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S C H O O L S O F
A U S T R A L I A

Submission to the
Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education
Inquiry into
Academic Standards of School Education
April 2007

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Introduction

1. AHISA (The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia) is an association of some 330 members, representing the Heads of schools that educate over 350,000 students in all States and Territories. Many of these schools, but certainly not all, have denominational affiliations including independent schools affiliated with the Catholic Church. Our response to the inquiry is provided from a practitioner's point of view, as the members of AHISA, as leaders in independent schools in Australia, recognise they have a responsibility not only to the students in their own schools but also to all the youth of Australia.
2. To be a member of AHISA, a school principal has to be the leader of a not-for-profit school, implement the policies decided upon by the School Council, be responsible for engaging staff and for enrolling students, and have control of the school budget. The fact that each of their schools is independent gives AHISA members the autonomy to drive the pursuit of academic excellence with fewer constraints than other principals.

Excellence in Schooling

3. Providing principals have the support of their School Council, they can focus upon the development of academic excellence. Academic excellence isn't just about best practice derived from research – excellence arises from the complexity of shaping research into actions that are contextually appropriate and reviewed in an ongoing process.
4. AHISA members have significant influence over the direction of a school but need high quality, dedicated and supportive staff to achieve results and take some responsibility for implementing actions. The classroom teacher is the single most influential figure, outside parents, in the education of the young.
5. Principals in independent schools know that they must enlist the help of other supporters from both inside and outside the school, if they are to manage this task. Therefore they communicate their vision and strategy to the whole school community, not just to the teachers in the school, so that everyone has that sense of ownership and direction that is essential for high quality results. They also know that they require a constant supply of data –so that they can constantly monitor the situation. Basic skills test data, when presented well, is useful in this context.
6. Data should be at the school, regional and national level and must be used to provide standards as reference points, not used for standardisation. Standardisation constrains the professional responses that schools or classroom teachers are able to provide. Standardisation is antithetical to excellence and it will not provide the skills of literacy numeracy and scientific knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that adults of the mid 21st century will require.
7. Members of AHISA as leaders of schools providing academic excellence for their students require an understanding of cognitive research and the

application of that research to the learning process. They must be able to engage in futures thinking regarding the skills their students will need in the adult world of the mid 21st century, and have contextual knowledge about their school community, be able to make quality judgements and communicate all of these factors to build a school community that drives for academic excellence.

8. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (<http://www.ruralhealth.utas.edu.au/comm-lead/leadership/Maslow-Diagram.htm>), a well accepted and long standing hierarchy of human needs clearly sets an order by which higher needs such as academic development cannot occur until the more basic needs of food, shelter, safety, security, acceptance and self esteem are met. Too many children across the nation attend school with significant deficits in their needs and therefore their academic results are constrained. Stanley et al describe the crucial influence the broader context has on the well-being and development of young people. (Stanley, F., Richardson, S., & Prior, M. (2005). *Children of the Lucky Country? How Australian society has turned its back on children and why children matter*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd.) Some of our members have rich experiences in dealing with these students and families. Improvements by schools in working with their communities to raise overall levels of academic performance will prove difficult whilst basic human needs are not addressed as part of a whole of government solution to improving schooling standards.
9. The Mindd Foundation (<http://mindd.org/serendipity/archives.php/107-Disorders.html>) has promoted the work of Dr. Bock who describes alarming statistics in his book, *Healing The New Childhood Epidemics; Autism, AD/HD, Allergies and Asthma* (Random House. 2007) In the past 20 years in the United States autism has increased 1500%, ADHD 500%, asthma 300%, and allergies 700%. Whilst these figures are from the United States, anecdotal evidence from our members would suggest significant increases in the incidence of these disorders in Australia. Member's schools can struggle to resource these students to achieve to the best of their abilities.

Preparation of students for further education, training and employment, and the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage;

10. Many independent schools offer parents a wholistic community focus around their children from a very young age with the provision of early learning centres and/or long and short day care. This assists in the development of a sense of partnership with parents in the development of the young that can begin at a very early age and run through until the end of secondary schooling. This assists in the sometimes problematic transition points in schooling, that is, the start of school, the move from primary to lower secondary or middle schooling and again into senior secondary schooling.

Parent knowledge and understanding of the continuing school culture and people as points of reference should not be underestimated.

11. The acknowledgement of the Middle Years as a distinctive stage of learning with its own needs and methodology has largely been championed by the Independent sector; Timbertop, the Year 9 campus of Geelong Grammar School was the first but was followed by numerous other programmes in independent schools. These programmes include a variety of ways in which independent schools have approached the needs of adolescents. These include activities at locations remote from normal daily life, approaches based at school but undertaking a broader range of developmental activities and approaches based on different cultural experiences. These innovations have started to find their way into the public sector.
12. PISA and TIMMS results would indicate that despite the 'tail' our top and middle students show up as competent or achieve highly in these international measures. AHISA sees little to be gained in the public belittling of these tests and the achievement of Australian students in same. School principals have access to national PISA and TIMMS data. This national level data has good indicators but some idea of the anomalous positions within the national picture would provide greater ability for this data to be used in a school context. Basic skills tests data is also useful, when used professionally in school development of a culture of excellence.
13. AHISA supports the gathering of data from focussed literacy and numeracy testing. While vital in preparing young people for the adult world, literacy and numeracy are built upon the development of other skills and attitudes. The successful development of children at school is more complex than basic skills tests. AHISA would support the gathering of data that provides usable data to member's schools not only on academic skills and attitudes, but also on the social, emotional, physical, aesthetic and spiritual development of students, similar to the Early Development Index devised by Professor Fiona Stanley.
14. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that academic learning is predicated upon the fulfilment of a number of lower order needs such as safety, shelter, and good nutrition. A better understanding, such as the examples provided in the Northern Region Metropolitan Health Service Study in the northern suburbs of Perth in 2003, is required for all schools to understand the attributes and deficits that children bring to school affecting their learning.
15. The various Government basic skills testing indicate almost all students within our member's schools clearly achieve the prescribed standards in literacy and numeracy which are the foundation skills for academic performance in the higher levels. Many (most) achieve above the expected benchmark levels, reflecting the levels of professionalism and skill of the teachers and support staff in our member's schools, leadership of those schools and the school community focus and support on these skills.
16. Our member's schools take a broader view of what skills are essential for the development of young people so considerable emphasis is also placed on

values education, the arts and physical development (note the complexity and extent of our co-curricular programmes – drama, music, sport and outdoor education) and spiritual development and pastoral support (the work of schools within the sector in the development of RAVE – religious and values education – some in conjunction with Peter Vardy; the senior role of Chaplains within independent schools; the number of staff within our member's schools who have as the primary focus of their work the provision of pastoral care and support to students – counsellors, nurses, Heads of House). All of these components of an independent school education underpin and support the academic focus. They tend to support the family and school community focus on the more basic needs outlined by Maslow as prerequisites for academic learning.

Preparation of students for further education, training and employment, and the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.

17. Whilst 13% of all students attend Independent schools, and 17% attend independent secondary schools, attendance at senior secondary level rises to 18.5% of those in Years 11 & 12. The sector supplies a high proportion relative to enrolments of those who move on to tertiary study. It is much higher than the 18.5% of total enrolments at this level and is around 50% in some jurisdictions. In WA in 2006, the number of students at non-government schools sitting the Tertiary Entrance Exams outnumbered those in government schools. In addition, median tertiary entrance scores for the sector are higher than the Catholic and Government sectors in Victoria.
18. While traditionally independent schools have seen their focus as preparation for tertiary education, many independent schools are judiciously building their offering in the non-academic area (Vocational Education & Training). This is due in part, to an increasing diversity in the socio-economic standing of parents of students at independent schools. The high access independent schools in suburban and regional WA, NSW and Queensland are testament to this growth in diversity. In addition, more established independent schools have acknowledged the diversity of needs that now exist in their students and are addressing those more vocationally oriented needs.
19. The broader view taken on essential skills and attitudes by our member's schools, are an indication of the preparation of a whole person, ready for the adult world. A focus on the physical, spiritual, emotional, aesthetic and social dimensions of learning are seen in religious and values education, a complex and various co-curricular programme (drama, music, sport and outdoor education) and pastoral support where students are both supported and expected to provide support to others within and beyond the school, through community service.

The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for the senior secondary school certificate in each state and territory.

20. Point 17 above is relevant here.
21. Our members express satisfaction and loyalty to the systems used within their jurisdiction, though from a national perspective it can be seen that the methods used in each state or territory to certify senior secondary education vary considerably.
22. Given the importance the sector places on “wholistic” development it would be good to see measures developed to indicate achievement in some of the non-core areas such as spiritual development, physical development, social development, development of leadership skills and communication skills.

How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries.

23. Whilst the methods used in each state and territory vary, our members express satisfaction and loyalty to the systems used within their state. Overseas comparisons for AHISA are difficult to state categorically. However anecdotal evidence based on the students from within the sector who enrol to study overseas or who undertake a GAP year would indicate that these students perform well on a range of criteria, both academic and social, when compared with students from other countries.

Conclusion

24. AHISA’s submission is limited in detail and data as the time line for the inquiry is short relative to the task undertaken by the inquiry. This significant factor, coupled with the association’s lack of capacity to devote resources to this task in the short term precludes a more detailed response that meets deadlines for submissions.
25. Our comments have been necessarily general in nature. We can nominate many schools within the sector where programmes that represent “Best Practice” can be observed. AHISA would be prepared to assist the inquiry in arranging visits to these schools should the Committee wish to avail themselves of this invitation. However, AHISA does not wish to appear before the Committee.



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April 27 2007



Geoff Ryan
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April 27 2007