

Proposed Amendments to the Australian Education Bill 2012

A Submission to the Senate Education Committee on the Australian Education Bill 2012

Australian Secondary Principals Association Ltd (ASPA Ltd)

Governments must acknowledge our profession, the role of our profession and the expertise that we bring to the education debate. It is therefore essential that governments engage with principals when developing and implementing policy.

The Australian Education Bill (2012) must be structured to enable the delivery of quality education and improved outcomes for all students. If all sides of politics are in agreement about what is best for students in terms of education across Australia this should be reflected in a long- term bipartisan agreement to secure the future for our students. Something as important as education should not be dependent upon funding or election cycles, it requires a long term commitment, regular review and guaranteed funding to ensure sustainability.

The Preamble to the Bill makes a number of specific points however the fundamental question is; will the five (5) stated reform directions for the national plan meet the national expectations we have for our children now and into the future?

The Preamble and the Objects of the Bill state that Australian schools should be “highly equitable” but this is not defined in the Bill. This term must be defined and should be consistent with the definition used in the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling Report which defines equity in education as ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. [p. 105]. It should also be consistent with the elaborations in the report relating to equity.

Equity is not about sameness rather it is about asking the question, what does the teacher and the school need to do in order for the student to improve. Given our understanding that context will vary it is preferable to use the following statement as an indicator of improvement; ***every child in every classroom every year must improve***. This is about value adding and this should be the measure of accountability for all schools.

The Objects of the Act need to be modified. ASPA believes that in the interests of consistency and clear definition of intent it would be more appropriate for the goals to reflect the Melbourne Declaration goals for schooling.

b) to set out the following goals for Australian schooling to address those matters..

(B) (i) would become - Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence.

(ii) All young Australians become successful learner s, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

Both of the goals from the Melbourne Declaration are clearly defined and as such there can be no ambiguity.

Quality teaching - All teachers have the skills as reflected in the agreed professional or teacher standards; it is about more than skills, it is about professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement and this should be recognized in the statement relating to teacher quality.

School Improvement should not be about compliance, it is about supporting growth and development and measuring what has changed as a result of learning and teaching or intervention (value adding). There is considerable international evidence that compliance does not lead to school improvement. The government and the profession must reflect upon and learn from the mistakes of others.

Developing benchmarks.

(A) Any development of benchmarks for assessing the performance of schools and school students must give consideration to context and the relativity of starting point e.g if attendance is a measure and a child has only attended school for 10 days in one term and through the intervention strategies employed by the school, the child attends 45 days in the second term, then significant improvement has occurred but it may still fail to reach the benchmark. In any context this must be seen as a measure of improvement.

The commentary specific to data collection fails to acknowledge the purpose for collecting data from the perspective of a school teacher and school leader. Data is collected first and foremost to inform practice and to examine what is working and what requires improvement. The collection of data for data sake will not lead to school improvement; what you do with the data to focus teaching and learning will lead to improvement.

Empowered school leadership:

Empowering local leadership is a centrepiece in the government education policy and yet the significance of high performing leadership is not explicit in the Australian Education Bill. The notion of high performing / quality leadership must be incorporated into the Bill, after all it is the leader who works with teachers and the community to improve student outcomes.

Empowered leadership is about more than a set of skills and the Education Bill should refer to the AITSL Principal Standard. School leaders will be empowered when they have had access to high quality training, ongoing professional learning and are provided with appropriate support

Conclusion:

While ASPA members applaud the government's initiative to ensure every young Australian benefits from their schooling, we urge the Australian Government to bring greater clarity to the Australian Education Bill specifically in the areas outlined above.

ASPA Ltd as a professional association representing over 2000 secondary school leaders would be pleased to work with the government to assist in providing clarity around the proposed changes.