

# Association of Principals of Catholic Secondary Schools in Australia

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Inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education:  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee

Submission from  
**Association of Principals of Catholic Secondary Schools in Australia  
(APC SSA)**

The Association is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to this Senate Inquiry.

## **General Comments:**

The Association notes that the Committee has stated that the purpose of the Inquiry is to inform the Senate of 'perceptions and realities' of standards of achievement in schools 'at a time when there is doubt in some quarters as to whether schools are preparing students adequately' for post-school destinations.

The Association notes with some concern that the source of the 'doubts [that] have been expressed' about the imparting of generic skills and the level of rigour of the academic curriculum are not referenced.

The Association, and the 468 schools and school leaders around Australia that it represents is thoroughly committed and actively engaged in the task of ongoing review and improvement of teaching and learning programs to ensure the best possible outcome for the students enrolled in their schools. It holds no brief for a defensive, closed approach to teaching and learning programs and activities.

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On the other hand, APCSSA is aware that generalised and ill-informed criticisms of the activities, curricula and outcomes of schools are easily made and have a particular cachet in some sectors of the press and public life. For this reason, schools, schools systems and the teaching profession need to ensure that clear and accurate information is placed in the public arena.

Nevertheless, APCSSA would make the point that education policy, at government, system or school level, should not be made as a response to criticism that is at best untested, and at worst unbalanced, inaccurate or based on assumptions about social and economic needs that are partisan, outdated or cannot be assured of broad community acceptance.

### **Academic Standards in Schools:**

The most comprehensive and objective data relating to internationally comparative student outcomes come from PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). Between them these international tests collect data regarding student performance in reading, mathematics, science and, since 2003, problem-solving.

Rankings for students in Years 8 and above over the period 1995 – 2003 in all three tests put Australia at number three for reading performance; number 12 in Mathematics and number 11 in Science. (*Brown Ruzzi, 2006*).

ACER analysis of the most recent PISA results indicates that Australian students were among the top five performers in all areas tested: mathematical, scientific and reading literacy as well as problem-solving, and that comparative state and territory results within Australia 'show more similarities than differences'. (*ACER*)

APCSSA does not intend to make any further submission based on detailed analysis of comparative tests results or to make any submission on the relative merits of these testing regimes. Such data and analysis is readily available to the Committee.

APCSSA does submit that such tests broadly indicate that standards of achievement by Australian students do not provide evidence of poor outcomes for students. The data would tend to support the view that teachers and schools should be affirmed for their performance.

The Association submits that the Committee should acknowledge the success of teachers and schools in assisting Australian students to achieve the high standards that have been evident in the results of international testing. Any suggestions for future developments aimed at improving such performance should be based on a realistic acknowledgement of the high standards of professional performance that underpin current results, and a further acknowledgement that the profession itself has demonstrated a commitment to development, innovation and review of teaching and learning programs and processes that is student-centred and future-focussed.

Nevertheless, the Association is of the view that it would be valuable for the Committee to consider what outcomes for students will best measure success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. APCSSA submits that necessary outcomes for students will go beyond those outcomes that formed the basis of current curricula. In some instances current statements of outcomes will need to be developed; some outcomes may not be seen as essential and should be omitted; in other instances new outcomes should be included to meet emerging needs of the future. Useful statements of outcomes will go well beyond the mastery of knowledge to include competence in developing and applying knowledge in a continually changing context made up of connected systems.

It is also APCSSA's position that continued improvement to teaching and learning is an ongoing commitment of the profession, and one that should be supported by governments and school systems.

### **Current curriculum guidelines (particularly regarding secondary schools):**

APCSSA submits that there is a need to identify and articulate the curriculum challenges required to prepare young people for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Any 'national curriculum' – however that is understood – should be based on a clear understanding of what such a curriculum should seek to achieve, and could usefully include a statement of key or core ingredients of a student's learning experience. Such a curriculum, whilst including the skills and knowledge commonly referred to as 'the basics', needs to go well beyond these if it is to be of value to students.

(In a response to DEST regarding the 2006 ACE paper *Australian Certificate of Education – Exploring a Way Forward* – APCSSA noted that the 'identification of curriculum essentials would provide recognition that there are fundamental principles, ideas and understandings in each discipline that need to be covered in a school course.' The Association also noted that a statement of agreed national standards needed to include a sub-set of skills as well as a statement of content. These opinions remain those of the Association and are relevant to any process relating to development of a national curriculum.)

Such an agreed statement of curriculum requirements for the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to be developed by primary stakeholders – teachers, school leaders, professional education associations, tertiary education authorities, business and employer groups and parents. The process needs to be open and inclusive if it is to have validity.

It is essential that the development of curriculum be evidence-based, and not driven by the views and enthusiasms of individuals or groups with vested interests and/or pre-determined positions.

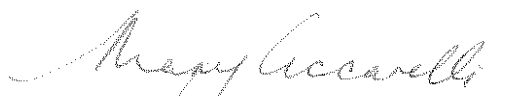
The Association's support for a process to discover and articulate valid and appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should not be seen as support for any particular form of 'national curriculum', for particular forms of assessment, or even for a national assessment regime.

### Factors bearing on teaching quality:

The Association made a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training Inquiry into Teacher Education.

The views expressed in that submission bear direct relevance to the desire to support the continued improvement of teacher quality in Australian schools. Requirements of 21<sup>st</sup> century school students will mean that teachers will need to update pedagogical approaches; to improve ICT skills as well as emotional literacy; and to ensure that their own discipline knowledge and skills as well as problem-solving approaches are constantly updated.

Attraction of suitable candidates to the profession and retention of practising teachers are of ongoing concern. Particular issues to be addressed in meeting these concerns include remuneration and status of teachers; induction, mentoring and support; ongoing professional development.



Mary Ciccarelli  
Executive Officer

On behalf of the Association of Principals of Catholic Secondary School in Australia  
24 April 2007

### References:

Betsy Brown Ruzzi, National Center on Education and the Economy (US), 2006: *International Education Tests An Overview 2005*.

Sue Thomson, John Cresswell, Lisa de Bortoli, 2003, ACER  
([www.ozpisa.acer.edu.au/documents/PISA\\_Brief\\_screen.pdf](http://www.ozpisa.acer.edu.au/documents/PISA_Brief_screen.pdf)) *PISA in Brief from Australia's Perspective: Highlights from the Full Australian Report*

APCSSA Submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training Inquiry into Teacher Education. Submission no. 39  
([www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/evt/teachereduc/subs.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/evt/teachereduc/subs.htm))

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