

Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment - Education

**QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Budget Estimates 2014-2015**

Outcome 2 - Schools and Youth

Department of Education Question No. ED0321_15

Senator Wright asked on 4 June 2014, Hansard page 106

Independent Public Schools - research

Question

Senator WRIGHT: I have had a look at the reports, and I have got to say that I have not been able to find any evidence, particularly of the robust causal kind that you were referring to earlier, in relation to the link between economic payment and student outcome. For example, the Productivity Commission's 2012 Schools workforce research report says: Strengthening school-level leadership could raise student outcomes. But there is no evidence cited there that autonomy has improved student learning outcomes, and there are warnings that autonomy might work against equity within the system. Is there anything stronger than that in that report that I missed? Mr Cook: Not that I am aware of. Talking about new information, I referred to some Victorian research that we would not have provided to you in those six reports previously. I am sorry senator, I am not sure if you were in the room when I talked about the Victorian research. Senator WRIGHT: No, I do not think I was. Mr Cook: When I was in Victoria we undertook research where we identified—I think it was—six low SES schools that were performing higher than you would anticipate based on an analysis that we did on the entry results of those students. Those schools were doing better than other schools that had similar socioeconomic characteristics. The characteristics of those schools were very similar to the sorts of principles of independence and autonomy. Those characteristics were: being able to select staff, being able to have flexible budgets to resource particular aspects of their school and direct that to teacher professional development, and also having very strong links to the school community—all of which are part of the independent public school sort of notion. I can certainly provide that to you. I am happy to take that on notice.

Senator WRIGHT: That was a sample size of six schools? Mr Cook: We identified those schools that were performing better, and, yes, we limited it to six, but still those schools were actually practical outcomes that were showing. Senator WRIGHT: The sorts of studies here were a little bit more extensive and rigorous, if I am right, in thinking in terms of— Mr Cook: I would not say that it is not rigorous. The department itself— Senator WRIGHT: Was there statistical analysis? Was there a control group of six— Mr Cook: The control group was groups of schools that had a similar socioeconomic background to those schools. Senator WRIGHT: Was there a control group of other schools that fit those criteria in terms of independence that were not performing as well? Did you look to do that? Mr Cook: The control group was those schools that did not have that level of flexibility, as opposed to those schools that did. Senator WRIGHT: Yes, but there may have been other schools that did and were not performing as well too. Did you look at that possibility? Mr Cook: I am not sure actually. I will have to take that on notice and have a look at that.

Senator WRIGHT: I would be interested to know more about that study.

Answer

Research referred to in this question is the 2009 Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, titled *Signposts: Research points to how Victorian government schools have improved student performance*, available at https://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/nws/Signposts_report.pdf.

This report investigates the behaviours of improving and high-performing schools, some of which are achieving great success despite the socioeconomic disadvantage of many of their students.

The research identified the high frequency behaviours of schools that have sustained improvement in student outcomes over ten years. It validated these behaviours against a control group of stable and declining schools. The report states that the schools consistently report that effective leadership underpins all other behaviours and strategies that account for their success.

Independent Public Schools - research

Question

Senator WRIGHT: If I could just look at other matters that you cited as evidence, the OECD PISA report you cited as one of the six studies actually backs an entirely different kind of autonomy, where schools have the responsibility—and this is where we talk about autonomy meaning different things to different people—to define and elaborate their curricula and assessments. That is not actually what is being envisaged, given that we have a national curriculum review and we have external national assessments like the NAPLAN testing program, is it? Mr Cook: I am not sure the extent to which they are talking about. But in schools that have flexibility about where they are going to focus the majority of their curriculum time—and the reality is that all schools around Australia still make decisions about where they are going to focus the majority of their curriculum time; even though we have a national curriculum, a school will have what we call a scope and sequence, which talks about 'When are we going to focus on fractions?' or focus on something else. They will keep to the broad guidelines of the national curriculum, absolutely, but they will not be— Senator WRIGHT: You say that all around Australia schools do that. They do not have to be independent public schools to be doing that, do they?

Mr Cook: This is not what the minister is indicating about the independent public schools initiative in Australia. Senator WRIGHT: No. My point is that you cited this as evidence because you were specifically asked what evidence there is and you assured me that there was evidence and you cited that report as evidence that this kind of autonomy that the minister is wanting to promote actually leads to better student outcomes. But, when I look at that particular PISA report, it actually talks about the responsibility to define and elaborate their curricula and assessments, and you have just said, 'Yes; schools across Australia do that'—and I think most people accept that schools need to be able to teach in a relevant way to their particular student cohort. If that is not the kind of autonomy that the minister is envisaging in his independent public schools model, why was that cited as evidence that his independent public schools model will actually lead to better student outcomes?

Mr Cook: I think it is still talking about the ability of a school to be autonomous in their decision making. I think that is an important part of that. Senator WRIGHT: The point that you just made is that many schools around Australia, irrespective of whether they are independent public schools, actually do that kind of emphasis of the

curriculum. Although there is a national curriculum, they choose when they are going to teach fractions, for example. That was the point you just made, wasn't it?
Mr Cook: Yes, and I think that it is a good thing. Senator WRIGHT: I think it is too. But you have cited this report as evidence that the minister's vision of independent public schools will lead to better student outcomes. That is what we keep being assured, but I am looking at what evidence there is that that is the case, and it does not seem that that actually proves what you are saying. Mr Cook: I think that is one point in that report. I am not sure that that report covers only that aspect. I am happy to take that on notice and provide advice.

Answer

This question relates to a publication by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2011, *PISA in Focus 9*, available at www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/48910490.pdf.

The OECD paper states that PISA results suggest that, when autonomy and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance.

The paper states that greater autonomy in decisions relating to curricula, assessments and resource allocation tend to be associated with better student performance, particularly when schools operate within a culture of accountability. (pg 3)

The Government's Independent Public Schools initiative provides flexibility so each participating state and territory can implement activities that will best suit the context of the schools. Under the initiative, the focus is on autonomy over resourcing and increasing accountability to the local community. This is aligned with the findings of the OECD paper that, "school autonomy in allocating resources tends to be associated with good performance in those education systems where most schools post achievement data publicly.