Submission to the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools

CENTRE FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

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NOVEMBER 2017

Note: This version of the CPD submission retains the questions to which submissions must respond, as well as hotlinks and formatting.

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

The two parts of this question are strongly linked. The first part is answered in broad terms only, with the second in far more detail, given the impact of measures on whatever is agreed to be the purpose of schools.

a. What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

Implicit in this question is the idea that schools should be steered by learning outcomes drawn up by some, transposed into curriculum boxes by others and served up to groups of recipients called children - the last mentioned being products in the making, progressing lock-step through school and given a stamp at the end to indicate their quality and likely destination.

Arguably a better question is who schools should primarily serve and how might they best be served, in the present and into their future. Parents, the wider community (including employers) and the nation all have a stake in what schools do, but they should primarily serve children. A good school will engage our children and young adults in learning for personal achievement, for a sustainable livelihood and an enduring contribution to society.

All those words – engage, learning, achievement, sustainable and contribution – are critical and even sequential. Without the engagement the others won't sufficiently happen, and schools will fall well short of achieving even the most erudite list of capabilities, skills and knowledge outcomes.

It is important to think of engagement in many contexts. Even though teaching methodology is very important, engagement is far more than what teachers do in conventional classrooms. It goes hand in hand with the increasing focus on personalised learning and has implications for the way learning is organised and how schools are structured – and certainly has implications for the measures of success.

b. How should school quality and educational success be measured?

We must proceed carefully when focusing on how success in schools should be measured. An over-reliance on measurement can produce negative, unintended consequences for how our children learn and develop. It can lead to a misallocation of school resources. It can skew parents' understanding of what constitutes a high-quality school. In the pursuit of quantifiable metrics of 'success', it also risks devaluing the critical need to engage students in their learning.

This has become very apparent in the last few decades. The endpoint of schooling, the stamp at the end of the assembly line, not only labels young people but collectively labels their schools. School-by-school rankings of measures such as HSC, VCE or NAPLAN, are readily publicised and noticed by families. Provided they have the means, parents will strive to ensure that their own children attend schools where most seem to emerge with the preferred stamp - and all that it implies for their future.

In recent years they haven't needed to wait until the final stamps are awarded. While created for a better purpose, NAPLAN was hijacked by government to help people – via the *My School* website - make judgments about schools, a process that – in the language of the marketplace – would ensure competition, inform school choice and enhance school quality.

There is no evidence that it did much of that. Instead there were two regressive consequences:

- While results have always been important, both primary and secondary schools are now urged to place greater focus on NAPLAN scores. There is considerable evidence on the extent to which this has impacted on students and distorted school priorities. Despite occasional claims about incremental change, it hasn't lifted national scores and almost certainly does little for engagement.
- As the late Bernie Shepherd and I have shown, school enrolments have continued to shift toward the higher socio-educational advantage (SEA) schools. The gaps between higher and lower scoring schools (aligning with higher and lower SEA) have increased across a number of measures. This has worsened problems identified in the first Gonski Review and helps explain Australia's mediocre levels of school achievement; the very problem that this current Review has been asked to address.

This recent history has implications for the question about measurement. The Mitchell Institute has shown that levels of student engagement are alarmingly low at all stages of schooling. The dimensions of disengagement are increasingly known. It would be a useful strategy for members of the Review panel to ask teachers to rate levels of engagement of students in their class or school – perhaps by using the categories developed by the Schlechty Center or similar. The results may variously confirm or surprise, and should concern.

The measurement of school quality and success has to shift from numbers about basics to a focus on student engagement in all its manifestations and indicators. Given that the measurement 'tail' wags the school 'dog' such a shift is long overdue. As a consequence of work done by Marsh and others we know much more about the significance of engagement as the trigger to learning and achievement.

The current Review, with help from innovative practitioners, should initiate the development of appropriate measurement tools around engagement. These might include common indicators such as attendance, retention, student welfare, school to work transition – as well as advanced survey instruments. At the very least these should have priority over existing measurement tools, if not replace them altogether.

2. What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

The first Gonski Review sought to increase our investment in schools where the potential for improvement is greatest. The findings revealed in the Centre for Policy Development report, *Uneven Playing Field,* show it didn't sufficiently happen. Recommendations of this second Review similarly won't have a significant impact unless they are supported by sufficient funding. We still massively over-invest

(with public and private funding) in schools where it is making little difference. While this matter seems to be outside the terms of reference of the current Review, the panel is asked to:

> 'Provide advice on related institutional or governance arrangements to ensure the ongoing identification and implementation of evidence based actions to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time.'

Given that the Terms of Reference refer to efficiency and effectiveness it would seem reasonable to recommend monitoring and explaining the complex relationship between the amount of money going into schools and the subsequent outcomes. *My School* data shows that high spending on some schools might be due to location, SEA and school duplication. Investigating these issues would certainly create a more nuanced debate about the relationship between money in and results out.

Finally, prospects for improving student outcomes need to be seen in context. We know from the OECD that the combined family/school SES effect accounts for two-thirds of student achievement. Schools therefore have the greatest capacity to impact on the remaining one third. However, this capacity is further limited because many decisions about school operation and priorities are made by the "system enablers" referred to in a later question, as well as by the barriers referred to in response to the final question.

The Review should recommend that improving the wider institutional and socio-economic context in which schools operate must continue to accompany within-school change and reform. Without this wider attention the success of within-school reform will remain diminished. This suggests that a drive for reform should also focus on the "enablers" – and on reducing the impact of the barriers - as much as on the schools.

a. 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?

A majority of Australia's schools don't cater for *all* students because they enrol *some* and exclude *others*. The schools with the greatest capacity to choose who enrols are those in higher demand and/or those which have active or passive enrolment discriminators in place. Choice and competition has even distorted enrolment patterns between many (otherwise comprehensive) public schools. Unless this changes, the task of catering for *all* will remain very unevenly shared. Hence the question, and solutions, must address problems at the school/system as well as the classroom level.

This behaviour of schools is noted in research on market mechanisms in schooling, and the specific impact in Australia described in CPD's *Uneven Playing Field*. The disadvantaged and vulnerable are not preferred enrolments and this has implications for how they can be effectively served, including by increasingly marginalised schools. By way of contrast, academically advanced students are preferred, but even the mechanisms we use to cater for this group are also not satisfactory.

There is another regressive outcome of marketization of schools. Mainstream schools cater best for those students who either respond well to the ways learning is structured in schools. If they can, schools display the results of these students, in their competition to enrol more of the same and increase their market share. They might innovate at the edges of pedagogy but they don't cater well, nor do they seek, those students who learn in very different ways.

One consequence is that deep innovation tends to be consigned to the fringe. There is some personalised learning in mainstream schools but only a small number, including Montessori and Big Picture are structured to cater for diverse learning interests and styles.

This illustrates a serious equity problem. Students come to school with a diversity of personal resources, interests, abilities and learning styles. They have no guarantee, and in many cases not even the remote possibility, that the schools which are available to them are able to maximize each student's potential to achieve their best. This effectively disenfranchises large numbers of students who learn in different ways.

The numbers who are disengaged suggest the scale of the problem. It is a substantial and unacknowledged equity problem. Just as the first Gonski Review set a benchmark for funding equity, the current Review should do the same for equity in learning opportunity, including in ways suggested in the next section.

i. **What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?**
ii. **What works best for whom and in what circumstances?**

Just about any teacher can elaborate on ways to improve classroom practice and outcomes, but this response is about effective and efficient ways to have a significant impact on learning outcomes of *all* students….and how an advantage for some can be created without compounding the disadvantage faced by others.

The classroom and school level response is important, but our experience in meeting the needs of all groups of students is very mixed – and seems to fall short of the expectations of parents. This is well illustrated in the availability of opportunities for gifted and talented children within each classroom and school. It is still not done well, in part explaining the increased number of designated selective government schools in NSW and the current selective streams being established in Sydney's Catholic schools. But such strategies fall short of amounting to an equitable provision, even for this group of students.

One solution at the school level involves establishing substantial personalised learning, in order to equally support students with a diversity of interests, abilities and learning styles. This requires an upfront investment in teacher retraining, but costs no more in the longer term – and goes a long way to meeting the effectiveness and efficiency criteria. For more information refer to the Big Picture Education Australia submission to this Review.

There is another systems response to the need to reach all students. One taken in NSW, in relation to gifted and talented children, is the establishment of a virtual selective school, Aurora College which successfully serves such students in rural and regional areas. The school teaches a variety of subjects using cutting edge computer technology and residential camps. Students are enrolled both in the online selective class and complete their other subjects in their local secondary (base) school. Mentors and local school co-ordinators also support the students.

This model overcomes the problem of access and also solves the zero-sum problems created when bricks and mortar selective schools advantage some, but at the expense of students in other schools. At present, selective schools simply aggregate advantaged students, contributing to the compounding of disadvantage elsewhere - a problem in general terms recognised in the first Gonski Review. Reducing this compounded disadvantage remains the clue to lifting overall student achievement.

We need to know more about the extent to which some online provision can bring together students who, with the best of intentions, aren't well served by their available (and often small) school. The current Review panel should visit both Aurora College (in Ryde, NSW) as well as seeing it in action in a rural school . A working group should then investigate how this model might bring together other groups of students who share common interests, subject preferences and especially learning modes.

b. 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?

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

The arrangements and enablers mentioned in these questions are arguably all essential – but from one perspective they make up or define a portion of the square in which schools are located (see Q3 on barriers). Innovative schools in particular don't find it easy to chart a pathway through the various authorities responsible for governance and 'enabling'. This is not an argument to cut schools loose; even schools in devolved systems, such as in New Zealand, are still accountable to a myriad of authorities.

The solution is to ensure there is strong alignment between agreed school priorities, the measures for success AND the system enablers. If student engagement is a priority then this needs to be prominent in the priorities of all the enablers. Curriculum authorities, for example, need to review the amount of content and give greater prominence to choice and opportunities for personalisation. If enablers are not aligned with school priorities they can become disablers.

In this context accountability is especially important. Just like poor measurement, poor accountability have a regressive impact on school priorities and practices. Apart from a varied collection of school reviews, the main common instrument for school accountability is the *My School* website. Whilst the collation of schools data since 2010 is very useful, *My* School is at best a proxy accountability instrument, and one that is shallow, misleading and also regressive.

There is a strong argument for consistency of school reviews across Australia, guided (and if necessary, funded) by the Commonwealth and drawing on best practice standards from the states and overseas. If appropriately constituted, such reviews can best "ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice" (question 2c above).

A good school review process will grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time. A poor one will discourage innovation, reinforce fear, engender mistrust and avoidance. In the wrong hands and poorly conducted, school reviews can distort the purposes of schooling in much the same as can limited measures of achievement. Reviews must be based on best practice and encompass a comprehensive set of indices and evaluation tools. Control of the review process must remain in the hands of professionals and at arm's length from government/s. Members of school review panels should represent, amongst others, students, parents and teachers – and key facilitators in the case of innovative schools.

d. 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?

There are limits to which this question can be sufficiently answered in a review which has a specific and limited timeframe. Instead, the current Review should recommend, as suggested by CPD in June 2017 that a task force be established to monitor progress being made against the recommendations of both Gonski Reviews and the commitments of federal and state governments - and report publically on them at regular intervals. Such a body should also address the ongoing need to assess the relevance of new initiatives and the evidence for their success.

This could incorporate the matters raised in the above question, but have a wider purpose, including a review of the Schools Resourcing Body, one of the most significant recommendations arising out of the first Gonski Review.

CPD also recommended a further investigation on barriers in our current schools' framework that risk preventing the implementation of both Gonski Reviews. This should include barriers such as:

- ongoing inefficiencies in the way schools are provided and resourced; and
- inconsistencies in the obligations on all schools which are substantially publicly funded.

3. Are there barriers to implementing these improvements? If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

When this Review was announced, the Federal Minister encouraged people engaging with the Review to think outside the square. The reality is, however, that schools are quite firmly confined within a square, making it very difficult to take the risks which are essential for authentic reform and improvement. Barriers to greater risk-taking are set out below, along with suggestions (in italics) on how they might be overcome:

1. Widespread views of what constitutes a good (and desirable/successful) school:
    a. The inherently conservative and often dated views held about schools. *More proactive school leadership can take families and the community on the reform journey*
    b. The priorities in media reporting of school issues. *Usually outside the control of schools, especially given over-management (by school authorities) of comments to media.*
2. Decisions by governments, school and related authorities:
    a. Requirements created by curriculum and testing authorities. *Some solutions suggested earlier, but schools have – and can make use of - more scope than they often assume.*
    b. Government decisions, both proactive and reactive, about priorities for school reform and improvement. *While unlikely, government should be required to make decisions based on best evidence available.*
    c. Processes of accountability, state (intermittent reviews), national (*My School*). *See earlier answers: just like achievement measures, these must serve and not distort the purpose of schooling.*
3. Market culture driving competition and choice – and shaping schools:
    a. Schools competing to gain and provide a mainstream (or above) advantage. *This will only change when the measures of a quality school focus on processes, especially engagement.*
    b. Fewer schools willing to cater for diversity in enrolments and learning styles. *Special and publicized recognition/rewards needed for schools that do this well.*
4. The culture within schools/systems
    a. Element of conservatism and inertia in the teaching profession. *School authorities and principals need to strongly award initiative, shared professional learning, reflection and school-level research into what works.*
    b. Pedagogy narrowed by external constraints and lack of system trust in schools and teachers. *Greater flexibility and trust – along with accountability – is essential.*
    c. The isolation and separation created when schools/teachers increasingly cater for students at either end of the achievement range. *Increase the rewards for those who*

take on the biggest challenges and accept greater proportions of disadvantaged students.

Summary of key points

We have reformed schools for decades, pitched them into competition and tested them to the hilt. Few would claim this has worked. Student disengagement is substantial, existing achievement measures are inadequate. A much greater focus is needed, at all levels, on re-engaging students in learning – matched by assessment processes which sustain and not undermine this focus.

This still needs to be accompanied by support directed at where we need the greatest lift in student achievement, rather than directed at students already achieving at high levels.

By the way it is structured and operates, mainstream schooling is not sufficiently reaching and serving those who are disengaged and who might learn in different ways. This is a serious equity issue. In order to reach all students we have to rethink not only classroom strategies but the way we 'do school' itself. Our diverse students are best reached through personalised learning, accompanied by different modes of delivery.

Those connected with schools, including system enablers, have to serve – and not constrain or distort - agreed priorities of schooling. This includes any planned process of monitoring and reporting on schools and the application of our investment in them.

This Review and its predecessor, should not be one-off events. CPD recommends that a task force be established to monitor progress being made against the recommendations of both Gonski Reviews and the commitments of federal and state governments - and reports publically on them at regular intervals.

These reports should identify new and emerging areas for action and address the barriers which need to be overcome to ensure that our provision of schooling equitably caters for all children and young people.

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