



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

Submitter: National Catholic Education Commission
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: NSW

Summary

Catholic schools have been part of Australia's education story for 200 years. Catholic schools today educate one in five Australian children. Catholic systems see themselves as partners with families, with government, with the broader community and with other schools in delivering a high-quality educational choice in almost every part of the country. Indeed, almost 40 per cent of Catholic schools are outside major metropolitan areas. Catholic education is also playing an increasing role in early childhood services, which are a vital part of our education system.

The NCEC submission has set out the unique characteristics of Catholic education and its vision for educational success for Australian students. The submission has argued that while measuring success is important, there are a number of student outcomes that are difficult to measure but which should be considered as indicators of educational excellence. Where data are used successfully, they should analyse student progress over time, explore opportunities for data linkage and consider the personal and familial contexts of each student.

The NCEC submission has shown that schools systems are an important and valuable part of the governance arrangements of Catholic and other school systems, and crucial to their ability to operate efficiently and effectively. School systems operate in a diversity of contexts across Australia and intimately understand the needs of their students. The NCEC would not support government funding being tethered to a scheme that micromanages school systems and creates onerous regulatory and reporting imposts.

Our submission has also explored some barriers to achieving educational success, including the SES methodology, privacy legislation and the complex challenges of educating students in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The NCEC thanks the Review Panel for the opportunity to make a submission to the Review and would welcome any further discussions on the matters we have canvassed.

Main submission

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

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), representing 1,737 Catholic schools and more than 765,000 students across Australia, believes the Australian schooling system should be high-quality and high-equity, developing young Australians as passionate learners and creative individuals, and fostering active and informed citizens who are the cornerstone of a successful workforce, strong economy and improved productivity. The NCEC also heeds the words of Pope Francis who believes that education is an act of hope because it builds upon the future in a spirit of service. Catholic education cultivates the whole person—cognitive, affective, physical, social, ethical and spiritual—encouraging every student to develop their talents in an environment of solidarity. These themes are echoed in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

In valuing the uniqueness of each individual and believing in the education of the whole person, the NCEC considers successful Australian schools must, and do, focus on meeting the diverse needs of students. The NCEC submissions to the Productivity Commission's 2016 Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base argued that by further developing the national evidence base for schooling, government policy can support all children to achieve to their potential, regardless of their postcode or life circumstances. These submissions are available at the following locations:

https://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/199682/sub049-education-evidence.pdf

https://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/208839/subdr106-education-evidence.pdf.

How do we measure success?

National and international assessments of student achievement are recognised and supported as a useful reference, but these provide only a partial snapshot of achievement at a point in time and not a complete picture of students' performance, development and progress. The measurement of school success should not be limited to cognitive outcomes as assessed by standardised tests. Such tests are a helpful tool but are not sufficient in and of themselves. Catholic schools strive to educate the whole person and seek to acknowledge and highlight those important outcomes of education that are not so easily measured. These outcomes include critical and creative thinking, emotional intelligence and the ability to negotiate complex problems. Indeed, Catholic schools often support and educate students coming from challenging backgrounds, helping those students complete their education, become strong contributors to their family and community and empowering them to overcome intergenerational violence and poverty. While this outcome would not be captured by standardised tests, it is clearly a case of a school

delivering educational excellence. The NCEC would welcome the opportunity to engage in a national conversation about how measures of broader elements such as wellbeing, resilience and social development might be developed and used to the advantage of students and wider society.

The NCEC has previously raised the advantage of a national education evidence base that is

wide-ranging, longitudinal and ambitious, with well-considered opportunities to link data from within the education domain and beyond it to areas such as health, early childhood and community and social services. The evidence should be framed by clear strategic objectives and an overarching purpose. A broad education evidence base, characterised by considered, valid and reliable measures to track development and significant changes over time, should not sit in isolation from evidence available on health and social welfare. It should be possible for education data to be linked to health data and welfare data in a meaningful way. Linked data could provide insights into educational disadvantage and make correlations between school outcomes and life outcomes. These correlations could then be extended to improving educational outcomes.

How can we use data to achieve educational excellence?

One of the challenges of educational policy is that of how and where to use a potential plethora of data to greatest advantage. While NAPLAN data is used on the My School website for the purposes of broadly like school comparisons, more successful use of the data lies in the capacity to analyse individual student progress over time, to better understand the positive differences teachers make every day and to look to high-gain schools, where the same cohort has shown significant improvement over time to understand why these schools perform well and thereby inform better teaching. These latter functions are generally best performed at the school and jurisdictional level where appropriate interventions can be targeted. For Catholic education, the role of the family is paramount and the capacity to work with family circumstances and contexts towards improving their children's outcomes is fundamental to school planning.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvements over time?

On the question of how school funding could be used more effectively and efficiently to improve all students' outcomes, the NCEC submission reiterates the importance and benefits of school systems, which the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling: Final Report argued "provide assurance to the Australian Government that Australia has an effective and efficient schooling effort" (46). Systems add value to the Australian education system through a commitment to building new schools and supporting existing ones; creating efficiencies and enabling economies of scale;

supporting financial viability of member schools; and helping schools meet the compliance and accountability demands.

For Catholic education, system funding is central to its capacity to operate effectively and efficiently. It does this in the following ways:

- Distribution of government funding across systemically funded Catholic schools according to need can occur using detailed local-level and school-specific information, and more up-to-date information, than is available to the Australian Government and State/Territory governments. Catholic systems are best placed to assess the financial condition and resource requirements of their individual schools, improving outcomes in terms of financial viability and educational equity.
- Catholic systems are able to use needs-based distribution to address need in relation to particular school characteristics (e.g. size, location, remoteness and the socio-economic status of the community). In relation to new schools, which suffer from a lack of economies of scale as they progressively grow to their full enrolment, block funding of the system and redistribution of funds enables the operation of the school to be appropriately supported as it develops.
- Catholic systems are able to cross-subsidise to address perceived shortfalls in government funding arrangements for certain students with high needs (e.g. students with disability, Indigenous students, ESL students including new arrivals and refugee students). There is also a greater capacity for systems—through economies of scale—to address growing infrastructure needs, which government funding cannot always alleviate.
- Catholic systems also use needs-based distribution to assist students whose particular educational needs are not directly funded through the loadings of the model, e.g. students with challenging behavioural needs and specific learning difficulties, as well as students from newly-arrived refugee families.

The NCEC submission supports the national desire to improve student outcomes yet emphasises the rich diversity of contexts across Australia. Catholic systems intimately understand the needs of their schools and students and contend these benefits must be maintained. The NCEC would not support government funding tethered to a scheme that micromanages and leads to onerous regulations and excessive reporting. A sensible level of accountability is, of course, welcome. The governance arrangements of Catholic systems will ensure ongoing implementation of evidence-based actions.

Catholic systems support ongoing improvement over time through existing strategies and would welcome future strategies that include:

- a focus on developing the capacity and expertise of early career teachers and quality pre- service programs for teachers;
- a commitment to developing and improving data literacy within the teaching profession;
- a focus on enhancing the professional standing of teachers in the community and attracting the best people into the profession;
- cross-sectoral resource sharing and a renewed commitment to further developing national resource banks such as Scootle;
- the implementation of a nationally consistent student identifier. A unique student identifier presents an opportunity for longitudinal data that could provide insights across the life cycle of learning, from early childhood to post-school pathways;
- a renewed commitment to prioritising general capabilities within the Australian Curriculum;
- active sharing of evidence-based effective practice that improves student outcomes. Evidence for Learning (<http://evidenceforlearning.org.au/>), which is based on and affiliated with the Education Endowment Fund in the UK, is one example;
- parent engagement in learning and wellbeing, including in early childhood education, which is vital for enhancing children’s development;
- a focus on assessment practices for learning, as well as higher-level process skills necessary to participate in a changing and dynamic environment;
- ongoing awareness and training in relation to disabilities and their functional impact and appropriate adjustments;
- support for teachers to differentiate teaching in order to extend high-achieving students;
- allowing systems, schools and teachers to exercise autonomy, creativity and professional judgement in a spirit of subsidiarity and in accordance with the curriculum, while remaining accountable and consistent;
- continuous learning through innovation and effective use of research and data.

Indeed, improving the national capacity for data linkage—that is, the capacity of one set of data, for example the ABS Census, to illuminate another dataset—is particularly important for the early years of schooling when there is an opportunity to link educational and health data. This could be achieved alongside the consolidation and expansion of the national capacity for longitudinal study and

longitudinal data linkage and analysis. Over time, the technology of data collection and management will change, the privacy provisions around data will require careful attention, expectations of governments, communities and schools will increase but all the agencies involved in determining evidence on school outcomes will still need to focus on ensuring that any data meets fundamental standards of quality, integrity, meaningfulness, feasibility of collection and management.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

A significant barrier to educational success in the non-government school sector is the continuation of the Socio-Economic Status (SES) funding model in its current form. Catholic system schools are local neighbourhood schools operating at about 84% of the total government funding that government schools receive. Their physical resources are modest and their student/teacher ratios are substantially higher than the high-fee schools with which they share an SES score. The Australian Education Act 2013 will continue to use the existing SES methodology in the Commonwealth's school funding model in 2018, despite the fact that the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling and 2013 National Education Reform Agreement recommended that a more precise measure of capacity to contribute should replace the existing SES methodology. However, the NCEC acknowledges the Commonwealth Government has indicated that the National School Resourcing Board will review the SES methodology.

Is privacy legislation a barrier?

The complexity and diversity of privacy legislation across Australian jurisdictions and sectors is a barrier to the development of national evidence-based research. As government schools must comply with State or Territory legislation and the non-government sector with the Commonwealth Privacy Principles, the ability to conduct robust and rigorous national data linkage studies is limited. The barriers of privacy legislation result in studies using only deidentified data and creates issues for introducing a national unique student identifier. It is time the education sector explored lessons learnt from the health sector regarding accessing and analysing national datasets. This is vital if the sector is to provide educators, government and the wider community with confidence in producing rigorous national research that reflects the Australian educational context.

Are there other barriers?

There are other barriers to implementing improvements that achieve educational excellence in Australian schools, including:

- the lack of long-term Commonwealth Government support for systems and jurisdictions to improve teacher quality;

- compliance costs and regulatory burden, which are significant issues for Catholic schools. Beyond the existing reporting obligations and regulatory requirements created by the Australian Education Act and other project reports for government funding schemes, non-government schools are subjected to the reporting requirements arising from the unnecessary regulatory burden that the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission imposes. Catholic schools devote considerable time and resources to meeting these reporting requirements and complying with regulations. Reducing the regulatory burden on Catholic schools means more time and resources can be devoted to enhancing schools and improving student outcomes;
- the complex challenges for education in regional, rural and remote Australia. The educational outcomes of children in these areas is shaped by a range of in-school and out-of-school factors and their interface. The mission of Catholic education has inspired Catholic schools that serve students in regional, rural and remote areas across Australia, especially students that may be disadvantaged or marginalised. Indeed, in some remote areas of Australia, the Catholic school is the only school that serves families and students that wish to remain in their home community. However, as the NCEC submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education has shown, attracting and retaining high-quality principals and teaching staff, shortages of allied health professionals and digital technology deficiencies are some of the challenges in regional, rural and remote Australia.