



Australian Council of State School Organisations

One voice for every child in public education

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President's Message, February 2018

We're off and running

With the summer break rapidly becoming a distant memory, especially here in Tassie where the nights are drawing in together with a freshening coolness at night, we look forward to the remaining ten months of 2018. It continues to astonish me how quickly time passes as we settle into our children's school year; together with all the hopes, challenges and expectations that come bundled with it.

Talking of challenges to come, the first part of 2018 will see the outcomes of various reviews currently in progress – all in a slightly different timeline, and yet each will have the overlapping potential for significant impact on education policy. They include the Independent Inquiry into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IIRRE) led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey – its report must be close to being released with the supporting documentation available [here](#).

There's also the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, Chaired by David Gonski AC, that's been engaging with ACSSO and a variety of other stakeholders (more information [here](#)) which is due to deliver its report to government next month.

Lastly, for the time being, there's the work of the newly established independent National School Resourcing Board (NSRB) which is seeking submissions into its review of the socio-economic status (SES) score methodology to define the capacity of non-government school communities to contribute to operational costs of private schools. Its supporting documentation is available [here](#).

A great set of numbers

All of these inquiries and reviews are taking place against a backdrop of surging enrolments in our proud nation's public schools. The Australian Bureau of Statistics latest education information (available [here](#)) sees a great set of numbers for public schools. In 2017 enrolments in all Australian schools have increased by 51,000, of which 80% chose the public system as the first choice for their future – a repeat of the same proportional growth from

2016's figures. It's also interesting to note that the proportion of enrolments in the Catholic system has now fallen below 20% - in an accelerated drop from 2016 with a net loss of enrolments in 2017.

Talking more of numbers sees NAPLAN, once again, attracting attention and possibly for all the wrong reasons. There is talk of high-stakes, robo-marking, league tables and other emotive rhetoric from a variety of commentators that seems to cloud an objective consideration of NAPLAN's intent. As a father of three children NAPLAN has long been part of my family's school experience – and one that gives a snapshot of a moment in time against a standardised worksheet that crosses the nation. For most school age students NAPLAN is a normal part of the variety in their classroom experience as they are taught by fabulous teachers according to the Australian Curriculum. It might also be interesting to ponder how many non-NAPLAN worksheets students will complete in the course of their education.

What it does allow us to reflect on when exploring the My School website ([here](#)), and especially the student gain reporting, is that there is often very little difference in student gain between public schools with open and fully inclusive enrolments, and exclusive private schools with selective entry requirements based on a variety of strictures. Perhaps this could be part of the private schools' advocacy groups hostility to openly publishing this and their resourcing information in a publicly accessible and searchable forum – public education has nothing to hide from anyone and every reason to celebrate the success of its students and teachers, and the school communities that work together for the benefit of all our children.

ACSSO is a long-time advocate for fair, simple and transparent education policy, and whilst we recognise the need to always reflect on the purpose and methodology of NAPLAN and the curriculum, at some point we have to trust that such initiatives are delivered with the best of intentions by principled advocates seeking the very best, within their remit, for our nation's children.

It's ACSSO's responsibility to offer objective input and advice to ACARA and others on this. The NAPLAN information does shine a bright light on those students, schools and communities with the most to gain from additional support and resources; it also gives parents an objective basis by which to engage in collaborative partnerships with our schools and departments to improve student learning for all.

What works, and what does not

Education can be a hot-bed of new ideas, old favourites and a fair bit of dodgy snake-oil; the question is how to filter out what works. The current mantra is for evidence-based practice with some possibly more enlightened educators talking of evidence informed practice - as the outcome of a research trial is always subject to the vagaries of sample size, repeatability and simple bias – or not being at all transferable to a specific cohort.

Late last year, in the midst of the submission timeframe of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, Sir Kevan Collins paid a whistle-stop visit to Australia as the CEO of the UK's Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The EEF has a focus on breaking

the link between family income and educational achievement to improve the life chances of those from disadvantaged communities. I have yet to meet a more passionate and principled advocate of a fair go for all. The EEF operates by funding rigorous trials at a school level on a variety of educational ideas, programmes and products – rapidly scaling up further trials of those that show promise. Its website is available [here](#) and it has been working in partnership with Australian Evidence for Learning that has free resources available [here](#).

The potential to provide objective information to educators that is based on large scale in-school trials, by establishing a similar independent national body in Australia, has been in ACSSO's sights for some time. ACSSO, together with a number of other key stakeholders have offered this recommendation to the review for its consideration and it's to be hoped this will resonate with the panel as a way of providing longevity to its work and hope for the future in objective evidence informed teaching practice.

Last week, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP and Amanda Rishworth MP made a welcome joint statement committing a future Labor government to establishing an '*Evidence Institute for Schools*' together with a significant funding commitment. If the review makes a similar recommendation that is supported by Government, we could be in a situation of long-term and meaningful cross-party support for a proven initiative that has a demonstrable impact on best practice at a school and classroom level.

In the meantime...

You may remember my observations in last year's September President's message on the proposed nationally consistent year one literacy and numeracy check to identify those in need of additional support at an early stage; a topic that has had a hugely polarising effect on a number of commentators. ACSSO has approached this with the view that phonetic principles are already one of many tools that parents, and teachers use as we help our children gain essential reading skills. It's well recognised that there are a range of principles surrounding the use of phonics in education – not all of which can be considered best practice; maybe a point highlighting the need for an Australian EEF to offer an objective input into these matters.

The year one literacy and numeracy check, as it's officially called, has the potential to be a useful additional tool for Year 1 Teachers to incorporate into their practice alongside their professional knowledge and experience. The review did find that it has to be implemented along with the necessary support and resources in place and as such a trial was conducted last year in South Australia.

The outcome of the pragmatic move to conduct a trial, is a recent announcement that the Year 1 literacy and numeracy check tool will be rolled out to all SA schools this year, together with additional resources and support for schools and teachers. Again, maybe this is a reflection of the EEF methodology that allows schools and teachers to trial an initiative in a safe way to iron out any issues before it becomes embedded practice. Perhaps now is the time for other states and territories to consider the pragmatism in this approach to exploring a new initiative in their jurisdictions.

Transparency and accountability

I recently travelled to Manila to be part of a three-day UNESCO IIEP ([International Institute for Educational Planning](#)) policy forum on using open school data to improve transparency and accountability in education. With delegations from 15 nations from around the world it was a unique opportunity to reflect on our place in the context of transparency and education governance.

There was also time to contemplate our relatively small population and acknowledge the regard in which our systems and protocols are held. Whilst many nations have long established systems of data gathering and reporting – many for far longer than Australia; every country is at a different state of development, and many are still at the initial planning/roll out stage. The international term for what we call My School is the School Report Card (SRC) and it's in this context that we can see the great respect and kudos Australia has from other nations in its delivery of the My School platform and other transparency initiatives, and ACARA's role in delivering this.

What is also striking is the role and impact that family, school and community partnerships have on driving improvement in the learning opportunities for all. If we were to look at an international perspective of how Australian public schools and systems work in partnership with their parents and communities, we could be seen as world leaders in best practice.

For me, it reinforced the role of public school advocates with an absolute focus on policy, partnerships and governance in ensuring that our political leaders, departments and community bodies are delivering the freedom and opportunity for every student to engage in learning at the level they require.

Phillip Spratt

18th February 2018