

PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

SENATE

**INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC STANDARDS OF SCHOOL
EDUCATION**

SUBMISSION FROM

AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION



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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Primary Principal Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to present this Submission to the Senate's Inquiry into the Quality and Standards of School Education ("the Inquiry").

APPA represents over 7,000 primary school principals, from Government, Catholic and Independent schools throughout Australia. Nearly two million students are currently enrolled in Australian primary schools.

The quality of education provided by the nation's primary schools is the product of a wide range of factors. The Inquiry's terms of reference focus on a major and crucial group of these factors.

The terms of reference cover a range of issues, but the essential questions before the Inquiry are, in relation to Australia's primary schools, those of the appropriateness of the content (including both subject matter to be learnt and skills and values to be imparted) of what is taught; the effectiveness of the strategies and methods of teaching; and the resultant qualities of educational outcomes for the full range of students in those schools.

APPA sees the Inquiry as a timely initiative to assess the primary school curriculum; teaching methods; provision for students with abilities both above and below the normal range; and instruments for testing and assessment. It will be essential not only that constructively critical examination should be made of aspects needing improvement, but also that things which are working well are both acknowledged and actively fostered.

More importantly, however, the Inquiry represents a valuable opportunity to focus the attention of the Federal government, its State counterparts, school educators throughout Australia and the public generally on what APPA sees as the three major challenges which must be met if our primary schools are to serve the children of Australia well in the 21st century.

These challenges are:

- Ensuring that all primary schools across the whole of Australia are properly resourced to enable them to deliver the academic standards expected by the Australian community;
- Rationalising an overcrowded curriculum in order to deliver to all primary students the knowledge and skills needed to progress successfully in life and in schooling beyond the primary stage; and
- Articulating the purpose of primary schooling in such a way as to facilitate valid and useful assessment of the performance of schools in delivering learning outcomes for students.

Addressing these three challenges will, accordingly, be the main focus of this Submission.

The Inquiry's attention is accordingly invited to the Submission. APPA would welcome the opportunity for its representatives to give evidence to the Inquiry, both to elaborate on the contents of this Submission and to assist the Inquiry in the task before it.

OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE OF THE SUBMISSION

In this Submission, APPA will argue that ensuring high-quality primary school education into the 21st century will require solving the three main problems confronting primary schools: those of insufficiency of resourcing; overcrowding of the curriculum; and uncertainties surrounding the purposes of primary schooling and how assessment can be made as to whether schools are achieving their purposes.

Solving these problems requires examination of how our primary schools are resourced, what is taught in primary schools, how it is taught and what is the quality of the educational outcomes. Content and method are essential, but are means to an end: the key issue is the value derived by children from their primary schooling.

This raises the question of how this value is to be assessed which in turn requires articulation of the objectives of primary schooling. What are we preparing primary students for and what knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values do we expect children to gain as a result of their primary schooling?

The answers to these questions will provide a frame of reference for addressing the range of other matters falling within the overall parameters of the Inquiry and the Submission will commence by examining these fundamental issues of purpose. Identification of the purposes gives guidance to the content of schooling; and the broad questions of teaching methods and tools for testing and assessment, follow. The achievement of clarity about purposes and outcomes should accordingly shed light on the question of how primary schools should be resourced across Australia so that funding is provided so as to maximise educational achievement by all students in all areas: urban, rural and remote; and of both affluence and socio-economic disadvantage.

Accordingly, the Submission consists of four principal parts:

1. The Purpose of Primary Schools
2. Content to be taught
3. Assessment
4. Resourcing

The Submission proceeds by attempting to identify what the Australian community expects its primary schools to achieve for those students who attend them; and by turning then to consideration of what is taught, and how it is taught.

The Submission then looks at the methods by which schools, governments and communities assess the achievement and progress of students and the performance of schools.

Finally, the Submission will address the current serious under-resourcing confronting many primary schools across the nation and what might be done to redress this problem. Work on assessing the adequacy of primary school resourcing began in 2000 when a survey published the following year as *Our Future* was undertaken of government primary principals regarding resource issues they faced in their schools. The findings of *Our Future* were of great concern to APPA which then persuaded the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to fund a more systematic and quantitative investigation into the question of primary resourcing.

Two more research papers have resulted: *Studies into the Resourcing of Australian Primary Schools 1 and 2* (referred to in the Submission as SRAPS 1 and SRAPS 2 respectively. A third study, SRAPS 3, is in preparation and is expected to be finalised late May 2007).

The Submission will accordingly draw extensively on that research. While the findings of the research will be discussed at more length elsewhere, the most striking and important finding is the degree to which there are large disparities in per-student funding provided to primary schools throughout Australia.

APPA will argue that proper resourcing for all primary schools; a rationalisation of the curriculum; and articulation of purpose and development of proper tools of assessment; are the building blocks essential for maintaining and improving academic standards. Accordingly governments (both Federal and State), educators, parents and the wider community must work together to achieve these objectives for all of our primary students.

PART 1

THE PURPOSE OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Questions about academic standards in primary schools cannot be answered unless there is agreement about the purpose of primary schools and what the Australian community expects them to give to students.

1.1 *Purposes of schooling generally*

A number of attempts have been made to describe succinctly the purposes of schooling (“schooling” is here used to refer to pre-primary, primary and secondary – both compulsory and non-compulsory – schooling, but not to tertiary education).

Common themes throughout these attempts are that schooling should prepare students to:

- live sustainable lives in the community;
- make useful contributions to the social, moral, intellectual and economic life of the community;
- respect, and encourage others to respect, values recognised by the community as the values of a civilised and just society; and
- value learning, and to pursue continued learning throughout their lives.

Other narrower and more specific purposes are often articulated as being the preparation of students to engage in education at a higher level, and the development of skills, abilities and attitudes conducive to fruitful participation in the workforce.

Despite widespread acceptance of the fact that primary schooling is the essential key to all of the purposes just listed, the bulk of what is written in Australia about schools and schooling is implicitly in the framework of secondary schooling. While the relevance of secondary schooling to tertiary and other further education, and to workforce participation, can readily be understood, it is absolutely crucial that primary schooling be given as much – if indeed not more – attention than secondary schooling.

Accordingly, the schooling purposes on which APPA will focus are those of primary schooling.

1.2 Purposes of primary schooling

APPA has for some time argued strongly that a Charter for primary schooling should be developed at a national level. The purpose of such a Charter would be to articulate clearly what the Australian community expects as outcomes of primary schooling. Much is both written and said about assessment – assessment of student progress, and assessment of the performance of teachers and schools. Self-evidently, however, it is impossible to make a valid assessment unless there is clarity and consensus about expectations as to what is to be achieved, and what standards are expected to be met. There is presently in Australia no clear, articulated and mutually agreed statement as to the purposes of primary schooling.

It does however appear to be generally accepted within the Australian community that what children should gain through primary education includes:

- the foundation skills of literacy and numeracy;
- the skills and abilities necessary for constructive participation in society;
- development of natural curiosity, and a love of learning and discovery;
- a sound basis for future learning (including learning how to learn);
- the acceptance and adoption of values commonly accepted in the Australian community;
- a sense of being valued as individuals; and
- the knowledge and skills necessary to progress to secondary education.

There is however considerable evidence that, over the past 20 years, there has been a degradation, rather than an enhancement, of the importance of primary schooling as a foundation for life long learning, the establishment of a love of learning and the encouragement of students in their belief in their ability to succeed.

Since the 1980s there has been a degree of national preoccupation with generating broad statements of educational intent. The Hobart Declaration (1988) and the Adelaide Declaration (1998) (both statements issued by joint meetings of Australian Ministers for Education, as the Australian Education Council) have been described as landmark statements that referred broadly to schooling as a whole. It has, as a result, been argued that these statements obscured and devalued the special purpose and identity of primary schools. It is however pleasing to note recent statements by industry groups recognising the importance of effective primary schooling to the economic health of the country.

It is APPA's submission that primary schooling should be re-established as *the* key and pre-eminent phase of education, in which the foundations of reading, writing and numeracy are established.

It is not the purpose of APPA in this Submission to attempt the task of developing a Charter for primary schools. APPA has however secured the resources necessary for this task, and will be pursuing this. Accordingly, APPA would urge that the Inquiry should recognise and acknowledge the importance of establishing, on a national basis, a Charter for primary schools.

PART 2

CONTENT TO BE TAUGHT

In this part, the Submission deals with what is taught in primary schools. The terms “curriculum” and “syllabus” are both used to describe the content of teaching, but here “curriculum” will be used to describe that content. Importantly, it needs to be borne in mind that when educators talk about curriculum, they are usually talking about not only the content of what is taught, but also about expectations of what is to be learned – in other words, the curriculum is not simply a subject matter inventory of each learning area, but also an expression of what students are expected to have learned at the end of each period of study.

The key issue addressed here is the content of the primary curriculum, and challenge of “uncluttering” the curriculum. This issue is, in a sense, interlinked with that of resourcing, in that delivery of the range of the content and learning areas expected of schools would be much less difficult if resources were unlimited. The issue addressed in this Part is, however, mainly that of what is the curriculum content which can reasonably be expected to be taught to primary students in the current framework of Australian primary schools.

2.1 *The primary curriculum*

In Australian schools, the curriculum is typically thought of as being divided into Key Learning Areas (KLAs), which are broad subject or discipline categories defined as being essential to a broad and complete school education. The curriculum documents for key learning areas have typically been developed in each State and Territory by a board of studies or similar body which is representative of key stakeholders and aims to draw from international best practice in the cyclic design and renewal of each curriculum. The overall curriculum framework is determined by each State or Territory government and typically enshrined in legislation.

Underpinning documents have been developed across Australia for specific discipline areas and for integrated studies, although the extent to which this has been done varies between States and Territories. These documents provide the detail of content and expected learning outcomes.

2.2 *What does the primary curriculum contain?*

To understand the issues relating to the primary curriculum, it is necessary to understand the content of the curriculum, not merely from the perspective of the KLAs, but also from the perspective of the competing demands which face schools and teachers.

Literacy and numeracy – the abilities to read, write and speak; and to perform basic mathematical operations – properly have a pre-eminent importance in schools. There is a general – and correct – public view that if primary schools are not equipping students with these skills and abilities, they are failing in the most fundamental way possible.

Outside literacy and numeracy, schools are expected to deliver learning in other important areas: science, social sciences, languages other than English (LOTE), the arts, physical health and physical education.

A third area consists of “mandated” content, consisting of education in specific areas intended to respond to perceived societal problems, typically with the object of safeguarding students against risks of various kinds.

Finally, expectations have been developed that the content of the curriculum will be delivered from specific perspectives or with a specific focus – for example, that a wide range of content will be taught with inclusion of an indigenous Australian perspective; or that teaching will imbue students with generally accepted civic values.

2.3 What should the primary curriculum contain?

Over the past quarter of a century, there has been an increasing tendency for social commentators, interest groups, lobbyists and indeed sometimes governments to propose solutions for a wide range of social problems which involve adding “mandated” or “value” elements to school curriculum. Bike education, water safety, sex education and others have been urged for inclusion in school curricula, and some have been. The teaching of “civics” is widely expected.

Many school educators, and fairly certainly most primary educators, have been wary of these initiatives, not least because of their propensity to distract effort from the key skills and abilities which schools try to give their students.

It scarcely needs to be said that the abilities to speak, read, write, reason, inquire and find information must form a fundamental part of the curriculum. It is however probably easier to be confident about what must be in the curriculum, than what might not be in it.

The current focus on a national curriculum intensifies the need for an uncluttering of the crowded curriculum in primary schools. The experience of primary schools has been that the overcrowding of the curriculum is a reflection of state, territory and national government responses over time to community pressure to include individually supportable imperatives and responsibilities that have collectively accumulated into a log jam.

2.4 Can the curriculum be uncluttered?

Uncluttering the curriculum is, in the final analysis, a matter of the setting of priorities; and the exercise of the will to make what may often be difficult decisions about the content of the curriculum.

The fact that the phenomenon termed the "overcrowded curriculum" or similar exists is a product both of the increasing complexity of modern life, and in some cases heightened expectations on the part of particular sectors of the community that schools can assist in solving a variety of societal problems.

Overseas research and experience – notably in the United Kingdom – suggests that uncluttering the curriculum is indeed possible; but it is a long-term process requiring extensive consultation.

In Australia there appears to be an emerging consensus at government level that emphasis should be placed on raising performance standards through a return to basics with a focus on explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy, national testing, statements of learning, common starting ages and increased autonomy for principals in employing and managing teacher performance. It is implicit in this approach that the curriculum must be rationalised.

Achievement of this will however require a re-establishment of a focus on the primary sector, and a clearly articulated consensus about the content of the primary curriculum. The process of reaching this consensus must start with literacy and numeracy, but will in due course need to include, as well, the other key learning areas. There must be sufficient flexibility to allow schools and teachers to adapt method and some content to local needs. While the issue of resourcing is dealt with at length in Part 4, it just needs to be said here that the development of an uncluttered curriculum can only be effective when regard is had the same time to the resources available to schools and teachers to teach that curriculum. Finally, this process needs to be Australia-wide.

2.5 A national curriculum

Australian Ministers for Education have recently given in-principle endorsement to the development of a national primary curriculum including, importantly, consistent progress and achievement criteria which will allow students moving from one state to another to enroll in primary schooling without disadvantage.

APPA stands ready to cooperate in exploring this initiative. While the issue of a national primary curriculum itself is beyond the direct scope of this Submission and the Inquiry, APPA would hope that, if a national curriculum is to become a reality, the benefits would include:

- improvement in the efficient deployment of resources;
- development of a core of basic disciplines, with room for local content;
- the capacity to provide appropriate initiatives where required (eg encouraging the study of science in the upper primary years);
- producing a curriculum grounded in a sound understanding of contemporary interests in developmental needs of children across this age group; and
- giving students an understanding of Australian culture, history and values (including in particular those relating to indigenous Australians and their culture).

It has been pointed out at the start of this Part that the curriculum and its underlying documentation inevitably includes statements about what children are expected to learn, and it is accordingly important that schools and education systems have the capacity to assess what students are learning. The Submission accordingly turns to this matter.

These questions point to the second of the three major issues which the Submission addresses, that of assessment.

PART 3

ASSESSMENT

There is a community consensus that an essential part of any system of education is the activity of measuring the quality of the outcomes of that system. While the bulk of resources and effort are properly put into determining the content of what is taught; the strategies and methods of teaching; and the quality of teachers, it cannot simply be assumed that, if these inputs are well-managed, the outcomes meet the expectations of students, parents and the wider community.

Schools are however not production lines, and valid and meaningful measurement of outcomes is an immeasurably more complex task than in a factory environment. There are two main challenges.

The first is to understand what it is that we are attempting to measure, both by standardised educational testing, and various assessment techniques.

The second is to be clear about why we are attempting to do this – in other words, to be able to clearly articulate the purposes for which the data generated by testing and assessment will be used.

Care needs also to be taken that testing and assessment remains firmly linked to the purpose of achieving improvements in learning for students. The activity of measurement of outcomes must not become an end in itself, as distinct from a means to achieve continuing improvements for students. The temptation to teach in order to help students score well in tests, as distinct from teaching students to learn what they need for the future, must always be resisted. The resource demand of measurement must be kept in perspective with the resources needed for the delivery of teaching and learning. Additionally, the resources devoted to measurement must not be only used for assessing the performance of schools and students, but also to assist teachers in the classroom to better understand how they can help their students.

3.1 *What are we measuring?*

In many contexts, articulating the intended outcomes of a societal, governmental, organisational or business process is not difficult. There is consensus that public transport should run on time; that citizens should not become victims of crime; and that medical treatment should be available when needed.

In the case of primary school education, as has already been pointed out that, there is as yet no comparable clear articulation of the purposes and outcomes of primary education (although the development of a Charter for primary schooling will hopefully achieve improvements in this respect). Therefore, brief articulation of what testing and assessment is attempting to measure is difficult.

Part of this difficulty arises from the fact that education does not simply consist of ensuring that students can, in a testing situation, recall facts they have been taught. Instead, the community expects that primary education will include a variety of outcomes (set out at more length at 1.1 and 1.2) including a grasp of foundation skills; abilities for creative expression and problem-solving; interpersonal skills and the holding of core values.

It is also essential that we should assess what we value, and not simply value what we can assess. A huge amount of data is generated by the process of education. Much of it

is relatively easy to gather, and to process in such a way as to demonstrate that it meets the tests of reliability and reproducibility demanded by basic scientific method. Data is always useful, but often the easier it is to collect, the less likely it is to provide real and accurate insight into the quality of teaching and learning.

Even where there is consensus as to the outcome which we are trying to measure, a potential problem is that we cannot be sure that there is a valid link between a particular score (however that may be expressed) and the actual quality or value intended to be measured in relation to an individual student. Additionally, where the outcome of such testing has some kind of potential for material benefit for a student (eg access to different streams, opportunity classes and the like), the testing regime can spawn a culture (and indeed an industry, as can be seen in the existence of coaching colleges) of teaching simply to pass the test. If this happens, the fundamental purpose of primary education will have been, at least to some extent, subverted.

The development of suitable tests or assessment tasks by schools and school systems and teachers must therefore identify individual needs as an ingredient of importance equal to the provision of system data. This inevitably raises the question of why we seek to measure educational performance in this way.

3.2 *Why are we measuring?*

Just as important as the question of what we measure is that of why we measure achievement and progress.

Much of the public debate about educational measurement and testing would lead us to think that its principal purpose is the production of some kind of report card by which the public at large can judge the performance of schools. The purposes are however more complex than this, and are worth examining separately.

3.2.1 *School performance*

Effective and valid assessment can potentially provide publicly available information about the performance of schools, but there are a number of drawbacks to the use of the outcomes of standardised testing for this purpose.

First, there is as yet no sound research evidence to suggest that the outcomes of standardised testing can validly measure the quality of performance of a school (however that may be defined) or the performance of individual teachers. Testing outcomes are affected by the nature of the student population (especially in relation to socioeconomic status, numbers of students of non-English-speaking background, students with learning difficulties and the like) and, despite claims made for some testing regimes in the US, there is currently in APPA's opinion no testing regime which can reliably separate the impact of the school on a child's performance from the impact on that performance resulting from factors outside the school.

Second, even if we could be satisfied that it was possible to measure school performance in this way, any regime of testing resulting in some kind of rank ordering of schools is likely to do more harm than good. It has the potential – where parents do have some choice about this – to discourage them from enrolling their children in particular schools, so that falling enrolments place yet another pressure on schools facing difficulties which may well be not of their own making. Frequently, parents will not have a choice about the school to which they send their children, and perceivedly poor rankings are likely to become self-fulfilling prophecies, as parents develop expectations that these schools will not serve their children well.

In short, the use of the outcomes of standardised testing to rate school performance is not justifiable unless that testing is demonstrably capable of measuring only the factors which relate to the school; and unless the data is used to provide resources and support to schools experiencing difficulties.

3.2.2 *Teacher performance*

There is also currently considerable pressure for the use of the outcomes of standardised testing to assess the performance of individual teachers. APPA does not intend to address this issue at length in this Submission, because it has already published a paper on this matter (*Performance-based Pay for Teachers – An Issues Paper*), but will simply say that, for reasons discussed immediately above, APPA is not presently satisfied that there is any regime of testing which is capable of reliably measuring teacher performance.

3.2.3 *Feedback to schools*

The opinions expressed in 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 do not of course mean that standardised testing has no value. It can be of considerable value to schools and teachers, in understanding where problems and deficiencies lie, and in giving clues to the ways in which resources and teaching strategies can be adjusted to assist students.

In fact, APPA's view is that substantial improvements could be made to the quality of teaching in schools if the focus in developing testing and assessment approaches were focused on tools which could be used by teachers in classrooms, to assist them in analysing the performance of individual students so as to determine the most effective strategies for intervention and support.

3.2.4 *Giving information to parents*

An important purpose of testing and assessment is to provide parents with information, in a form which they can easily understand, about the progress of their children at school. In this connection, APPA needs to comment on the current move by the Federal government to require primary schools to report, at regular intervals, on the performance of students using the so-called "A-E" scale.

At the outset, APPA should make very clear that it strongly supports the proposition that schools should regularly provide information to individual parents on the progress and achievement of their children. The question is, instead, what should be the manner of provision of that information.

The simple fact is that parents wish to know "how their child is going at school". This may be a question not phrased in a particularly scientific way, but what they want is an amalgam of information which gives them some sense of whether a child is progressing as well as might be reasonably expected. The provision of a ranking on some graded or numerical scale is not well suited to the achievement of this purpose. Not only does it fail to give parents the kind of information they really want, but it also has the potential to lead to unrealistic expectations. In particular, it can lead to an expectation, for example, that a child rated as "C" at one point should, if the school is performing well, eventually progress to "A" level which is not, of course, always a realistic expectation. These problems can be compounded by applying measurements of this kind across cycles other than a single school year, which is potentially confusing even to teachers, let alone parents.

It seems quite clear to APPA that the best way of providing information to parents is in plain language which describes the way in which their child is progressing. Fitting these descriptions into some series of grades of some kind is not a problem, but the essence of feedback to parents must be descriptive, rather than through some numeric or symbolic scale.

3.2.5 *International comparisons*

In the context of the global economy, it is inevitable that there will be a demand to understand how the effectiveness of Australian schools in equipping students for further study, the workforce and productive participation in society compares with schools internationally.

In this connection, two international testing regimes are frequently cited: the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) testing.

In APPA's view, the performance of Australian primary schools generally compares favourably with the rest of the developed world. However it acknowledges that performance in international tests can be improved. Before it is possible to draw any valid conclusion about what Australian performance in these international tests tells us, it is necessary to understand exactly what is being tested.

There has been recent debate about the respective reliability and validity of PISA and TIMSS, with some criticism that PISA is less rigorous than TIMSS. In this connection, we once again draw to attention what was said at the start of this Part, about the taking of the utmost care and deliberation in deciding what to measure.

If different testing regimes operate on different subject matters – for example, if one devotes effort to assessing creativity while another does not – the first question to be asked is whether the users of the data derived from testing are interested in the assessment of creativity or not. If they are, the next question to be answered is whether the testing regime purporting to assess creativity does so in some valid or defensible way. There has, for example, been criticism of PISA on the basis that it is more forgiving of errors of grammar, style and expression than is TIMSS. Criticism of this kind cannot be ignored, but the force of it must be assessed against the background of what it is that a given testing regime is attempting to measure.

Obviously, international comparisons should not, and in today's world cannot, be ignored; but the data which will best guide Australian teachers is that derived from validly designed regimes of testing and assessment which meet the needs of Australian schools and students.

3.3 Issues and challenges for assessment and testing

As has been said at the start of this Part, APPA acknowledges the need for testing and assessment, but would argue strongly that these processes be kept in perspective.

First – a point repeated because it bears repetition – it is essential that the purposes of primary schools be clearly articulated in order that valid assessment is possible.

Second, we must find ways of assessing what we value and must not fall to the temptation to value what we can conveniently assess. In addition, it will be necessary constantly to guard against developing modes of assessment which result in students being taught, not what they need to learn, but what they need to know in order to produce a favourable assessment. The thing we do not wish to create in Australia is schools as testing factories. Recent research conducted in the United States and United Kingdom suggests that not only does teaching for testing stifle genuine learning, but it also has discernible counterproductive effects. Schools are, and must remain, places of learning; where students learn because they want to, and not simply to achieve a prescribed number of ticks in boxes.

Third, the process of assessment consumes resources. APPA does not question that, as an important part of the educational process, the activity of assessment must have resources devoted to it. Resources are however limited and it is essential that there be a problem balance between resources devoted to assessment, and those devoted to the delivery of teaching and learning.

Fourth, the outcomes of assessment do not merely provide information about student progress, but about other things as well. APPA accepts that the outcomes of assessment can provide information about teacher quality, although there is great doubt that the outcomes of standardised testing can provide valid information about the performance of individual teachers. APPA would however strongly argue that governments need to recognise that assessment outcomes contain important information about the adequacy of resourcing in schools. We need to move beyond the perception, driven for decades in popular culture by movies from *Mr Chips* to *Dead Poets Society*, that the only requirement for top quality education is the brilliant teacher: the reality is that resources are required as well.

3.4 Directions for the future

While APPA has made clear that it accepts the concept of a national regime of testing, it has two important concerns.

One is that, in APPA's view, the commitment of further resources and effort to extend testing at a national level cannot be justified. The pressing need is, instead, to equip teachers at the classroom level with better means of assessing the progress of individual students. The level of support available to teachers in this respect is presently inadequate, and teachers need improved tools to allow them to tailor teaching strategies in the classroom to address the difficulties underlying lack of adequate progress on the part of individual students.

The other is that the outcomes of national testing should not be used in any way to place more pressure on schools already grappling with difficulties of resourcing, lower SES intakes, and students with learning difficulties. Any use of this testing to constrain resources, or to create a climate which discourages parents from enrolling their children in particular schools, is unacceptable. It is simply not possible for all children to be enrolled in perceivedly "better" schools: the challenge for governments is instead to assist in lifting all schools to outstanding levels of performance.

From the perspective of parents, however, the rationale for testing is the provision of useful information about student progress. In APPA's view the "A-E" scale (or any other non-descriptive scale) is not effective to achieve this purpose. What primary schools and parents need is a process which does not unduly divert resources from the fundamental tasks of teaching and learning; which is a means to an end, and does not become an end in itself; and gives parents, in plain and accessible language, information about the progress their children are making in learning.

Nationally, APPA accepts the current regime of literacy and numeracy testing. This is not, however, the time for expanding national testing; instead, if resources are indeed available to expand effort in testing and assessment, they should be directed to assisting teachers at the classroom level. Resources are however stretched at all levels, and the Submission now moves to this matter.

PART 4

RESOURCING PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The fundamental issues clearly include the extent to which primary schools are resourced to do the work that they do. Substantial attention has been focused on this issue.

4.1 Research into primary school resourcing

The current work on primary resourcing began, as has been said, with the production of the 2001 *Our Future* survey of government primary principals regarding resource issues they faced in their schools.

The view of nearly 2,500 principals who responded was bleak. They felt that they were not able to meet the expectations placed on them.

As this was essentially a qualitative study, DEST agreed to fund further systematic investigation into the question of primary resourcing. This was done in two parts: SRAPS 1 & SRAPS 2.

The purpose of SRAPS 1 was to identify the overall quantum of funding available to primary schools and to look at the historic reasons for the lower level of funding in primary education compared to secondary. The report of this work is published as *Resourcing Australian Primary Schools: A Historical Perspective*.

The purpose of SRAPS 2 was to investigate whether the historic factors creating the disparity in funding were still relevant and to assess the sufficiency of resource levels in primary education. This work has been published as *The Sufficiency of Resources for Australian Primary Schools*.

4.2 How well are Australian primary schools resourced?

The findings of SRAPS 1 and 2 paint an unhappily revealing picture of the resourcing of Australian primary schools.

4.2.1 SRAPS 1

SRAPS 1 provides important background information about the reasons for the differential, which persists today, between the resourcing of primary and secondary schools. While the reasons are complex, much of this disparity arises from the fact that secondary schools were not established by governments until the start of the 20th century; and when they were, they adopted much of the character of the relatively well resourced secondary schools which had been established by private and church interests over the preceding half-century. Schools which were in effect primary schools had also been established by governments during the 19th century, but were far less well resourced. Despite the fact that, during the 20th century, this gap has to some extent closed, it still exists; preserved in part by a societal focus on the link between secondary schools and both university enrolments and workforce participation; and in part by a general failure of understanding about the importance of the early years of education.

4.2.2 SRAPS 2

SRAPS 2 is concerned with the present. Its specific purpose was to investigate whether Australian primary schools had sufficient resources to achieve the goals set for them by the Commonwealth and State Ministers for Education in the statement *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*. The key finding of SRAPS 2 was that they do not.

While the statement of *National Goals* outlines the educational outcomes sought for all Australian students, it remains an ideal yet to be attained by many primary school students. Without additional financial and other resources, these goals are outside the reach of many primary schools, particularly those located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (lower socio-economic status, or SES). In these areas, the pattern is one of lower levels of parental and community support and private contributions, resources on which all schools depend, but which are outside government funding formulas. Further, it is typically more difficult to attract high-quality teaching staff to schools of this kind.

Disparities between the funding provided to individual primary schools (as distinct from the general funding gap between the primary and secondary sectors) is also to some extent a product of the way in which funding formulas operate.

The combined result of these factors was that, in an analysis reported for the 2002 calendar year, the lowest per capita expenditure on primary education was a little over \$4000 per student, with the highest, at slightly under \$8,000 per student, being almost twice the lowest level of resourcing.

It is important also to understand that SRAPS is not the only research which reveals under-resourcing. MCEETYA has produced two reports to similar effect without any discernible resulting action from governments.

4.2.3 *The extent of the resourcing problem*

One thing which needs to be clearly understood is that the existence of this level of disparity is, it can confidently be inferred, in significant part a product of the fact that there has been little public knowledge of, and hence debate about, the problem. SRAPS 2 points out that, while primary school principals have clear understandings of some aspects of the funding of their schools, they tend to have little knowledge of the complex and largely hidden workings of systemic funding formulae. While there are doubtless perceptions of the differences between schools, they will be largely intuitive and anecdotal.

Another side of this coin is that the general architecture of funding formulae has a tendency to disadvantage schools with higher levels of students with special needs.

While formulae differ between systems, they typically include prescriptions relating to class sizes which turn on a specification that resources are given to a school of a particular enrolment level such that “no class need exceed” a given number. A prescription of this kind provides principals with the option of structuring most classes closely below or at this given number, but also with another option of establishing some classes above that number, in order to free teaching resources for specialist teaching, student support and professional development. While this is likely not to be a problem for schools in more affluent areas, it is not a practical option for schools with high proportions of students with special learning needs, or who are disruptive.

4.2.4 *Schools from lower socio-economic status (SES) communities*

SRAPS 2 also found that, while funding formulae typically make allowances for lower SES schools (on average, these schools had classes with 4.2 fewer students, and received about \$1000 per student more, than the higher SES schools), the differential was still insufficient to allow for the smaller class sizes, and additional student support, needed in these schools without contracting the curriculum.

The enrolment of students with severe behavioural problems was of serious concern to principals and teachers because of the lack of additional help available for such students. Moreover, there tended to be higher concentrations of these students in lower SES schools. Maintaining a constructive classroom climate in classes including students of this kind is far more difficult, and it is accordingly much harder for a whole class to reach whatever standards may be prescribed in assessment and testing regimes.

4.2.5 *Curriculum*

Another finding of SRAPS 2 was that it was difficult for schools to teach all of the learning areas in the *National Goals* within a regular school week. At least half the week tends to be allocated to English and mathematics, with more time allocated for these Key Learning Areas in schools with lower SES intakes. The remainder of the instructional time is spread across the other learning areas.

4.2 *What should be done?*

From not only the SRAPS studies, but also from its own membership, APPA is acutely aware of the impact of under-resourcing, and disparities in resourcing, of primary schools.

Many schools find the need to cut instruction in areas such as Languages Other Than English (LOTE), or the arts, not only because of general resourcing restrictions, but also in some cases because of the absence of any suitably qualified teacher on the staff. This problem is compounded by demands for mandated, extrinsic topics to be included in the curriculum (see 2.3).

An essential first step, therefore, has to be an examination of the disparities between the formula funding allocated to schools. This is an issue on which SRAPS 3 is expected to shed further light but, while the products of that research are not yet available, some comments can confidently be made.

First, it is important to understand that the objective is *not* equality of funding, because there do need to be differences in the funding delivered to different schools, based on need. The problem confronting the primary sector is not merely that of ensuring some kind of evenhandedness, but instead redressing serious and longstanding imbalances in resourcing, which have operated to the disadvantage of many schools, predominantly those with lower SES intakes or in remote areas.

Second, while the magnitude of this problem is likely to be made clearer by SRAPS 3, anecdotal evidence suggests to APPA that there may be a need for differences of the size which currently exist, but in favour of a different group of schools: some lower SES schools may well, on proper analysis, be shown to need nearly twice as much as schools in more affluent areas.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The picture in relation to Australian primary education, both in relation to academic standards and generally, is that the performance of the primary sector stands up well, in an overall sense, by both national and international standards of performance.

At the same time, the reality needs to be recognised that a not insignificant number of primary schools are now, and for some time have been, unable to deliver the level of teaching and learning across the curriculum which would be expected by the Australian public.

In addition, despite the longstanding and unchallenged research findings showing that primary schooling, is the single most crucial time of a child's school education, primary schools remain, on a per-student basis, significantly under resourced by comparison with secondary schools. The typical simplistic answer – that primary schools do not need science laboratories – is no longer a good enough explanation.

Australia has the basis for building a primary school sector as good as any in the world, but action is now urgently needed in key areas.

Accordingly, APPA recommends that the Inquiry endorse (and where necessary recommend to the Australian Parliament accordingly):

- the value of developing a national Charter articulating the purpose of primary schools and primary schooling;
- the inclusion in the process of developing a national primary curriculum of an objective to unclutter the curriculum, so as to ensure that there is proper instructional time in all learning areas; and
- the giving of a commitment by both Federal and State governments to improve primary school resourcing, with the objectives ensuring proper resourcing to all schools to enable them to provide the academic standards expected by the Australian community, and to better match resources to the needs of individual schools.