/9 (October) – © OECD 2011)

In our current system, most jurisdictions have little flexibility relating to the curriculum.

We cannot adopt a “one size fits all” approach. The focus must be twofold:

1. Improving the quality of and access to data at all levels. There has been a systematic reliance on the ‘big data’, which does not give the information needed for change at an individual student level. It is essential that the focus for teachers and school leaders is informed by ‘small data’ which is made available in an accessible and timely manner.
2. Improving the capacity of teachers and school leaders to interpret evidence, develop and implement strategies based on that evidence and evaluate the results.

We must not get locked into traditional data sets. ASPA defined schools of the 21st Century as EDU Ecosystems, which are:

- Systems thinking
- Dynamic
- Healthy and thriving
- Sustainable
- Innovative
- Fertile
- Contemporary

How will this be captured in the data sets?

We also have to start measuring what is important. The Prime Minister has made a compelling case for Australians to be transformed to become “more *productive, more innovative, more technologically sophisticated and more imaginative*”. But, for the schooling sector to play its part in such a transformation, it needs the Commonwealth Government to drive the national agenda away from what has been (that is an attempt to create a *better version of 1960s schools*), to what it needs to be, which is a *new learning paradigm* where *learning to learn and inquiry* is every bit as important as what is learnt. The Australian Curriculum incorporates a key set of lifelong learning skills and processes: these are the General Capabilities undertaken through a subject-based curriculum and the very essence of the intended spirit of the Australian Curriculum. We must start to measure these important skills and leave the process of university selection to the universities.

Our submission focuses on the key points in the DRAFT Report:

Monitoring outcomes, performance benchmarking and competition between schools alone are insufficient to achieve gains in education outcomes. They must be complemented by the use of data and evidence to identify, and then apply, the most effective programs, policies and teaching practices.

Whilst we agree with this point the critical element is the ability for teachers and school leaders to interpret and use the data effectively **within the context of their students and school community**. It is essential that the capacity of teachers and school leaders be enhanced so that they can effectively use the data. The data in itself should not be used as a measuring stick to other schools, as it is inherently unique to that school, but as a measure of progress. The quality of the data supplied must be usable so that educators can drill down to individual performance and tailor individual improvement plans. It is important to have this 'small data' available quickly in order for it to be useful.

A national education evidence base is broader than a national data repository and requires two key capabilities:

- a 'top-down' capability, for monitoring, benchmarking and assessing performance in achieving objectives at all levels of the system, as well as promoting transparency and accountability, and informing resource allocation
- a 'bottom-up' capability that evaluates the effectiveness in education policies, programs and teaching practices, enabling systematic identification of ways to improve student achievement.

'Top down' capability is important but more work must be done to determine 'value add measures' rather than the current reliance on point in time measures of student achievement, captured in National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), PISA, TIMSS scores which do not provide a full picture of the impact that schools have on student learning. As stated in the DRAFT Report "value-added measures are preferred because they take into account two additional aspects of student achievement: progress over time and external influences that schools have little control over. That is, value-added analysis focuses on the value that a school has added to a student's learning, over and above that expected given the backgrounds and prior levels of achievement of students within the school. These measures are a useful starting point for further analysis of high-performing schools to shed light on school effectiveness and build understanding of how to improve education outcomes".

This 'bottom up' evaluation is important, and strategies designed to strengthen this are needed. Programs / strategies are not always transferable and this is where support to interpret the data and develop "contextualised solutions" is important. Too often programs and teaching practices that are effective in one context fail in another. We need effective teachers and leaders to drive the change agenda.

The 'bottom up' capability will provide alternative teaching strategies for highly skilled teachers to "adapt and adopt" to their particular context. Collection of this data will also contribute to the national evidence base.

There is much education data collected, imposing a substantial compliance burden across schools and ECEC services. This burden can be reduced by collecting data more cost-effectively and making better use of it.

- Access to, and sharing of, data can also be improved through changes to privacy protections and processes for collecting, sharing and linking of data.

ASPA supports better national education data without placing an extra burden on schools. We also call on states and territories to follow through on their 2009 endorsement of a unique student identifier which will facilitate better data collection on, and tracking of, individual students to assist in developing individual based plans.

There are some gaps in existing data collections. But the largest gap of all is in the evaluation of policies, programs and teaching practices in Australian schools and ECEC services to identify what works best, for whom and in what circumstances.

- Without improving and applying evidence to policy making and teaching in schools and classrooms, there is a substantial risk that increased resourcing of schools will continue to deliver disappointing outcomes.

Whilst we agree that there are gaps in existing data collection and in particular evaluation of policies, programs and teaching practices to identify what works best, for whom and in what circumstances 10000 different schools across Australia present 10000 different challenges.

Quality teaching, quality leadership and school autonomy have been widely referred to as the keys to an improved education system and educational outcomes. There has to be recognition that schools have changed and the demands on school leaders have changed.

Effective school leadership is essential. If the school leader does not have the capacity and skills to implement policies and programs in the context of the school that they lead, then it is destined for failure. Investment in the development of school leaders is essential to the success of the system and the nation.

The Australian, state and territory governments must take a shared and cooperative approach to developing a high-quality and relevant Australian education evidence base. There are already effective arrangements for monitoring and performance reporting. With respect to implementing the bottom-up capability, governments should:

- put in place a new Education Agreement (building on previous agreements) that defines the objectives of, and framework for, commissioning and applying evaluative research about what works best
- assign an institution to be responsible for the implementation of the evaluative research framework, which is accountable to, and funded by, all governments
- specify the assigned institution's governance arrangements, functions and operations.

Whilst the call for a more collaborative approach to generating evidence and clear research priorities is welcome, more discussion is needed on how this could be best facilitated and by whom. We believe that

Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) which has an excellent record of delivering outcomes and working across federal and state / territory governments would be well placed to pursue this charter.

Conclusion

Whilst we support and encourage a culture of using evidence to inform and improve teaching practice and decision making in schools, we caution that the data will be of little use if it is simply taken at face value and if teachers and school leaders do not have the capacity to interpret and use the data effectively for student growth. It is also crucial that the data is well differentiated, delivered in a timely manner (the current NAPLAN turn around is not useful for individual student planning).

Schools need to be judged on improvement rather than overall scores and value adding needs to be seen as a valuable measure of success. As such the testing shouldn't have a ceiling so that students who perform in the top deciles are also able to see improvement (or not) over subsequent testing periods. At the moment they flatten out and no progress is apparent.

Both Hattie (*Visible Learning*) and William (*Teachers developing assessment for learning: impact on student achievement*) talk about the importance of data generated through formative assessment (assessment for learning) and the positive effect this has on learning. Unfortunately the pressure in schools to improve the results achieved by students in externally-set tests and examinations precludes its use and this must be addressed.

Any development of an improved dataset must be accompanied by investment in teacher and school leader development to enable them to use the data effectively and for others to monitor appropriately.