

President's message: October 2017

Before you know it...

With our children now getting back into the school routine for the last term, and hopefully free of the flu and colds that played havoc with term three, we look forward to the end of the year where we celebrate their accomplishments.

By accomplishment I also refer to the vital non-academic elements of our children's learning that mean so much to our families, communities and society as a whole - and yet are so hard to measure in absolute terms. These often include being part of community groups outside of school, trying something new; a new experience, a new skill or just the confidence to have a go – even if the first attempt doesn't succeed.

The move to quantify these skills is surrounded by an entire range of terms that, like so much in education, spill over each other as learned academics seek to quantify the intangible. Terms such as life skills, 21st Century skills, enterprise skills, entrepreneurship, resilience, grit, capabilities etc. are often framed to suit the context its champions espouse. Perhaps we as parents see things more simply in that we strive to see our children happy and capable of thriving in a modern world where an ever-accelerating rate of change and innovation will be their normal. What does seem almost inevitable is that rote learning and the recitation of facts is losing its importance, to be replaced with knowledge as a ubiquitous resource freely available through any electronic device. With this revolution in access comes the essential ability and skills to successfully utilise knowledge and to work with other people...

We are entering the height of exam season for our senior students. Once more the relevance of a traditional tertiary education is being discussed in the media. What this debate has highlighted is that there are many routes to a satisfying career/life balance with a growing variety of post Year 12 options and routes into what will be life-long learning for us all.

A perfect storm of evidence and equity

Australia is well placed in the world as an attractive destination for education experts and gurus to visit and share their thinking and vision. Just in the last few weeks we've seen Pasi Sahlberg, Professor David Hopkins, Andreas Schleicher, Sir Kevan Collins and a range of other notable international names drop by and openly discuss their thoughts on how we can all do better. Evidence and equity are two words that seem to resonate in all approaches. In the context of public education how do we get more of both..?

One observation that strikes to the heart of the matter was that if you come from a wealthy background you will have many opportunities in life - schooling doesn't make that much difference to your life chances. However, if you come from a less affluent background education can make an enormous difference and is a single shot chance – it has to be right.

So how can we make it right for those with the most to gain from a well evidenced and properly resourced education system where need is addressed and want is ignored...?

There are already a number of initiatives with the potential to address evidence and equity, and we have to approach them in good faith as an almost perfect storm of education reform. With the passing of the 2017 Education Act Amendment Bill we saw the establishment of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (more popularly known as Gonski 2.0) that's now underway with submissions closing on the 2nd November, and due to report next March (the issues paper and supporting documents are available [here](#)). There's also the Independent Inquiry into Regional Rural and Remote Education that is also due to conclude next March with the supporting discussion paper available [here](#).

The final element in this perfect storm is the work of the new and independent National School Resourcing Board – the exact composition of which has been subject to some heated discussion at September's Education Council meeting. The work of this board offers the chance to review the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) and look to the formulae surrounding the six additional needs based loadings to address disadvantage. ACSSO, as part of the legislative process surrounding the Education Act Amendment Bill, has called for this to be one of the crucial final elements in defining equity. In the new single national funding model the additional needs based loadings must address need, wherever it exists, and ignore what is just an expected want when there is no need whatsoever for additional funding.

Collaborative enterprise

As public education is a disparate system whereby the Commonwealth cedes all responsibility for its delivery to the states and territories there is a critical role for the Commonwealth to deliver collaborative leadership via the Education Council. There's also a responsibility for members of the Education Council to act in the best interests of all our children in public education – not just those of their individual jurisdictions. With two-thirds of our school aged children in over 70% of our nation's schools, public education is the first choice for most of our families, and often the only choice of those with most to gain from education.

There are precious few voices that champion public education at a national level that are also free from representing a professional interest. ACSSO is one and the Education Council is another. Perhaps now is the time to restore some balance in the national debate where the deficit language and metaphor that has framed so much of the education debate can be put to one side. In its place we need to look to the future and speak of opportunity that exists with public education to improve the confidence and life chances of our children, and in turn the families and communities that support them. It is public education that delivers education for all regardless of gender, income, wealth or postcode – it must have the means to thrive and it is the Education Council's role to deliver this policy at a national level.

An interesting adjunct to this is the work of the UK's Education Endowment Foundation, an independent charity that receives most of its funding from government with the aim of breaking the link between family income and

educational achievement. A significant part of its work is producing evidence of what works and what does not to aid teaching practice. Its website is available here and it has been working in partnership with Australian Evidence for Learning that has free resources available here. With the education reform debate seeming to defer to the mantra of evidence based policy, perhaps now is the time to deliver the means for independent, repeatable and defensible evidence that can look to the future of education policy for those students with the most to gain from a great education. Our children deserve nothing less and the Education Council must be a founding partner in delivering this.

Seventy years young

As part of our Policy Roundtable weekend ACSSO will be taking the opportunity to acknowledge the huge contribution made by its members, supporters and those that have been part of ACSSO's work over the last 70 years. This will be at a dinner to be held in Canberra on the evening of Saturday 11th November. If you would like more information or be part of this occasion, or know of someone that might, please contact Bec Ashford-Wykes: mail@acso.org.au

Public education offers so much to so many and is reliant on the goodwill and support of its communities that give so much to their schools, and define their character and strengths. In the current debate surrounding the same sex marriage survey it's frustrating to see schools and their students used as pawns in such a discourse. Public education is all about a fair go for all and supports families of every kind without fear or favour, and giving every child the best opportunities in learning. It's the giving of time, passion and commitment in supporting our schools that are secular, fully inclusive and open to all that is so valuable. Our public schools represent our nation's hope for the years to come and in an increasingly complex world they provide a sense of certainty to every student that whatever their circumstances someone cares. Public education is the first choice for all our futures.