



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: NSW

Summary

Recommendation

Resources created by parents (possibly parent organisations) for parents and supported through government funding like previous Centres of Excellence under the National Partnerships would leverage the effectiveness of the early literacy and numeracy check.

Recommendation

Partner with families and business to guide and direct student choice of subjects, work experience and career choices.

Recommended reporting practices:

- provide parents with information and professional advice they require to enhance and support their child's learning.

Recommendation

Specific language programs for immigrant students and Aboriginal students to intervene from the very early stages of education.

Recommendation

Principals and executive staff receive professional development in engaging with families and community as well as their own internal relations. Skills in difficult conversations and conflict management should be offered as part of ongoing professional development especially for leaders.

Recommendation

Education policies around parent and community engagement be strengthened through toolkits and online resources to assist school leaders and staff in this underdeveloped area of in-service.

Recommendation

Consistent focus and assessment measures be adopted to ensure that all students across Australia are being prepared for future employment and development equally. There is a variety of tools in the marketplace which can be adapted to measure such competencies from programs such as KidsMatter programs, Peer Support to the VIA Character Strengths.

Main submission

Executive Summary

While the purpose of this review is to investigate how school funding should be used to improve school performance and student outcomes, the temptation for a narrow focus should be avoided since, such an important undertaking that will impact Australian student learning into the future should be well-thought out and considered.

This submission considers the following questions particularly in the way that they interface with parents, families and communities since we represent the families of children in almost 600 Catholic schools across NSW and strive to bring the parent voice to this review

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

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Are there barriers to implementing improvements

How to use funding to improve student outcomes and test performance in international tests

Improve preparedness of school leavers to succeed in employment, further training or higher education;

Improve outcomes across all cohorts of students, including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced

Practical measures that have been shown to work from Australia and around the world will be offered for consideration in designing the best way forward for maximum effectiveness and efficiency for Australian students.

What success looks like?

If we look at success in the context of emerging thinking in positive psychology, then the definition will logically be realigned to build on student strengths and individual achievement as opposed to the alternative of comparing students to year grade peers through a system of standardised testing. Redefining year levels into stages with more flexible parameters for example, would allow students to progress effectively at a pace that would see them gain a year's worth of progress in their

learning regardless of their level which is one of the precepts of Hattie's keys to successful learning. It is well-known in the field of positive psychology that building on individual successes as opposed to adopting a deficit view is far more effective in leading to behavioural change and further success. Not only does this lead to better outcomes for students, it also contributes to better mental health thereby positively impacting outcomes as well.

Parents have knowledge about their child's strengths and in sharing this with teachers will combine for greater effect in improving outcomes for that student. Teachers also have knowledge about the student in the school context and open and regular two-way communication channels regarding the student's progress and disposition; regular communication about subject content and expectations; and a warm and welcoming invitation to school events and activities open up the possibilities for parents and teacher to collaborate for improved student outcomes.

The idea of an entry 'soft test' for kindergarten students around their literacy, in particular phonemic ability has merit. More and more, educators are accepting the benefits of explicit instruction of phonics either in addition to 'whole language' approach to reading or instead of. What this points to, is the necessity for having teachers who are fully versed in this area of teaching. Experts such as cognitive neuroscientist, Maryanne Wolf, Tufts University, Boston, would recommend 'explicit instruction' in phonemes as the basis for deep understanding of the foundations of letter and sound connections. This critical phase of student learning demands teacher practitioners who are comprehensively trained in this method of teaching as initial testing will need to be followed up with 'explicit instruction' to ensure that no student misses this important building block in their literacy development. Where this would be a divergence from current teaching of reading, it would be imperative to bring parents along the journey by providing them with information and practical tips on how to use this method with their children since it possible they are not familiar with or have not been exposed to this method before. While it may seem doubly onerous to have to provide information or instruction for parents in new teaching methods, the benefits of having parents read confidently at home with their children will far outweigh the impost.

Canada is regarded as having a strong base in literacy and this can be attributed in part to "systematic efforts to improve literacy, with well-trained staff, resources such as school libraries and testing and assessment to identify schools or individuals who are struggling".

Recommendation

Resources created by parents (possibly parent organisations) for parents and supported through government funding like previous Centres of Excellence under

the National Partnerships would leverage the effectiveness of the early literacy and numeracy check.

Another indicator of success can be applied using Covey's principle of beginning with the end in mind. Assuming that education is preparing students to function and contribute in the workforce, it is important to adequately prepare them in various ways: good careers advice drawing on community and industry expertise to ameliorate what the school can offer in this area is one example. A school in California has taken this to its completion, by enlisting parents and community as critical friends in the learning process within a framework of design thinking to assist and judge student projects. This begins with a parent survey sent home at the beginning of the year to gauge their interest and willingness to be involved and has resulted in outstanding results for student achievement and community social capital.

Recommendation

Partner with families and business to guide and direct student choice of subjects, work experience and career choices.

High-profile, Yong Zhao recommends that 21st century learning needs a paradigm shift to focus on student autonomy with a personalised education experience among other things.

This is backed up by Masters in the Five Challenges in Australian School Education where he discusses personalised teaching and learning that depends on "diagnosing where students are in their learning before commencing teaching" as a more effective way of augmenting student achievement. This leads to targeted teaching that addresses the need of individual students which may seem unobtainable within the current context of large classes and limited resources. However, as we see the introduction of new technologies (i.e. automated test marking) it opens up boundless opportunities for customising student learning to build on their knowledge and ability to encourage individual growth and development.

Key to this is engaging parents with the process and results so they understand their child's stage of development in relation to their age and other students. Reporting to parents that is often; meaningful and proactive; (in that it sets out clear objectives and ways of improving) will disburse the responsibility for student outcomes back on to parents so that they can be meaningfully involved in their child's learning. Currently, the standard practice in some schools of 'speed dating reporting' is woefully inadequate in communicating student progress and does nothing to engender good relationships with families. Reporting that includes students such as 'student-led conferencing has proven most effective in lifting student outcomes and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Recommended reporting practices:

- provide parents with information and professional advice they require to enhance and support their child's learning.
- facilitate opportunities for parents to undertake training and share their knowledge of their child
- encourage and support parent engagement in children's learning activities
- report regularly to parents in a readily understood language and format that provides interpretive comments about their child's progress in academic and non-academic areas and against school and state-wide standards, where available
- develop a sense of responsibility and ownership with parents for student learning, underpinned by common understandings of educational goals
- recognise that co-ordination of programs across teachers and over time is an important element of the relationship between parents and the schools their children attend
- involve students in reporting to parents

Equity in Education

When it comes to equity in education, the example of Canada can be investigated since it shares many similar characteristics to Australian society. There is a high level of immigration, multi-culturalism and families where English is not the first language as well as indigenous populations. In spite of these conditions, Canada, and in particular the three provinces of Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta have outstripped expectations by ranking in the top echelon alongside the high-achieving education systems like Shanghai, Singapore, Japan and Finland.

Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education director, says Canada's "big unifying theme is equity" involving fairness and equal access so that in no time children of migrants are achieving at levels similar to native born students.

Recommendation: specific language programs for immigrant students and Aboriginal students to intervene from the very early stages of education.

Collaborative leadership

School leadership is perhaps the most important variable in influencing school culture, community relationships and student achievement. School leaders who understand the benefits that can be gained from distributing their leadership among their executives can be less susceptible to principal burn-out and fatigue. New models of leadership are gaining prominence to better equip principals and executive staff to work with other staff, families and community. A coaching style of management has proven most effective especially in managing performance conversations with staff and difficult conversations with parents. In working with

younger, less experienced teachers, it is clear that they would like increased/any professional development in the areas of parent engagement, difficult conversations and conflict management.

We know that teacher consistency leads to good outcomes in student achievement and so teachers should be supported both by schools and school parents to execute their roles to their best ability. This could be achieved by reducing administrative burdens and placing the onus on parents to track their student progress which is aided by online parent portals designed for this purpose.

“There is clear evidence that teachers’ understanding of their local communities, including families and the wider community, relates to the efficacy of their teaching and their sense of satisfaction in their work” (Freebody & Freebody 2010).

Recommendation

Principals and executive staff receive professional development in engaging with families and community as well as their own internal relations. Skills in difficult conversations and conflict management should be offered as part of ongoing professional development especially for leaders.

Community and parent engagement

The Melbourne Declaration states that: Partnerships between students, parents, carers and families, the broader community, business, schools and other education and training providers bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement. Partnerships engender support for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and can provide opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, participate in civic life and develop a sense of responsible citizenship. In particular, the development of partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities, based on cross-cultural respect, is the main way of achieving highly effective schooling for Indigenous students.

Leaders of the most successful schools in challenging circumstances are typically highly engaged with and trusted by the schools’ parents and wider community (Hargreaves et al., 2008).

Recommendation

Education policies around parent and community engagement be strengthened through toolkits and online resources to assist school leaders and staff in this underdeveloped area of in-service.

General Capabilities

There are many and various ways of measuring student success in schools using traditional assessment and testing in subject content areas. One area that is gaining prominence as an important set of skill for students to master in preparation for

their future lives is in what Lambert calls the 'soft skills'. These are the social and emotional skills of problem solving, creativity, communications, innovation, entrepreneurialism, intercultural understanding and a growth mindset among others. While these skills are more difficult to assess, they appear in the national curriculum and General Capabilities. Certain jurisdictions have developed methods for assessing levels of growth and success in these areas and this needs to be taken up in all states and territories since these are the important skills that will enable students to take their place in an increasingly knowledge based society. For Australian society to grow, not least in terms of productivity, education and investment in knowledge-based capital is integral to its flourishing.

Recommendation

Consistent focus and assessment measures be adopted to ensure that all students across Australia are being prepared for future employment and development equally. There is a variety of tools in the marketplace which can be adapted to measure such competencies from programs such as KidsMatter programs, Peer Support to the VIA Character Strengths.

Conclusion

This is a critical time in Australian education with PISA and TIMSS results decreasing; the shift in the workplace from a commodity to knowledge base and the changing ways that students learn as a result of technologies at school and play.

By listening to the whole of community including the voice of parents and students, hopefully will lead to more fulfilled, less stressed and better prepared students of the future.