



Australian Primary  
Principals Association

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JE.

Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Education and Employment  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Emailed to: [educationbill.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:educationbill.reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Secretary

### **House of Representatives Inquiry: Australian Education Bill, 2012**

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA), representing the principals and heads of school in government, Catholic and independent primary schools in all states and territories, welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. Our submission is based upon the professional opinions of primary school leaders, position papers of our association and reports of research projects undertaken on behalf of APPA.

APPA's response is organised under the headings of the Australian Education Bill, 2012.

#### **PREAMBLE**

APPA believes the Preamble places a high value on education, childhood and children and sees this as entirely appropriate.

The recognition of diversity in schools and schooling, and the valuing of equity and quality are also endorsed, along with the intention to use evidence-based strategies to achieve the Objects of the Bill.

In the area of partnerships, primary school principals consistently report that effective schools are bound to their communities through partnerships with all who make up the community not only parents, families and employers.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that a significant element of school leadership is 'community leadership'.

## **PART 1: PRELIMINARY**

### **1. Short title**

No comment.

### **2. Commencement**

No comment.

### **3. Objects of this Act**

The goals of high quality and high equity in Australian education are endorsed by APPA. However, we believe the goal "for Australia to be ranked, by 2025, as one of the top 5 highest performing countries based on the performance of Australian school students in reading, mathematics and science, and based on the quality and equity of Australian schooling" is problematic for three reasons.

1. This goal privileges reading, mathematics and science over other subjects that many Australians would argue are equally important. That said, APPA has acted in the knowledge that reading is the cornerstone of literacy by making it the focus of our very successful Principals As Literacy Leaders (PALL) Project. Even so, to focus national attention on reading in this way masks the significant role listening, speaking and writing play in ensuring Australian children become literate.
2. This goal risks narrowing the Australian Curriculum by overemphasising the importance of three subjects and undervaluing the creative aspects of the primary school curriculum. It may also encourage teachers to place more attention than they otherwise might on those aspects of reading, mathematics and science that are more readily assessed.
3. This goal will focus Australia's attention on aspects of curriculum which may well not be viewed as important by international testing authorities in 2025. Already the OECD is asking, "What should students learn in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" In response, Charles Fadel, writing on the blog *oecd educationtoday* proposes a much broader knowledge base; skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration; character related traits in both moral and performance domains; and, a meta-layer of learning. (Fadel, C 2012)

APPA believes Australian primary schools must continue to concentrate on teaching fundamental literacy, numeracy, science and social education in a curriculum that is both rich and engaging for children. This must always occur in the context of recognising the inclusion of

the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum and the need to foster social and emotional learning in primary aged children.

### **Definitions**

No comment.

## **Part 2: IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL STUDENTS**

### **5. Improving the performance of schools and school students**

No comment.

### **6. Developing a national plan**

APPA endorses the intention of the Commonwealth to work with all State and Territory Governments and non-government education authorities to develop and implement a national plan for continuous school improvement and improved student educational achievement. We urge comprehensive consultation with the profession at every stage.

APPA believes primary schools must not be expected to adopt nationally imposed strategies or targets with regard to students developing capabilities to 'engage with Asia'. The Australian Curriculum's Cross Curriculum Priority *Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia* provides appropriate emphasis on integrating this priority into classroom teaching and learning programs.

### **7. Reform directions for the national plan: Quality teaching, Quality learning, Empowered school leadership**

Primary schools have developed complex and sophisticated approaches to teaching. However, the challenge of improving quality teaching, ensuring quality learning and empowering school leadership cannot be met by just a 'more of the same' approach. APPA believes primary schools must be transformed in the following ways:

- Teaching and Learning Leadership and professional support must be provided to every teacher;
- Administrative support must be to a level which allows school leaders to focus on student learning and teacher professional development, and ensures that teachers can focus on teaching in the classroom;
- Early, focused and sustained intervention that addresses both learning and wellbeing must be available for every student in every school; and,
- Technology to enable 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning, and the skills to use and maintain that technology, must be present in every school and classroom.

The discourse around empowering school leadership in Australia today is confused by the number of ill-defined terms that are used interchangeably e.g. empowering local schools, school based management, principal autonomy, school autonomy, local governance, school

boards, school governing bodies, etc. APPA always uses the term 'school autonomy' when discussing governance options to indicate our belief that the principal must not lead a school in isolation.

APPA believes any process to increase autonomy in primary schools must be based on an understanding that the evidence shows a spectrum of valid governance and administrative structures can operate effectively and that this is the current reality in Australian primary schools. In school governance, one size does not fit all at the moment and it will not in the future.

Any process to increase school autonomy must focus on those areas where local decision-making will improve student learning outcomes such as curriculum implementation, pedagogy, assessment, staffing and school improvement planning. The responsibility for managing human and physical resources, often expressed as the right to hire and fire, is beyond the capacity of many primary schools at this time because of the limited administrative support available to them. This situation is exacerbated for small or remote schools.

Even in those primary schools where there is capacity and support for greater autonomy, APPA views professional development and training for school staff, particularly principals, and school community leaders as prerequisites to any process to increase school autonomy. In all primary schools, greater school autonomy must be supported by an increase in resources to meet new responsibilities successfully.

### **Reform directions for the national plan: Transparency and Accountability**

APPA knows that primary schools are data rich institutions with teachers continuously collecting data on student achievement, needs, interests and progress through an extensive range of assessment measures. These data, both qualitative and quantitative, are then recorded in various school or system formats and cannot be readily aggregated beyond the school or system.

In APPA's opinion there is a national challenge to use the school and system data on student performance far more effectively than is currently the case. Using NAPLAN results in ways for which they are not designed and thereby raising the status of NAPLAN to high stakes testing does not benefit students, schools or school communities and will do little to improve student achievement.

APPA is increasingly concerned about the effects of a high stakes testing regime on students. Primary school principals have consistently reported to APPA that they observe negative impacts on student wellbeing, particularly from Year Three students, as a result of the pressure of participation in NAPLAN testing. These observations are supported by The Foundation for Young Australians which states, "Considerable evidence may be found in the international literature regarding the negative impact of high stakes testing on students' wellbeing."

APPA believes that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) should initiate a comprehensive research project drawing on the experiences of students to identify the impact of high stakes testing on student wellbeing. There is little doubt that when their wellbeing is threatened the chances of students reaching their academic potential are reduced.

APPA recommends that, when ACARA introduces online test formats and administrative procedures, teachers control when students undertake the tests. The removal of a single week of NAPLAN testing will dampen media interest in the annual event, lowering this aspect of the high stakes nature of the tests.

### **Reform directions for the national plan: Meeting Student Need**

It is APPA's opinion that student need must be broadly defined, as in the Act, to include both wellbeing and learning. There are implications for the funding arrangements in Section 9 of the Act if student wellbeing needs are to be addressed at school. Primary schools are not well equipped with the facilities or staff to provide the physical and mental health services or social welfare required by an increasing number of students. APPA believes the concept of 'wrap-around' services in, or explicitly linked to, primary schools has merit and recommends trials to establish a cost effective method of provision.

Providing additional learning support to students who require it is a challenge to governments, systems, schools and teachers. The APPA research project, *Targeting support for high-need students in primary schools* states: "While education authorities subscribe to policies that promote 'personalised' education that takes account of the uniqueness of each student, in practice they are reliant on schools to put those policies into effect. From a position of some distance, education authorities tend to privilege the general over the particular, building on commonalities among students rather than differences and on abstractions rather than actualities. This is why targeting is so difficult. Given the diverse range of limiting factors the most likely outcome of any systemic innovation is that it will assist some students and not others. Therefore, consideration should be given to extending the focus of the National Partnerships to include building the capacity of schools to solve their own problems in ways that complement the interventions developed centrally." (Angus, M. and Olney, H. 2011)

Students with disabilities may have access as well as learning challenges. In APPA's view the current practice of supporting the significant number and growing proportion of students with disabilities in primary classrooms through the employment of non-teaching staff members poses serious questions at both school and system level. In 2007, teachers reported to APPA that "(b)ecause these allocations are tied to individual students' classifications, the staff are employed part-time and on contracts: a job ceases if a student moves to another school. As a result, individual non-teaching staff members may work with a number of students. Their availability is then subject to their timetables rather than the convenience of the students and the class teachers." (Angus et al 2007)

Generally, APPA believes inclusive classroom practices for students with disabilities are enhanced when specialist teachers are available to provide classroom support and focused withdrawal activities. For some students full service units or schools may be required. The capacity to vary the placement of students with disabilities as their needs change is vital for meaningful inclusion.

## **8. Developing Benchmarks and supporting improvement**

*A National Plan for School Improvement* focuses the attention of school leaders, teachers and school communities on those domains that, when improved, increase student learning outcomes.

APPA supports the framework in principle. We reiterate the caution that nationally imposed strategies and targets can have unintended or perverse consequences for classroom teachers.

APPA believes the “gathering and sharing of evidence about the most effective methods of improving the performance of schools and school students” as mentioned in Section 8 of the Act is the most effective way governments can influence changes in schools that improve student performance.

APPA is concerned that very complex student learning and school performance data published in simplistic form on the MySchool website will not increase transparency in relation to schools. Rather, the use of local data in context on individual school websites and other school community media provide real transparency in regard to school operations.

Finally, APPA recommends full consultation with the profession as governments develop benchmarks for Australian schools.

## **9. School Funding**

Recognition that the current school funding model does not meet the needs of all students for an equitable, high quality education system has been widely acknowledged. APPA endorses the intention of this Act to improve the situation for Australian students from 2014 onwards.

APPA further believes that there is an urgent need for immediate action to ensure that the planning for 2014 currently underway in Australian schools and school systems is grounded in a known and assured funding model. The intention of the Act must be supported by action.

The implementation of the new funding arrangements will meet the needs of primary school students should:

- all students be valued equally to ensure primary students have the access to the resources needed to reach their potential;
- the School Resource Standard not overemphasise the importance of NAPLAN results in the determination of school effectiveness;
- valid indexation for growth and improvement be included;

- all aspects of disadvantage, including student mobility, be recognised; and,
- the capacity of individual parents in fee paying non-government schools to pay be fairly calculated.

APPA recommends the establishment of a clear school funding process to oversee the application of the funding model so that the distribution of funds to schools, school systems and funding authorities is fully transparent.

Finally, APPA appreciates the need for a 'staged' introduction of the new model beginning in 2014. We believe an appropriate timeframe for full implementation would be one quadrennium.

In general, APPA is very positive about the Australian Education Act 2012 and commits to continuing a constructive dialogue with governments to ensure a seamless introduction of the Act in 2014.

APPA appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission and wishes the Committee well in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Norm Hart  
**APPA President**

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