



# AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL Inc.

*Representing parents of students attending non-government schools in support of choice, equity, quality and voice for all Australian children*

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## SUBMISSION

### *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*

**November 2017**

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the nationally recognised peak parent organisation representing the interests of parents with children in non-government schools and Australia's parent population more generally. These interests extend down to early childhood development and learning and up to post-school transitions.

APC believes it is important to draw the panel's attention to aspects of our work that bear on the Review and are informed by the voices and experiences of the parents, schools and communities we have worked with over many years.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission.

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

Young adults who graduate from any school in Australia should be able to contribute to society in a meaningful and productive way throughout their life, feel confident and capable of doing so, and be happy. They should be provided with rich learning opportunities to develop their emotional intelligence, mental and physical health, global knowledge and fundamentally, to have competency in literacy and numeracy.

Moving learning from product and content in the curriculum to processes and synthesis of learning, critical thinking, knowledge and application by doing, and skills in creation is key. We believe these entrepreneurial skills are very necessary attributes for current education and will facilitate student engagement through greater personalised and student-driven learning.

Success for schools should be based on their ability to "grow" every student's confidence, knowledge and learning capacity over time. This must be underpinned by pastoral care for students, genuine engagement of families in their learning and by respect and value for the professionalism and wellbeing of the leaders, teachers and other staff who have the capacity to influence, and mandate to educate, children alongside their parents, families and the community.

#### *How should school quality and educational success be measured?*

The quality of a school should be centred on the culture within but also beyond its gates into the broader community. It is not just about the educational success attained by students although this is obviously very important.



Communication and collaboration are equally valuable attributes of a quality school as is the ability to build respectful relationships which create quality learning opportunities, harness resources and strengthen the fabric of school communities. It is also important for schools to understand and implement true opportunity for authentic and meaningful parent engagement in a child's learning with the explicit purposes of improving student performance, improving school performance and building the social capital of students and their families.

The quality of educational success should be measured by the growth in student achievement, one year of school equalling one year of growth, the "value-add" that schools provide over and above academic achievement (e.g. the necessary skills to be life-long and adaptable learners), by teachers knowing their subject matter and providing timely and detailed feedback to students on how to improve at all levels of schooling and, ultimately, by the productiveness and happiness of our society.

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

APC believes there are three key areas of value that will make the biggest difference to student outcomes: supporting school leadership and teachers, broadening the education environment, and very importantly, developing national policy on parent (and family) engagement in learning.

It is clear that education needs to be less about uniform education and more about differentiation in a 21st century classroom which fully encompasses technology-based and community-based learning. Every student is unique and more tailored education opportunities, co-created and driven by student initiated learning and creativity, are required.

It is important that teachers are skilled and have capacity to shift from classroom management of content delivery to this new adaptive learning environment. From what we are seeing so far with the Digital Technologies Hub, this will be a great support for teachers in building their capacity and capability to help nurture innovative, collaborative and engaged learners who will be adaptive to the changing world of work.

APC believes there needs to be additional support for school leaders and teachers to address the many and complicated facets of education (incl. behaviour management), especially more *time* to develop themselves as a teacher or leader, to reflect on and improve their teaching practices and pedagogy, and to engage with parents and students. There needs to be substantive competency in facilitating collaborative and entrepreneurial learning environments and implementing a range of instructional approaches that support, empower and challenge all students with their diverse talents and needs.

It is critical that students, parents, teachers and the community, indeed society as a whole, values the teaching profession by acknowledging, trusting and respecting the work and devotion required to be an excellent classroom teacher, and at the school level, creating and sustaining



positive learning cultures. It is equally critical that teachers are highly qualified and skilled to enable this trust and respect to prosper. APC would see this as an important outcome of this Review.

We believe education environments need to address student engagement, in particular active learning and achievement as opposed to compliant and test-oriented learning. A component of this is to provide opportunities for learning and discovery beyond the classroom which can be assessed in flexible ways.

Our desire is to see general capabilities of digital citizenship be a prime focus alongside partnership and shared vision with parents on technology use. We believe it crucial that technology enabled learning is accompanied by a strong focus on fostering the self-regulation skills that students (and their families) need to successfully and safely navigate the online world as active digital citizens.

Related to these general capabilities is the social and emotional learning that students need to make sense of their complex emotional boundaries, and to build emotional intelligence and regulation through mindfulness skills and interpersonal effectiveness. These in turn will enable them to deeply engage and be empowered in their learning. Respectful relationships, digital responsibility and specific initiatives that build the important scaffolding around active wellbeing of students must sit as part of holistic learning rather than add-ons to education delivery.

There is substantial, robust evidence that parent engagement has a significant positive effect on academic and other indicators of student achievement (e.g. Fan & Williams, 2010; Jeynes 2005, 2007, 2012, 2015; Pomerantz, Kim & Cheung, 2012). Therefore, improving the capacity of school leaders and teachers to productively partner with parents from all backgrounds is critical. Professor Debbie Pushor (University of Saskatchewan, Canada) speaks to the strength of both “parent knowledge” and “teacher knowledge” as important factors in student learning outcomes and therefore of the necessity for active, mutually appreciative relationships and shared decision-making (Pushor, 2010). We need a deliberate and sustained focus on building the capacity of both teachers and parents to partner in children's learning at all ages and stages of development. Systemic capacity-building support for parents, families and teachers (incl. pre-service teachers) to effectively collaborate is fundamental to realising further improvements in student learning and achievement. To this end, APC has consistently called for coherent policy development and a national approach to engagement and partnership capacity-building for parents but more urgently for pre-service and graduate teachers.

At the school and classroom level, APC believes that establishing earlier relationships between teachers and parents to create and maintain positive and productive two-way communication is necessary. It is not appropriate to make this contact when difficult conversations are required, and parent-teacher speed dating interviews do little to build respectful alliances. Home visits or one-on-one meetings - not teacher-to-parent but with the parent as an equal - especially in the early years, would be ideal to build the close relationship required between home and school before other means of communication are deployed (e.g. social media, apps, parent portals).



APC has three programs which contribute to parent and community engagement in schooling and learning. The *Indigenous Parent Factor* and *Successful Learning in the Early Years* programs empower and strengthen the confidence and capacity of parents and families to engage in learning and form partnerships with teachers. The *Certificate IV in Parent, Family and Community Engagement* and in particular the two specialist units, “*Build quality school, family, business and community partnerships*” and “*Facilitate and support parent and family engagement in learning and schooling*” could be provided to all pre-service and newly graduated teachers. Both units, and the Certificate IV in its entirety, link to the Family-School Partnership Framework which was endorsed by all Australian Ministers of Education in 2008 and has recently been refreshed to encompass developments in the engagement and partnership domain.

Although not covered by the Review, what happens in the early years before formal schooling sets both the trajectory of the child and the propensity and capacity for parents to engage in their child’s learning journey (e.g. Monti, Pomerantz & Roisman, 2014). Hence it is critical to invest in more family-based engagement initiatives in the early years so that the foundation is set for the formal years of schooling.

*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?*

However conceptualised, parent engagement is typically thought of as an “external factor” – a student/family variable that is beyond the control of schools. But, in reality, this is not so. Schools, teachers, policy makers and other invested stakeholders have considerable capacity to support, influence and facilitate effective parent engagement in young Australians’ formal schooling and informal learning. Parent engagement, including through the committed development of home-school partnerships focused on learning, should be considered core school/teacher practice. Policy effort and funding needs to be directed at parent engagement in learning and school leaders and teachers need to be cognisant of what it is, what benefits can accrue and how to support, facilitate and leverage it.

In relation to children with disabilities, funding which enables consistency of assistance and support every year that they are in formal schooling is required so that students do not see the benefit of that support one year and it removed the next because of the gains they made. Too often, the rollercoaster of support for these students is reflected in their learning outcome continuum.

For students in regional, rural and remote communities, educational delivery should be broadened so that they have the ability to remain in these communities, especially in secondary school, and receive the same level of education and opportunities as their metropolitan counterparts. Connectivity and equity of access issues should be a priority to realise this ideal.



What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?

Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders (2012) concluded from the best available evidence that parent engagement (in learning) improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, and that the progress of policy and practice in this domain is important, if not essential, to Australian education reform. Subsequently, Emerson, Fox and Fear also observed that without a concomitant effort in this domain, the magnitude of change expected from other schooling reforms may well not be achieved (Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau, 2012).

In parallel to research and evidence, there is also the “lived experience” evidence which is equally valuable and which tells us that the teachers standing before our children, a parent’s ability to be part of their learning journey and the relationship between teacher, parent and child has a positive impact on their educational outcomes.

In our submission to the *National Education Evidence Base Inquiry’s* draft report, APC questioned the almost singular focus on “teacher effects”, the conceptualisation and treatment of parent engagement as an “external influence” and the failure to recognise and appropriately position parents as decision-makers in their children’s education.

Actions to improve practice and outcomes:

- The general utility of Australia’s refreshed *Family-School Partnerships Framework* merits scrutiny. How might the core elements be coherently integrated in government policy to better support, facilitate and leverage parent and family engagement? What can be done, intellectually and physically, to shift engagement from a peripheral to priority concern at the system, school and classroom level?
- Dr Karen Mapp, international engagement expert and key contributor to the U.S. Department of Education’s *Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships* (SEDL, 2013), contends that the failure to create the conditions and collective capacity for impactful partnership work lies at the heart of well-intentioned but ineffectual policies and strategies. APC urges consideration of this framework as a mechanism to move beyond the perpetual circularity of “the what and the why” to strategic embedment and enactment of “the how”.
- The competency expectations for graduate, proficient and highly accomplished teachers in Standards 3.7 and 7.3 of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* are set very low and do little to encourage engagement and partnership competence. They need revision.
- For parents to be appropriately positioned as decision makers, they need timely access to relevant and current data. We point the Review to Weiss, Lopez and Stark’s (2011) paper on sharing student data to improve family engagement and teacher-parent communications which also contains policy recommendations to support 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and technology trends.



*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?*

The Australian Government's *Students First* policy identified parent engagement as a core area for action along with teacher quality, school autonomy and strengthening the curriculum. Parent engagement is the only policy area which hasn't received significant attention and funding resources and it has now been downplayed in the *Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes* policy plan.

Crucially, there is still no national policy position or indeed any strategy to leverage parent/family engagement in support of improved student and school performance. Australia must heed the substantial and growing body of international evidence and systematically integrate engagement in schooling and early childhood policy agendas rather than continue to tinker around the edges.

*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?*

APC appreciates that NAPLAN reporting to parents is moving from a "snapshot" to a "photo album" so parents can see the actual growth of their students' progress across consecutive tests. It would also be beneficial for teachers to properly work through the results with students and their parents so that, together, they can acknowledge the learning process, celebrate the outcomes and identify and work together on further improvement. We believe this, too, would be an enabling tool for parents to partner in the ongoing progress of their children's results to build a more complete picture of their school grade outcomes each year together with NAPLAN test results. This would be further enhanced if the results were not released publicly.

The integration of compulsory and nationally agreed units into initial teacher education courses that teach the skills to build authentic parent/family relationships, and impart an understanding of the benefits of parent engagement in learning, will contribute to increased educational achievement and success for students and teacher efficacy. The provision of ongoing development opportunities for teachers, parents and families will embed these as long-term gains.

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

APC believes that more research must be done to assess the impacts of embedded technology in classrooms and schools, and its broader impact on families. To date, there is no clear evidence as to the effects and such research could inform what education strategies and actions are taken in future. This shortcoming has been identified by Dr MaryAnn Wolf (Centre for Reading and Language Research, Tufts University): "Digital technology can be a great resource but it can also be a pernicious one, so it's how we as a society really study the cognitive impact of that and use



evidence-based research to go after the technology designers to do a better job of dealing with the problems of memory and attention we are seeing." It is important across all student cohorts.

APC would also like to see longitudinal research conducted where past students are asked what they were given from their school which contributed to their success or otherwise and what they would have liked to have been given, as an opportunity to learn what worked best and what could be improved from the student perspective.

*Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?*

Potential barriers may be equity of access and teacher capacity and capability, however both can be addressed with effort.

We are also concerned that BYOD is the means by which technology is being implemented in schools, adding a recurrent cost to parents and at the same time seeing schools develop their own protocols instead of a consistent national framework. With the onset of online national testing, device use and a technology plan for schools is crucial and parents must be part of these decisions.

*Other?*

APC suggests the need for concurrent national campaigns to value teachers, their knowledge, dedication and contribution to society and to value families for their unique knowledge and importance to the academic, social and emotional success of their children. It takes both in partnership to raise the educational outcomes of our children and we need to promote this understanding as well as sing the success stories.

**Shelley Hill**  
**President**  
**Australian Parents Council**

**2 November 2017**



## **Executive Summary**

- On completing school, all young Australians should be able to contribute to society in a meaningful and productive way, feel confident and capable of doing so, and be happy.
- All students must be provided with meaningful learning opportunities to develop emotional intelligence, mental and physical health, global knowledge and competency in literacy and numeracy.
- Processes of learning, critical thinking, knowledge and application by doing, and skills in creation for students are key.
- The quality of a school should be centred on the culture within but also beyond its gates. Communication and collaboration are valuable attributes, as is the ability to build respectful relationships which create learning opportunities, harness resources and strengthen the fabric of school communities.
- Teachers and school leaders need more time to reflect, engage and improve their practices.
- General capabilities of digital citizenship must be a prime focus alongside partnership and shared vision with parents on technology use and active digital citizenship.
- The dominant concentration on “teacher effects” to the almost total exclusion of “parent effects” is misplaced.
- More research should be done to assess the impact, positive or negative, of embedded technology in classrooms and schools.
- Australia needs a national policy position or strategy to effectively lodge and leverage parent/family engagement in support of student and school performance.
- Systemic capacity-building support for parents, families and teachers (incl. pre-service) to effectively collaborate in student learning is required.
- Compulsory and nationally agreed engagement/partnership units need to be built into initial teacher education courses that teach the skills to build authentic parent/family relationships.
- The competency expectations in Standards 3.7 and 7.3 are low and need revision.
- Concurrent national campaigns to value teachers and families for their contribution and importance to children’s educative and social development could help shift the current paradigm.