



The National Voice for all Primary School Principals

---

**Submission to**  
**Productivity Commission**  
**Education and Training Workforce: Schools**  
**August 2011**

**Norm Hart**  
APPA President

Australian Primary Principals Association  
16/71 Leichhardt Street  
PO Box 4578  
KINGSTON ACT 2604  
Telephone: 02 62399510  
Email: [natoffice@appa.asn.au](mailto:natoffice@appa.asn.au)  
Website: [www.appa.asn.au](http://www.appa.asn.au)



## **Introduction**

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the third phase of the *Productivity Commission Education and Training Workforce Study*. In examining the workforce of the schools sector the Productivity Commission is addressing issues that are central to the long-term improvement of Australian education.

APPA is the national professional association for primary school principals in Australia and is formed by affiliated state and territory Government, Catholic and Independent primary school principals' associations in each state and territory. APPA represents approximately 7,200 Government, Catholic and Independent principals across Australia.

In recent years, APPA has undertaken a large body of professional work including the development of policy positions, discussion and issues papers; commissioned research; involvement in, and preparation for, conferences, forums and meetings; and, the preparation of submissions to reviews (e.g. Funding Inquiry), parliamentary inquiries (e.g. Teacher Education, School Libraries) and the Australian Curriculum consultations. APPA is represented on the *Staff in Australian Schools (SiAS)* Advisory Committee.

With respect to the questions posed in the Issues Paper, APPA considers it vital that a 'primary school' perspective is provided and so begins the submission by establishing the context of primary schools.

The APPA submission to the study is organised under the following headings:

- § Recognising the purpose and context of Australia's primary schools
- § Developing high performing principals to lead autonomous schools
- § Attracting quality people to the profession and improving teacher education
- § Remuneration and performance-based pay
- § Targeting disadvantaged students and getting reform measures right
- § Parity resourcing and the funding of primary schools

## **APPA's research-based policy positions**

APPA has a history of establishing partnerships with universities and research institutions in order to produce an evidence base from which to develop its policy positions.

In a commissioned study undertaken in 2000, a survey of 2,500 primary school principals

revealed considerable disquiet about the level of resources available in primary schools and the ways in which they were allocated.<sup>i</sup>

The history of the differential funding of primary and secondary schools was the focus of the second study. The report *Resourcing Australian Primary Schools: A historical perspective* had its findings published in 2002<sup>ii</sup>

This historical study led to the third, an empirical investigation of how primary schools are resourced and whether the resources were sufficient to achieve the goals set for them. Its findings were published in 2004.<sup>iii</sup>

The report of the fourth study, *In the Balance: The Future of Australia's Primary Schools*, was published in 2007. *In the Balance* is the report of an investigation into the state of Australian primary schooling. The study employed a random sample of 160 Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools.<sup>iv</sup> It examined the aims of primary education, the curriculum, the staffing and the funding.

The report of the fifth study *Targeting support for high-need students in primary schools* was conducted in 2010 and published in 2011.<sup>v</sup>

### **Recognising the purpose and context of Australia's primary schools**

Most governments see the quality of their education systems as a key to economic growth and prosperity. Schooling is considered to be a way of 'building human capital': that is, generating a workforce that is highly skilled and innovative, so that the State and nation can compete successfully in the global marketplace. Economists encourage governments to invest in education (or human capital) because to do so will lead to a more productive economy.

Viewing educational funding as an economic investment encourages schooling to be framed in the terms used by economists. The complex process of schooling might then be seen as a series of variables that yield outcomes. This view calculates the mixture of inputs that will maximise the desired outcomes. The term 'human capital' should not be seen to capture what a school education, and most particularly, a primary school education, is all about. There is a risk that the use of the term might artificially narrow the scope of a study undertaken on the resourcing and performance of schools or of the contribution schools make to society.

The higher moral purpose of education – preparing children for a meaningful life in which they contribute to family and society – means that schools must ensure children develop good character, have the capacity to make thoughtful decisions about life, work and health, understand the world in which they live, and enjoy art, culture, science and mathematics. The list is long and primary schools are where the foundation should be laid in partnership with parents.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* issued by MCEECDYA conflates the purposes of primary and secondary schooling. Further it incorporates a third phase – middle schooling that overlaps the primary and secondary years of schooling. There is no clear, articulated and mutually agreed statement as to the purposes of *primary* schooling in Australia. It appears, however, to be generally accepted within the Australian community that what children should gain through primary education includes:

- § the foundation skills of literacy and numeracy;
- § the skills and abilities necessary for constructive participation in society;
- § development of natural curiosity, and a love of learning and discovery;
- § a sound basis for future learning (including learning how to learn);
- § the acceptance and adoption of values commonly accepted in the Australian community;
- § a sense of being valued as individuals; and,
- § the knowledge and skills necessary to progress to secondary education.

Given this lack of agreement important policy decisions are made routinely without reference to a clear and authoritative public position regarding the purpose of primary education. The consequence of this lack of agreement of purpose is a tendency for primary schools to acquire new responsibilities without shedding old ones.

Most primary educators recognise that governments need to know whether schools are performing effectively and whether funds are being put to good use. They also accept that schools should be helping students acquire foundational skills so that they can complete their education successfully and become productive and contributing citizens.

At present there is an over-reliance on NAPLAN assessments to assess the performance of schools even though it is acknowledged that the purpose of schooling is much broader than the acquisition of the kinds of skills measured in NAPLAN assessment instruments. Agencies that conduct the assessments or use the results acknowledge that this is the case but then quickly revert to total reliance on the test scores in their evaluation of jurisdictions and institutions.

### **Developing high performing principals to lead autonomous schools**

Research into school autonomy identifies what makes a school effective in promoting student learning and achievement. A system or school wide vision, a whole school approach with comprehensive professional learning, partnerships with parents, and a restructuring of the way schools are managed and led have the most impact.

Empowering primary schools should give principals clear authority to establish well-structured governance arrangements and decision-making processes which focus upon what is best for students and their learning. Accepted is accountability for areas over which authority is held. It must, though, mean more than simply providing primary school principals ‘token’ authority. It requires, initially, a large pool of well qualified and capable applicants who have the capacity to lead a school community – students, staff and parents. The principal must possess the skills necessary to respond to complex situations involving, for example, the long-term welfare of a student with multiple social, emotional and learning needs.

In the autonomous primary school environment, the principal must engage with stakeholders – school governing body and parents, teachers and administrative staff, system administrators and jurisdictions, and, most importantly, students of pre-school and school age. Principals also need a practical knowledge of governance structures, an understanding of the legal frameworks which affect families, the ability to develop relationships with outside agencies, the wherewithal to respond quickly to occupational health and safety issues, and the insight to build an effective team in line with sound employment practices.

In any primary school, principals need to lead the community using well-developed and future-focused decision-making and management skills. Decisions must be constantly made in regard to the school's finances, physical environment, facilities and staffing levels. An effective principal has the capacity to consult and negotiate in a collaborative framework. He or she has the ability to supervise and mentor staff. This latter aspect requires a thorough knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy together with the experience to be actively involved in teacher professional development. Such involvement occurs in a context of effectively allocating resources to support student learning.

The complexities of school leadership are apparent and APPA sees merit in any system which supports principal professional development through an authentic profession-led accreditation system. Such development and accreditation will not operate effectively if inadequately resourced. There is also a central role to be played by the profession should any move be made towards principal qualification, accreditation and development processes. The involvement of the profession in such processes, similar to that used in other professions, brings an 'ownership' to the process which encourages a rigorous, relevant and practical dimension than might otherwise occur in a 'top down', bureaucratic model.

There is no doubt that the role of the primary school principal has changed significantly over time. In many ways the school principal is seen as the 'community leader'. This description brings with it responsibilities which, while possibly difficult to define and quantify, see an additional challenge to the role of principal. It is a challenge keenly felt by all principals, particularly those working in disadvantaged communities.

The leadership model for primary schools is very lean and based on an outmoded view of primary education. In comparison, for example, to secondary schools, primary schools are allocated significantly fewer leadership positions. APPA's research, *In The Balance: The future of Australia's primary schools* did not set out to investigate leadership. However, during interviews many principals reported that they were under enormous pressure. Current salaries and incentives do not reflect the modern primary school principal's additional workload, responsibilities and exposure to public criticism and litigation.

### **Attracting quality people to the profession and improving teacher education**

APPA contends that every child deserves a quality education and that teachers play a vital though not total role in achieving this. There are a number of issues which impact upon having an effective teacher in every primary school classroom – attracting quality candidates to the profession; ensuring that candidates are trained in an environment which is rigorous, time efficient and reflective of the nature of the professional work undertaken; and, retaining a commitment to the profession of teaching and its role in developing young Australians.

The supply of highly skilled and appropriately trained primary teachers in coming years is of concern to APPA given that teachers form an ageing workforce and that there will be a considerable turnover over this decade. In considering teacher supply, there is also a need to ensure that the diversity of Australia's population is represented fully in the teaching profile of the nation. Gender and ethnic background are two such aspects of this diversity.

*In the Balance* highlighted that most teachers are extraordinarily positive about their work and overwhelmingly feel that they make a difference to their students. Around half of those surveyed believed this to be strongly the case. In noting this, many teachers were able to draw attention to significant difficulties they experienced while remaining positive.

It could be said that there is a difference in the situations of other professionals who may deal with difficult individual clients by appointment or in a meeting. The primary school classroom teacher, responsible for 28 – 30 students and faced on the first January school day with complexity of situations involving, for example, a lack of parental support, parents with misplaced expectations, challenging and aggressive student behaviour, students with special learning needs, students with disabilities, is still in that daily situation come December. While likely able to make positive inroads over a year, the reality is that such inroads require enormous energy, careful planning, clear guidance and special character.

In responding to the ageing workforce and in achieving that diversity mentioned above the teaching of primary school students needs to be an attractive career proposition. Achieving this is challenging. It requires the investment which recognises that the academically able and talented will enter primary teaching when it offers a strong career culture, when there are genuine incentives (particularly to work in hard-to-staff schools) and when the work of schools is valued by society, government and the media.

The culture of primary education brings a strong focus on children and their learning, and values collegial professional service. It is crucial that government and education authorities preserve the culture of primary schools, a culture that sustains extraordinarily high levels of commitment, efficacy and goodwill.

In preserving this culture the structures in place for preparing aspiring teachers is critical. The latter half of the Twentieth Century saw teachers entering formal teacher education and training programs that were university based, modelled on a theoretical and 'transmission' model that raised both the breadth and depth of teacher education and the consequent status of teaching as a profession.

Notwithstanding this change in professional status, the role of school-based professionals in the training and education of teachers has been substantially reduced. The relocation of the locus of control, funding and responsibility for teacher education meant that the roles of schools and the involvement of the practising profession became ad hoc and limited to the placement negotiations and supervision of students for practicum blocks. Apart from some religious based schooling sectors i.e. Catholic and Lutheran, and more recently, Christian Independent Schooling, employing authorities and state departments have little engagement in, or responsibility for, this task.

Pressures to add more to the teacher education curriculum, along with staff workload pressures, financial pressures that restrict the placement and supervision of students in practicum, now further restrict student and staff involvement in the school-based component of teacher education and training.

Further, the location of all pre-service teacher education funding in the tertiary sector, with no discrete funding for the school-based teacher education and training component except for notional practicum supervision payments to individual teachers, has restricted the relationship between schools and the university sector.

Despite these difficulties, anecdotal evidence suggests that the graduates now entering the profession are, in the main, better educated and more theoretically prepared for the complexity of teaching in the primary years, especially given the complexity of contemporary Australian society and new advances in professional knowledge. There are frustrations that, at times, students who perform adequately or even well in the academic phase of their training are not as successful in the practicum. The result is that students complete training and gain a teaching qualification with skills insufficient to enter the classroom.

The alignment of the National Professional Standards for Teachers with the outcomes of university teacher education programs will be an important first step in reinvigorating teacher training. There is also scope for instituting a well-resourced internship model where pre-service teachers work closely with schools and experienced and selected teachers in partnership with universities. Such a model offers the coherence required to address any imbalance between the requirements of the classroom and the interests and priorities of universities.

Critical to the effectiveness of primary education and to the long-term credibility of the profession is that the education of aspiring teachers does not involve 'quick fix' or simplistic solutions.

### **Remuneration and performance-based pay**

There is widespread acceptance that Australian primary school students benefit from a good quality education and that overwhelmingly teachers demonstrate high levels of commitment, energy and professionalism to their role in the classroom.

It is also widely recognised that investing in teacher development will improve teacher effectiveness and thereby enhance student learning outcomes. APPA strongly supports building a profession in which outstanding teacher commitment and performance are appropriately recognised. The design of such systems of recognition must be undertaken with considerable care in order to ensure that its overall impact is positive and that unintended consequences are stringently avoided.

The appraisal of teachers raises a significant dilemma. If the purpose is for school improvement then teachers are likely to enter into the process with high levels of trust and a greater willingness to disclose areas of strength and areas requiring development. It should be noted that, according to the OECD (2011), when the purpose of appraisal is to reward individual teachers then the process is more likely to be constrained and the areas which teachers seek to improve remain hidden. At a school level, improving the quality of teachers

must always rely on engaging in meaningful and constructive appraisal. This combination of school improvement and personal reward in a single process presents challenges at both system and school levels.

There are many factors which contribute to the performance of students. Primary school principals are aware that the performance of their school on national tests is generally associated with the socio-economic background of the student intake – home background, parent education levels, and the like. High stakes testing has been shown in other countries to lead teachers to ‘teach to the test’ in ways which are extraordinarily damaging for the education of primary-aged students. It consumes large portions of the school year in preparing students to take the tests. It is neither stimulating nor purposeful in the primary school context.

Performance pay systems have the potential to undermine the teamwork that is a key feature of successful primary schools. *In the Balance* notes that the ‘expectation of collegial support is now so well established that its absence can be discouraging’. It further asks whether the culture of primary education, with its focus on children and its valuing of collegial professional service, can be sustained under such a regime. Its replacement by a more individualistic culture is a significant concern. In considering teamwork and collegial support it should be noted that the performance of students, however assessed, is the product not only of the current class teacher but also of previous class teachers as well as the school’s administrative and ancillary staff, parent helpers and colleagues. Teacher quality depends not only on individual effort but also on the contribution of the whole staff to the environment in which individual teachers work. Collegial effort is crucial in the primary school setting.

The introduction of a performance pay system would see additional associated costs related to its implementation and administration. It is vital that these costs are not offset by way of stripping funds from other necessary school or system expenditure. Nor should the additional burden of a performance pay scheme be borne by primary school principals in a way which detracts from their ‘core business’.

*In the Balance* highlights overstretched teachers being drawn away from their teaching as parental expectations rise in line with the growing demands of work on households, the increasing pressures to relieve parents of their responsibilities to socialise their children, and the lack of cooperation from parents in some schools. An effective and flourishing partnership between home and school is essential in the primary school environment for the social, emotional and educational benefit of students. There are many societal, family and emotional intelligence factors which impede such a partnership.

There is no doubt that the pay structures generally for teachers have not kept pace with other professions or the public service, particularly when pay steps and career pathways are considered. While there are many high performing teachers who commit themselves to working in outer metropolitan, rural and remote schools, school principals often find it difficult to attract quality candidates to fill vacancies.

With initiatives to recognise great teachers, there is the opportunity to lift the standing of the profession through improved teacher preparation, enhanced salaries for all teachers, improved career pathways and valued incentives for current and high performing teachers to remain in their classrooms.



### **Targeting disadvantaged students and getting reform measures right**

In 2009, APPA commissioned a study which examined the targeting of support to schools and classrooms with large numbers of students struggling to reach national minimum standards in literacy or numeracy. The *Targeting Resources in Primary Schools Study* collected data from 33 schools with concentrations of students achieving below the minimum standards and examined whether additional funding provided through the National Partnerships led to the provision of support that actually reached these students

The study highlighted several issues in relation to targeting support for high-need students in primary schools:

1. The impulse to spread resources allocated for a targeted group of students more widely among schools and students is powerful and commonplace.
2. The pressure on governments, school system authorities and schools to reach publicly announced performance targets leads to the concentration of resources on schools and students most likely to reach the targets. Schools with greater claims to additional support are sometimes overlooked and support is sometimes diverted from high-need students to students just below performance targets.
3. Among the students unable to reach national minimum standards are many with multiple, complex obstacles in their path. Most teachers doubt whether these students will achieve at a satisfactory level before they leave primary school as long as the level of support stays at current levels.

These findings point to the need to ensure that funding allocated at the national level to support students struggling to achieve minimum standards reaches these students. This will only occur after there is a much greater degree of transparency, particularly in the way in which school systems disburse government funding to schools.

The study highlighted that the support required by one school may differ markedly from the support needed by another even though the two schools might be quite similar in many key respects. Additionally, there is the likelihood of a better match between the support provided and need when a school's leadership team is actively involved in negotiations around its students' needs and the delivery of the support.

Importantly, there needs to be a candid sharing of what is working and what is problematic.

The National Partnerships have been an important chapter in the history of school reform in Australia. They have provided a national framework, are underpinned by commitments from all Australian governments, are guided by ambitious goals and are resourced with a large pool of additional funding allocated according to student need. However, in paying reward payments to states and territories there is some question as to the selection of schools being based on maximizing eligibility for reward payments rather than on the basis of student need.

APPA supports the adoption of funding mechanisms that maximise the discretionary use of funds at the school level. Principals are best placed to get 'value for money' from government

grants. Hence, except in exceptional circumstances, APPA is opposed to tied grants that restrict the use of funds to purposes that have been tightly specified in funding agreements.

There appears to be an increasing tendency for governments to distribute limited pools of funding for which schools can compete by making written submissions. Primary schools are not set up like small businesses and generally the schools with the greatest educational needs have the least administrative capacity to produce high quality applications.

APPA believes that this form of funding should be restricted to non-essential activities and that the application and acquittal processes should be kept as simple as possible.

Competitive funding should not be used for core infrastructure projects. Need should be the pre-eminent funding criterion and education authorities should have a transparent method of establishing the need.

### **Parity resourcing and the funding of primary schools**

Primary teaching is increasingly recognised as a field with a specific body of knowledge in its own right. Primary school classroom teachers require specialist knowledge together with a high level of technical capability in order to teach the age cohort across all subject areas of the curriculum.

AS APPA's study *Resourcing Australian Primary Schools: A historical perspective* has shown, the current practice of funding secondary students at a higher level than primary students is based on historical precedent and specious argument. There is a significant amount of research from international and Australian sources indicating that early and sustained intervention in the primary years is necessary to achieve quality learning outcomes for a significant proportion of secondary students. The following points support this condition:

- § The years 3 – 6 or 7, depending on jurisdiction, are the lowest funded in Australia.
- § The pedagogy necessary to engage younger learners is as resource-intensive as any other.
- § Given that primary teachers are required to teach all subject areas, they require at least an equal level of curriculum leadership and support as secondary teachers.

Students who are successful in the primary school years and who obtain sound literacy and numeracy skills have the foundation for success in secondary schools and later life. The foundation is provided by ensuring that primary schools have quality staff, good facilities and are well resourced.

*In the Balance* noted that the average cost of a staff member was greater in the high-SES schools than in the middle-SES and low-SES schools. The difference between the high- and low-SES categories was over \$5000 per teacher. This discrepancy is partly explained by the tendency for low SES schools to rely on less experienced staff. In fact, if low SES students are to achieve their potential that trend must be reversed.

### **Conclusion**

The dominant discourse in Australian education has a decidedly economic perspective. Education policies are now filled with economic concepts and terminology to the extent that

they are commonplace: markets, inputs, outputs, outcomes, performance indicators, human capital, incentives, value adding and so on.

Obviously questions of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource allocations to schools are an important matter for governments. This is recognised by APPA: its own commissioned research addresses school resourcing issues. However, economics provides only one lens through which the operation of primary schools should be examined. When it becomes the only significant lens used in the policy formulation process then there is a serious risk of policy distortion and aberration.

The instruments used by governments to improve schooling have been drawn from economics: the key instruments are reliant on NAPLAN assessments. When challenged it is common for ministers and officials to state that they are aware that literacy and numeracy assessment results constitute only one, limited indicator of the performance of a student, school, system, state or country; yet that caveat is quickly brushed aside because of the need to include some measure of schooling in a quantitative model of the process of schooling.

One of the reasons why policy makers are surprised by the resistance of many teachers and principals to reforms based implicitly on economic modeling is because at the ‘chalk face’ the people who governments really count on to make things happen simply don’t accept the assumptions built into such models.

APPA therefore urges the Productivity Commission to recognise the plurality of legitimate perspectives with which to examine primary schooling and the challenges they face. With regard to the particular issue of the education workforce, the Commission is urged to take on board the maxim that, contrary to much of the public commentary these days, teachers should be seen as part of the solution, not the problem.

---

<sup>i</sup> Angus, M. & Olney, H. (2001). *Our future: Report of a survey of Australian government primary school principals*. Sunbury, Victoria: Australian Primary Principals Association.

<sup>ii</sup> Angus, M., Olney, H., Selleck, R., Ainley, J., Burke, G., Caldwell, B. & Spinks, J. (2002). *Resourcing Australian Primary Schools: A historical perspective*. Canberra: DEST

<sup>iii</sup> Angus, M., Olney, H., Ainley, J., Caldwell, B., Burke, G., Selleck, R., & Spinks, J. . (2004). *The sufficiency of resources for Australian primary schools*. Canberra: DEST.

<sup>iv</sup> Angus, M., Olney, H. & Ainley, J. (2007). *In the balance: The future of Australia’s primary schools*. Canberra: Australian Primary Principals Association.

<sup>v</sup> Angus, M & Olney, H. (2011). *Targeting support for high-need students in primary schools*. Canberra: Australian Primary Principals Association.