



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

Submitter: Federation of Parents and Citizens of New South Wales
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: NSW

Summary

The central focus of education must be individual students' needs and as no two students are the same, there needs to be flexibility within funding and resourcing to allow for customised learning plans for each and every student. The ultimate goal of education must be that students become effective contributors within society. Central to any equitable funding model is the principle that no student should face disadvantages in education due to factors beyond their control, such as socio-economic status, socio-educational status, ethnic/cultural background, gender, geographical location or disabilities/special needs. There is a definite risk that the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 (Gonski 2.0) will exacerbate such disadvantages by delivering less supports than was originally promised under NERA. A critical area for boosting student improvement is constructive parent engagement. Some means of improving this include active parent organisations, effective networks linking of families with parent representatives, regular and effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications, communication with families about school programs and student progress, and more robust requirements to include the parent community as participants in school decisions and governance. Teacher professional development must provide opportunities for teachers to increase their practical knowledge and experience in areas that they are teaching. The main challenges to implementing some of these improvements are often a simple lack of resources coupled with a lack of political will. Federal initiatives in education are often short-term and ad hoc and not considered, and are vulnerable to overhaul upon a change of Government. Another barrier is the institutional inertia and risk-averse cultures that frequently become ingrained in large departments, where a "if it's not broken don't fix it" mindset often prevails.

Main submission

QUESTIONS:

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

- What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?
- How should school quality and educational success be measured?

ANSWERS:

- The central focus of education must be individual students' needs and as no two students are the same, there needs to be flexibility within funding and resourcing to allow for customised learning plans for each and every student. The ultimate goal of education must be that students become effective contributors within society.
- As well as sufficient proficiency in literacy and numeracy, the education system should instil in students the skills to learn, inquire and critically assess, and develop their ability to carry those skills in their own way through life. This also requires the acquisition of a broad, foundational general knowledge across multiple subjects, not necessarily limited to subjects included in current curricula. Interpersonal skills are increasingly important in businesses and other organisations as the job market generally becomes less routine and increasingly entails strong social and communication skills. This entails an emphasis on self-direction, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and other skills by embedding methods to encourage collaborative work and reflection in existing curricula. Considering that by some estimates, 65% of children now entering school may work in jobs which currently do not exist, a curriculum which fosters adaptability and innovation would be enormously beneficial.
- Currently, a common measure of school and student success is standardised test scores. Even setting aside whether such tests are of strong educational value, the challenge with this measure is that such scores are frequently correlated with socio-economic and socio-educational status. Consequently, there is a risk that assessing schools and students by this measure will reward schools catering to more privileged sectors of society.
- One desirable measure of educational success is for there to be no statistically significant correlation between educational outcomes and factors such as socio-economic status, gender, cultural background or geographic location.
- A further measure of success is whether a student has acquired the adaptability, resilience and ability to add to their knowledge and skills far into their post-school future.

QUESTIONS:

2. What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over Time?
- How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students?
 - What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?

ANSWERS:

- Funding must be directed to fostering learning spaces that enhance student learning outcomes. This is particularly the case for large schools, and schools in and around metropolitan Sydney which are projected to experience a surge in enrolment numbers over the next decade. The provision of more highly skilled and engaging teachers, teachers aids and classrooms would allow for students struggling for whatever reason to be more easily identified and to be provided with the necessary supports. The feedback that has been provided by schools that have received funding under the National Education Reform Agreement (NERA) has been overwhelmingly positive. However, due to the Government reneging on the original Gonski funding agreement this year, the full benefits of that funding have never been fairly investigated, nor will they reach the expected outcomes.
- Central to education must be the development of knowledge and skills of each individual student. The educational delivery model must be changed from its current teacher-centric approach to a student-centric model, which would develop the learning skills and educational outcomes of each individual student. Part of this entails changing the curriculum from its focus on age cohorts to a greater focus on the progressive development of knowledge and skills of each individual student, working at individually-determined paces and in individually-determined directions.
- Central to any equitable funding model is the principle that no student should face disadvantages in education due to factors beyond their control, such as socio-economic status, socio-educational status, ethnic/cultural background, gender, geographical location or disabilities/special needs. There is a definite risk that the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 (Gonski 2.0) will exacerbate such disadvantages by delivering less supports than was originally promised under NERA. For example, a 2017 New South Wales Upper House report into the provision of education to students with a disability and special needs concluded that “schools require the full allocation of funding as originally agreed under the NERA in order to achieve a

minimum resource standard.” Moreover, it found the current Learning and Support Teacher allocations have not kept pace with the increased demand and complexity of student need faced by schools.

- It is the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government to ensure that no student is left behind by Gonski 2.0 . The Government must end the imbalance of funding and ensure that there is a standard model that applies to students across all levels, and then a top up for identified needs based on each individual student without bulk funding or block funding to sectors.
- There must be a review of processes in teacher training development and consider the need to overcome the current trajectory many teachers follow, whereby they graduate from school, complete university and return to school as teachers. The possibility of incorporating real life experiences into Teaching Standards should be explored.

QUESTIONS:

What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place to ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time?

ANSWERS:

- Greater recognition that a single educational model (e.g. with respect to both curriculum and delivery methods) is insufficient to cater for all individual students.
- Greater capacity for experimentation with educational models, with formal approval and assessment to determine advisability and worth.
- An expectation of more teachers who specialise in particular subjects. This must include primary schools, which are currently characterised by a single teacher acting as a general instructor in essentially all subject areas.
- Dramatically improve the ability of educational systems (such as state/territory Departments of Education) and individual schools to implement change, necessitating both a formal understanding and adoption of change management disciplines and approaches and a commitment to the investment of money, effort and time required for effective and sustainable implementation of change.
- Movement away from the traditional model of “one-teacher/one-class” to have multiple teachers working together in each other’s presence and enabling learning from each other.

- A real partnership within school communities that enables creative innovation in education with the recognition that one model does not fit all.

QUESTIONS:

How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

ANSWERS:

- All schools must have a consistent means of identifying and tracking the progress of individual students identified as requiring assistance with their education, by undertaking constant revision and evaluation as to the effectiveness of this assistance. Currently, such monitoring is not applied consistently across all schools, and it would be of enormous benefit to students with educational difficulties, such as those with disabilities or special needs. In New South Wales, a potential tool to address this is the School Excellence Framework (SEF), which sets a framework to monitor educational outcomes in three key areas: learning, teaching and leading. In general, however, consistent frameworks for schools to improve their educational outcomes are scant. Moreover, the SEF process in NSW is relatively new and much evolution in its operation can be expected in order to improve its effectiveness and reduce the amount of time required from participants. For example, SEF requires a school to extensively document achievements divorced from any other need of the school, whereas many quality-assurance programs in the commercial world make assessments without the need for such extra work.
- Progression report cards for students would enable parents, educators (and students themselves) to assess growth in a student. Students will learn at different speeds, however with the introduction of a progression report, we can assess how much a student has improved from their last assessment.
- That assessment must be only related to the stage of the curriculum in which students have received instruction and that such assessment must only be used for diagnostic purposes to allow for reinforcement or changes in delivery based on individual student needs.

QUESTIONS:

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

- What are they and how could they be further developed?

ANSWERS:

- critical area for boosting student improvement is constructive parent engagement. Some means of improving this include active parent organisations, effective networks linking of families with parent representatives, regular and effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications, communication with families about school programs and student progress, and more robust requirements to include the parent community as participants in school decisions and governance.
- Teacher professional development must provide opportunities for teachers to increase their practical knowledge and experience in areas that they are teaching. It is often the case that teachers have a satisfactory grasp of the theoretical background of their subject area while lacking the practical experience that could enhance their instruction to students. Teachers must therefore be able to continually improve their teaching through ongoing exposure to practical experience relevant to their subject area.
- Improved teacher professional development also entails moving away from treating newly-qualified teachers as ready for unsupervised management of students from the moment they graduate. Treating new graduates as ready to work with such a high level of independence and lack of oversight differentiates teaching from the vast majority of other professions, and graduate teachers should be provided with greater professional development and oversight. Moreover, a degree of oversight and professional development should be provided to teachers at all stages of their career in order to improve teaching, and improve early identification and remediation of substandard teaching.

QUESTIONS:

3. Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

- If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

ANSWERS:

- • The main challenges to implementing some of these improvements are often a simple lack of resources coupled with a lack of political will. Schools that lack sufficient funds to make improvements often turn to P&C Associations to make up for the shortfall, which puts an unfair strain on

parent communities in schools. Federal initiatives in education are often short-term and ad hoc and not considered, and are vulnerable to overhaul upon a change of Government.

- A case in point is the National Education Reform Agreement, which was cancelled before the majority of funding was released and replaced with considerably reduced funding increases under the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017. There is nothing preventing funding pledged under 'Gonski 2.0' from being cancelled in a similar before it has been fully provided. In order for any initiatives recommended by this panel to be successful, the Government must commit to implementing them in full and not renege on them before they have run their course. This will require a bipartisan commitment to agree on directions, if not a greater bipartisan commitment to eliminate party-political or ideological intervention in educational approaches and curricula, and remove all political gamesmanship from debates on education policy. In return for this, the education industry must accept a greater degree of transparency, scrutiny and constructive criticism together with an ability to evolve as a result of such oversight.
- Another barrier is the institutional inertia and risk-averse cultures that frequently become ingrained in large departments, where a "if it's not broken don't fix it" mindset often prevails. This has led to Departments of Education, both at Federal and State/Territory levels, to focus primarily on keeping day-to-day operations reasonably smooth, and without controversial or negative media coverage. The prioritisation of these factors often act as a barrier to identifying the need for innovative reforms and implementing innovative reforms.
- Related to the above point, educational providers generally have a lack of willingness and ability to experiment, evaluate, learn and change. Some of the elements which educators say they wish to inculcate in students, such as adaptability and critical thinking, are the very things that are often absent in the practices of educators. Some of this may result from inadequate training of teachers or from the constraints placed upon educators by Government policies which prioritise standardised education over student-centred teaching. This makes it all the more imperative that the education system allow for flexibility in teaching methods in order to cultivate each individual student's progress and interests.
- There are frequent cases of the Department of Education exerting disproportionate influence on the parent community, including in the following ways:

- Some Community Engagement officers, Deputy and/or Principals can scuttle P&C Associations by running competing events, as they are opposed to the leadership or idea of a P&C Association that they cannot control.
- In many schools, the P&C Association is over stocked with Department of Education staff. Who thereby lead the direction of the P&C Association – by their attendance and forcefulness, they scare parents away.
- Some of these people are office workers and ex-student parents who do not give up their roles, and new parents cannot make changes, as the ‘old guard’ are locked into the plans that they roll out each year with little to no amendment.