



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

*A Submission to the Review to achieve
Educational Excellence in Australian
Schools*

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Preamble

ACSSO believes that a well-funded high quality public education system is the key to Australia's future.

Educational success enables young people to take diligent care of themselves, to become positive contributors to society and to achieve satisfactory work (paid or unpaid) with a satisfying life balance. Outcomes for 21st Century students should not measure on academic achievement alone but include the general capabilities, as well as the psycho – social and emotional factors that contribute to well-being.

We believe any policy or practice developed as a result of this review must be sustainable and have a life beyond political cycles. Policy and programs introduced as a part of this review should well-funded, evidence based and sustainable programs.

There is a growing body of evidence that an independent body should be set up to support this. A significant part of its work would be producing evidence of what works and what does not to aid teaching practice. A working example of this is in the UK.

In order to fully support a young person's skill development, academic achievement and well-being funds of knowledge acquired through school and other agencies could be linked to a national student identifier. We believe a National Student Identifier would provide a framework for enabling the transfer of information to be seamless.

ACSSO believes that it is time to move beyond the research and put family engagement into practice. This will require infrastructure of personnel and support at the local, state and national level. Family Engagement should be linked to learning and embedded in school plans and practice. Extensive professional learning should be developed and implemented for school leaders and staff. Pre-service teacher training should include family engagement. Family engagement should be consistent, and evidence based – contextualized to fit each school community.

Submission

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is pleased to provide the following submission to the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (the Review).

As the national peak public-school parent organisation we firmly believe that the responsibility of both Federal and State governments is to ensure that government schools:

- will be of the highest standard and open to all, irrespective of race, gender, religion, social-economic status, geographic location, disability (physical or intellectual);
- can develop flexible and diverse programs necessary to meet individual needs;
- discriminate in favour of those schools and individual students facing disadvantage and/or disability;
- actively engage families in the education of their child
- provide for participation by parents and community at all levels of education decision making

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) stated improving educational outcomes for all young Australians is central to the nation's social and economic prosperity and will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.

These goals are:

- Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence
- All young Australians become:
 - successful learners
 - confident and creative individuals
 - active and informed citizens

Achieving these educational goals is the collective responsibility of governments, school sectors and individual schools as well as parents and carers, young Australians, families, other education and training providers, business and the broader community.

We are still a distance from achieving these goals.

Well-funded, evidence based, sustainable programs

We believe any evidence based policy or practice developed as a result of this review must be sustainable and have a life beyond political cycles. For too long new “innovative” practice has been funded and mandated and whether

experiencing success or not is often superseded with a newer program once the government changes or the project completes its contracted time. With very little evaluation there funding is ceased; resources rendered unusable and any personnel either deployed or made redundant.

Communities and educators often become despondent when programs that appear to be having traction are ceased without consultation or explanation. This leads to some skepticism when new practice or policy is introduced. Sound evaluation with authentic evidence or data is essential for education programming and policy development.

The work of the UK's Education Endowment Foundation, an independent charity that receives most of its funding from government aims to 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. 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 has to be a founding partner in delivering this.

21st Century Skills

The value of education is its contribution to the success and well-being of the learner, now and in the future. Both these outcomes have numerous dimensions: intellectual, social, emotional, physical, economic

In general terms, educational success enables young people to take diligent care of themselves, to become positive contributors to society and to achieve satisfactory work (paid or unpaid) with a satisfying life balance. Outcomes for 21st Century students should not measure on academic achievement alone but include the general capabilities so aptly part of curriculum delivery by ACARA as well as the psycho – social factors that contribute to well – being. Andrew Fuller has done some significant work in this area.

Providing education to millions of young people in a diverse and rapidly changing world is a huge complex endeavour. As we leave the industrial era it will be necessary to reduce the use of top-down (expert-novice), industrial production, “this is the answer” approaches.

Current assessment tends to focus on what students “don't know” rather than what are their strengths - current curriculum tends to focus on filling young people with a specific set of knowledge, assessing then filling the gaps - rather than finding an interest and building on the strengths and skills of the young person.

The twenty-first century alternative is to take an interactive approach, undertaking small safe-to-fail experiments and then nurturing the development of those that work.

There should be a reduced focus on problem solving and a commitment to embed continuous improvement into the life and work of schools. Teachers and parents find continuous improvement a natural component of their practice.

Because they are remote from the action administrators tend to prefer interventions and these are typically disruptive and often compete with what is already working.

Continuous improvement comes in many useful forms: Solution Focus, Plan-Do-Study-Act (Deming), Action Learning, Positive Deviance, TQM, School-wide Positive Support; “Improving Learning” (King et al), Activity Theory, and PET.

The value of education is its contribution to the success and well-being of the learner, now and in the future. Both these outcomes have numerous dimensions: intellectual, social, emotional, physical, economic for example. This means young people need to be increasingly in charge of their learning as they develop.

It is expected that school education will increase a young person's ability to make good sense of their experiences of the world, to manage themselves well, and to respond in ways that are useful to themselves and others now and in the future.

Schooling has a timeline that is much longer than the foreseeable future. To be effective it must support outcomes that will be desirable in our ever changing and unpredictable world.

It would not be wise for Australia's schools to an overly defined set of student outcomes.

New essential capabilities such as entrepreneurship, continue to emerge as the nature of work and society continue to change. The present rapid rate of

change is unlikely to lessen at any stage so it is not possible to spell out any student's long-term learning needs in detail.

At the same time, we will continue to need to be able to work with others, make good choices, resolve uncertainties and solve challenges that we encounter along the way.

And there are core capabilities that will have life-long value: literacy; numeracy; logical problem solving; relating to and collaborating with others... While these are necessary they may not be sufficient for long-term success and well-being.

There are many frameworks of knowledge, skills and capabilities and they continue to evolve and new ones emerge rapidly over time. Some of ACARA's present work on the general capabilities and the [FYA's New Work Order](#) series are good examples of such frameworks that enhance 21st Century Skills.

Ideally each school should be able to communicate its current general working framework as part of its accountability to key stakeholders including students and parents in terms of "This is what we currently do and how we do it". Templestowe College, Big Picture, Merrylands East and numerous other highly successful schools and school systems provide useful examples. One thing they have in common is a coherent framework that students and parents can relate to, and highly collaborative working arrangements with parents.

There are huge challenges in this area. Issues arise when government and school frameworks are not readily compatible with what schools need to do with and for different students. Such frameworks need to help ensure that a school has the requisite variety of responses it needs to make good provision for all its students. System-wide frameworks should not restrict school responses to student needs in ways that curtail needs-based provision.

School quality is best indicated by the ongoing success and wellbeing of its students. Parents expect that their children's schools will

- Know what matters for their child (and parent as advocate and stakeholder)
- Do what works for and with their child
- Be accountable for their decisions and actions

To do this systematically and well will require new tools and practices. Fortunately, emerging technologies will enable this to be done well.

The best available measures of quality and success are made by cross-referencing data from multiple sources: the students, their teachers and families and communities, and other stakeholders. There are numerous ways of gathering and relating disparate data: testing, surveys, longitudinal tracking, contextual details. Accessing and processing these data are rapidly improving with big data and AI are becoming rapidly more powerful.

National Student Identifier

It is widely known that much of the information on an individual student rarely passes from year to year at the same school and is even less likely to travel with them from school to school – even when these are significant transition points. The key supports and or interventions as well as relationships, health and academic achievement is all vital information to ensuring a young person has the best of opportunities whilst at school. We believe a National Student Identifier would provide a framework for enabling the transfer of information to be seamless.

A National Student Identifier will allow comprehensive student records to be developed and maintained and shared over place and time so that key student information is recorded and made available in a timely manner. The data could cover

- Student needs and circumstances
- School commitments and commitments by other parties (the student, family, other stakeholders and contributors)
- School interventions: support plans, monitoring of the success or otherwise of support provided
- Other supports and interventions: social workers, therapists, police...
- Incidents involving the student and responses made by various parties
- Links to student achievement

Family Engagement

ACSSO has been a leader in family engagementⁱ for some time. The Family School Partnership Framework (Framework -2008), was the result of a four-year research project funded by the Commonwealth. This project also produced a series case studies to support the framework that can be used as discussion starters or examples of effective practice – no one strategy fits all and we should always be mindful that planning should be contextual and reflect the community the school serves.

Further to that, ACSSO was funded to work with the Australian Parents Council (APC) in launching the Family School and Community Partnerships Bureau

(Bureau). The Bureau commissioned research, reworked the Framework, held two highly successful national symposiums (2012 and 2014) and a roundtable on Family Engagement (2013) and conducted 7 action research projects in schools across Australia.

The Family School and Community Partnership Bureau, in 2013 provided a national definition to move forward with: *Family engagement is an intentional and collaborative strategy to support and leverage the knowledge, capacities and social capital of families to improve learning and well-being outcomes for all children and young people.*ⁱⁱ

Families possess valuable funds of knowledge that support the growth and development of their young person. *Schools can enhance children and young people's learning by developing cultures, practices and programs which engage families in school. The outcomes of engagement practices and programs encourage effective educational partnerships to be developed and sustained.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The term parent engagement, involvement and participation are not new and in Australia there has been a growth in the focus on this both at the jurisdiction and national level. Many jurisdictions have in place policy and some personnel. ACSSO applauds this however unfortunately it isn't consistent, and support is limited. Most of the professional support is from private providers with no common or consistent model and not in tune with the current research.

There are pockets of excellent practice, often ad hoc and dependent on personnel who have a strong conviction to concept – in general though it would be fair to say we haven't moved beyond the research.

The most effective strategy to ensure the embedding of family engagement into school culture and practice is to provide a systemic approach. It needs to be consistent two-way approach based on the evidence and research.

Family engagement is not an "add on" program but instead it should be embedded in all planning (school, state and national level). Schools and systems should be accountable and measurable standards (both qualitative and quantitative) should be developed to assist with reporting.

A nationally consistent framework would support schools with planning. Schools would need to benchmark current beliefs and practices; plan to build on strengths and support areas for improvement and include regular evaluation and review to continue to build on and improve.

A thought could be to develop a Family Engagement planning tool like Reconciliation Australia's Action Plan.^{iv}

Family engagement policies developed at all levels are essential. (Epstein 2002, Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg 2010)

We suggest that there be structure that provides support at the Federal, jurisdictional and local levels. This includes personnel; funding and professional learning. The United States has set up a family engagement infrastructure (initially led by Dr Karen Mapp^v) which works with schools at the local level and provides professional learning to teachers, school leaders, parents as a part of building capacity. The dual capacity building framework is embedded in ACSSO's soon to be launched Family Engagement Circle.

Dr Karen Mapp, in her presentation at Harvard University in 2013, stated that we need to build the capacity of both families and schools to “engage” – it is not a key part of pre-service teacher training, nor until recently has it been offered as professional learning for teachers and school leaders. Research commissioned by the Bureau in 2012 supports this.^{vi}

There should be extensive investment in building the capacity of all. Family Engagement should be a key component **in pre-service training**. When delivering professional learning on behalf of the Bureau in 2012 to beginning teachers, Dr Janet Smith^{vii}, from Canberra University, noted that less than 1% of attendees had discussed parent engagement in their pre-service training. Anecdotally, we are aware that little is covered. ACSSO delivered an early version of the Family Engagement Circle this year to pre-service teachers in Western Sydney and Swinbourne Universities.

Continual and ongoing professional development in Family Engagement for educators is essential. We know many jurisdictions are delivering ad-hoc; many through private providers or consultancies.

Professional learning needs to be evidence based and linked to the current research and it needs to be consistent across the nation. We believe that educators should be afforded time to work on their family engagement strategies and relationships.

We would strongly suggest infrastructure of personnel at all levels of education to provide networks, support and professional learning. In our discussions with the US Department of Education^{viii} the strength is in the networks with some personnel at

the national level feeding out to the districts with local schools employing school based family engagement officers

We strongly support the employment of school and area based community engagement officers who assist schools with the professional learning and facilitating the family engagement strategies.

However, Family Engagement will involve a shift in culture for many schools. It requires strong leadership, professional learning and be linked to learning and integrated in the school plan.

School Governance

Problems arise when governments and school system policies and frameworks are not readily reconciled with what schools need to do with for their students.

Many parents have the sense that, in government schools at least, the role of parents in areas of leadership and governance has diminished in recent years. This appears to be a result of becoming more accountable to the school system than to students, their families and communities.

A consistent approach to school governance is vital.

Enabling the system

Australia's school system is increasingly relying on targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment.

Parents are uncertain whether these things do improve the effectiveness of the teachers working with our children. Together these enablers have the potential to be a major distraction for schools and staff, especially where compliance with these frameworks influence the school's standing within the system, and the career prospects of staff.

Improved local school governance involving parents and members of the community, should include some discretion to establish school priorities and to choose how best to demonstrate compliance with system expectations and requirements. Rather than competing for the school's attention, these enablers should be useful in focusing on the core business of schools: ensuring the success of teacher, parents and learners working together.

What works best

Schooling involves our children. We know as parents that there is no one best way for all our children. Nothing works all the time and every time with everyone.

There are many of case studies that appear to demonstrate successful practice. But practice is always situational. The best provision for any student involves a multitude of local real-time decisions and actions based on the insights of the students themselves and those who work with and support them: staff, parents, community members

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ⁱ ACSSO uses the term Family Engagement when relating to engaging with parents and carers – it is universally acknowledged that families have significant influence in a young person's growth and development. Family Engagement is the term adopted by the US Department of Education following the work of Dr Mapp and many others

ⁱⁱ *National definition* - Family School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2013 – joint Commonwealth funded project Australian Council of State School Organisations and Australian Parents Council

ⁱⁱⁱ *Family Engagement Circle* – Australian Council of State School Organisations, 2017

^{iv} Reconciliation Action Plan <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/>

^v Dr Karen Mapp- <https://community-wealth.org/content/partners-education-dual-capacity-building-framework-family-school-partnerships>

^{vi} Parental Engagement in learning and schooling; Lessons from research: Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders 2012

^{vii} Dr Janet Smith <https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/faculties/estem/contacts-estem/staff/dr-janet-smith>

^{viii} **Carrie Jasper** Director, Outreach to Parents and Families Office of Communications and Outreach and **Jonava Johnson**, Communications Associate/Parent Liaison <https://www.ed.gov/family-and-community-engagement>