

CLOSING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

A response to the Interim Report of the Productivity Commission

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This response is limited to four themes on matters for which I have expertise and have conducted related research in recent years. These are concerned with (1) policy deliberations, (2) targeted interventions, (3) teacher and principal time, and (4) the role of the principal under conditions of autonomy. Several recommendations call for immediate and urgent action. The nation cannot afford to wait another three or so years before findings of related projects are released and implementation gets underway.

It is acknowledged that the Productivity Commission is concerned, among other matters, with the outcomes of actions taken in the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) and recommendations for the next agreement. The context is deeply concerning, namely, that outcomes for students have flatlined or declined despite what states and territories have agreed to do. There has been “little impact” of the current agreement. (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 7)

1. POLICY DELIBERATIONS

Interim Report

A key challenge in lifting school performance is that policy deliberations — including as part of intergovernmental agreements — can be far removed from the daily realities of classrooms, teachers and students. A theme of this report is the need for the next NSRA to move beyond system architecture and drive real improvements on the ground. To be successful, the NSRA will need to close the distance between national policy making and classroom practice. Each should inform the other — with teachers and school leaders influencing policy, and evidence-based approaches gaining more traction in schools and classrooms. (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 22)

Response

I consider this to be one of the most important statements in the Interim Report and endorse without reservation the view that “the NSRA will need to close the distance between national policy making and classroom practice,” hence the title of this response. Taking up this challenge is key to improving outcomes for students, and Sections 2-4 below endorse and propose particular ways of achieving that end.

2. TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

Interim Report

Research suggests that targeted interventions are effective, particularly small group or one-to-one tuition. Intensive, targeted support allows the teacher to focus on the needs of a small number of learners, providing teaching that is closely matched to pupil understanding and opportunities for greater levels of interaction and feedback. International evidence from two high performing nations — Finland and Singapore — shows that small group tuition can improve learning by around four months over one or two school terms. (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 81 citing a submission from AERO)

Response

This statement has important implications for the next NSRA and is an example of how the gap between national policymaking and classroom practice should be addressed. Part A(ii) among the

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agreed National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) in the current NSRA calls for states and territories to “Assist teachers to monitor individual student progress and identify students learning needs through opt-in online and on demand learning assessment tools with links to student learning resources, prioritising early years foundational skills.”

The Interim Report notes that the opt-in online and on demand assessment tools (the online formative assessment initiative [OFAI] have not been implemented (p. 7 and Attachment C). The Interim Report canvassed in Attachment C whether there is commitment to and need for a national initiative. Expressed bluntly, is it worth the effort?

However, there is a fundamental issue arising from the first words in the NPI A(ii) cited above: “Assist teachers to monitor individual student progress and identify students learning needs.” Are jurisdictions aware of the number of schools that have the capacity to do this and are using this capacity to good effect as far as student achievement is concerned? Schools do not need OFAI to do this as I demonstrated in a study in 2015 of primary and secondary schools in the government sector (Caldwell, 2016a), most of which were in disadvantaged settings and performing well in NAPLAN. Leaders in case study schools were able to explain the links between their capacity to do this and student achievement.

I have studied schools in Finland where there is a capacity in schools to ensure that no student falls behind by more than a day or two. This is called “special education” in that country, which has a high level of equity among systems participating in PISA. There is no counterpart to an OFAI. Over the course of their schooling about one-third of students need “special education.”

I recommend that the next NSRA require agreement by states and territories to report the number of schools that have a capacity to implement the approach described in the Interim Report, and to design and implement programs to build the capacity of schools that do not. There are implications for leadership development. It is noted here that the National Professional Standards for Teachers and the National Professional Standard for Principals expect that leaders in schools should do these things well.

I read the annual reports of the largest states and there is no indication they have knowledge of school capacity in this area or that they have addressed the matter in schools that do not. To illustrate from a recent report, considering quality of teaching in a broader sense in New South Wales, the Auditor-General found in 2019 that the New South Wales Education and Standards Authority (NESA) “did not oversight principals’ decisions to ensure that minimum standards for teaching quality are consistently met” and that “The Department does not effectively monitor teaching quality across the state ... The Department’s Performance and Development Framework does not adequately support principals and supervisors to effectively manage and improve teacher performance or actively improve teaching quality.”(Audit Office of New South Wales, 2019, pp. 8-9)

3. TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER TIME

Interim Report

In the next agreement, the Australian, State and Territory Governments — in consultation with teachers and school leaders — should develop a new National Policy Initiative that commits all jurisdictions to undertake an assessment of teacher and principal time use. This could involve a four-step process, whereby Australian, State and Territory Governments:

- commit to an assessment of teacher and principal time use across school sectors, with a focus on identifying how teachers and principals spend their time, and what tasks they rate as low or high value
- specify how they will remove low-value tasks, duplicate tasks and regulatory inefficiencies
- specify how teaching assistants can be best deployed, including to reduce teacher workload
- monitor the compliance and administration burden on teachers and principals over time. (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 36)

Response

I undertook a study from late 2021 to mid-2022 of school curriculum and quality of teaching in Australia (Caldwell, 2022a) and drew the same conclusions as the Interim Report but I injected a sense of urgency. For how much longer must teachers and principals, and organisations that represent them, report that their roles under the status quo are unmanageable? That it is so is evident in expectations that Proficient teachers should perform well against 37 standards, be in tune with expanding folios of evidence-based findings that should shape their work; respond to the needs of all students in their care through a form of personalised learning; keep up-to-date with advances in technology; manage the implications of the never-ending stream of reviews and inquiries; deal with mountains of administrative paperwork; and look after the wellbeing of their students, always, and especially in post-pandemic circumstances. Face-to-face teaching loads are far higher for primary and secondary teachers in Australia than for counterparts in high-performing countries ... Australia urgently needs a vision of the role of a fully professional teacher in the third decade of the 21st century, as exists in Finland (“teacher-as-researcher”) and Singapore (“teacher-in-an-inquiring-culture”). (Caldwell, 2022a, p. 56)

I support the recommendation in the above excerpt from the Interim Report but urge that the studies be conducted quickly, with a sense of urgency, given that so much is already known about how teachers and school leaders spend their time. We can’t afford to wait around for three or more years before findings are assembled and a further two years elapse before action is taken and impact assessed. The assumption here is that contracted or in-house researchers have the capacity to conduct their work expeditiously and that system authorities are committed to making a serious and timely response.

I also recommend that a similar and independent study be undertaken of how system personnel spend their time, not only on recommendations in the preceding section in respect to Targeted Interventions but also on the extent to which they actually read and act on the reports they expect schools to provide. It is not enough to require teachers and principals to be accountable and submit lengthy reports that provide evidence of what they have accomplished. Such a study should also report on how system personnel spend their time in schools to find out what occurs and why, providing direction and support as required (“system-as-researcher”).

The brief to the Productivity Commission included the statement: “As managers of the largest school systems, states and territories have broad and deep insights into the impact of the National Policy Initiatives ...” (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. v). This assumption is challenged on the basis of evidence presented in the Interim Report.

4. ROLE OF PRINCIPALS UNDER CONDITIONS OF AUTONOMY

The Interim Report addressed matters related to the role of the principal and canvassed possibilities for attracting able people to leadership. My response is limited to the role of principals under conditions of autonomy, a subject I have researched and written about in recent decades.

The Interim Report provides a good summary of literature on the topic, both national and international. I believe we have sufficient knowledge and experience to ensure that states and territories are able to implement school autonomy well; indeed, better than most countries.

There should be agreement on the meaning of school autonomy. I recommend the following based on findings in projects reported below along with foundation conceptual work on the self-managing school (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988). This definition makes clear that autonomy is constrained by system accountabilities.

There is school autonomy when there has been significant and consistent decentralisation to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources, with decisions at the school level being made within a framework of local, state and national policies and priorities. The school remains accountable to a central authority for the manner in which resources are allocated. Resources are defined broadly to include curriculum, people, time, materiel, technology and finance.

There are six projects that are not referenced in the Interim Report that might be useful in preparing the Final Report. All six were funded by the Australian Government. I was chief investigator for each. Three books were published (Caldwell & Harris, 2008; Caldwell, 2016a; Caldwell, 2018). These projects were conducted from 2007 to 2017. The following are brief summaries.

The *Principal Autonomy Research Project* was commissioned by the Australian Government in 2007. The project involved mapping approaches to school autonomy in each state and territory as well as in Catholic and independent schools. Document analysis and interviews with leaders in each sector were conducted in every state and territory as well as with leaders of principals' associations around the country. Case studies were conducted in each jurisdiction and in each sector. A comprehensive review of research was undertaken. The report was submitted to the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in December 2007, being received on the change of government by Julia Gillard, then Minister for Education. Gillard released the report in 2009.

The *International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools* was conducted in 2006 and 2007, with the findings included in Caldwell and Harris (2008). Funds were provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST (Australia) and the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS) (Wales). The framework for the project was derived from a series of events from 2004 to 2006 for school and system leaders from 11 countries who had an interest in transformation: 49 case studies written by school leaders, 4 master classes and 60 workshops. These included 19 workshops in every state and territory in a program organised by the Australian College of Educators. The aim was to identify factors that were perceived to be important in efforts to achieve the transformation of schools.

Analysis resulted in the identification of four forms of "capital," or resources, as reported in Caldwell and Spinks (2006) and Caldwell and Harris (2008). Schools that have been transformed or have made good progress to transformation are adept at strengthening and aligning four forms of capital: intellectual capital, social capital, spiritual capital and financial capital, achieving this strength and alignment through good governance. About 4,000 school and school system leaders participated the activities described above. The project concluded with case studies in six countries in 2006 and 2007, all in public secondary schools (except in Victoria, Australia where one primary and one independent school were included): Australia (Victoria) (7 schools), China (Chongqing) (5), England (5), Finland (Tampere) (5), United States (Michigan, New Mexico, Hawaii, California, New York) (5) and Wales (5).

I was invited to make an Australian contribution to a project entitled the *International Study on School Autonomy and Learning* (ISSAL). Convened by the Chief Scientist in the Israel Ministry of Education, members of the research team were from Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), England, Finland, Israel and Singapore. The purpose was to use surveys and conduct case studies that illuminate the link between school autonomy and learning. Three contributions from Australia were funded by the federal

government and published in Caldwell (2016a, 2016b and 2018). The project was conducted from 2014 to 2017.

The first contribution dealt with the “how,” with findings published in Caldwell (2016a). System leaders in the ACT, Queensland and Victoria were each invited to nominate three schools in their jurisdiction that had a high degree of autonomy, had performed well on tests of student achievement and which would be able to explain how the links were made. Five schools were selected to ensure representation of each level of schooling and I spent two days in each school, interviewing principals, other school leaders and teachers. Participants were from primary schools in Victoria (Broadmeadows and Specimen Hill), one secondary school in the ACT (Canberra High), one P-10 school in Queensland (Millmerran) and a senior secondary college in Victoria (Glen Waverley). Diagrams were prepared illustrating the chain of cause-and-effect for various initiatives. Case study accounts and diagrams were confirmed by principals. The outcome of the project included a summary of international research on the impact of school autonomy as well as accounts of the Australian context and the five case studies. A seminar for stakeholders was held at Parliament House, Canberra featuring presentations from the five principals and the author.

An important distinction in the report of this study, cited in Gonski 2.0 (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 89) was between structural autonomy and professional autonomy. Case study schools exhibited a high level of professional autonomy.

Structural autonomy refers to policies, regulations and procedures that permit the school to exercise autonomy. Schools may take up such a remit in a variety of ways, or not at all, including ways that are ineffective or counter-productive if the intent is to improve outcomes for students. The granting of autonomy may make no difference to outcomes for students unless the school has the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference, and uses that capacity to achieve this end.

Professional autonomy refers to teachers and their leaders having the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference to outcomes for students, and this capacity is exercised in a significant, systemic and sustained fashion. Professional autonomy calls for the exercise of judgement, with a high level of discretion in the exercise of that judgement. (Caldwell, 2016a, p. 35)

The second contribution drew on a survey of principals across Australia, with findings reported in Caldwell (2018b). The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) provided a stratified random sample of public schools. More than half of respondents reported a higher level of autonomy than five years ago. Most identified factors associated with autonomy that enabled them to make decisions that helped achieve improved learning outcomes. They identified strategies that were employed to build the capacity of staff. Their school systems supported schools in a variety of ways. A majority would prefer a higher level of autonomy.

Noteworthy were responses on constraints on autonomy. Six factors were generally viewed as clearly constraining and four were perceived to be both constraining and supporting. In the first category were national/system curriculum, national/system testing, expectations/demands on principals’ time, expectations/demands on teachers’ time, national/system targets for improvement, and compliance requirements. In the second category were performance management requirements for principals, performance management requirements for teachers, system requirements for school review, and system requirements for accountability. The most constraining factor was compliance requirements. The most supportive was performance management requirements for teachers. These and open-ended responses underpinned the following recommendation:

There were simply too many concerns raised or implied about these matters which are seen as a constraint on autonomy. The open-ended responses, in particular, make this clear. While school systems can offer good reasons why these exist, they should re-double their efforts to reduce the

demands on principals, especially as far as compliance requirements are concerned. (Caldwell, 2016b, p. 44)

The third contribution to the International Study on School Autonomy and Learning arose from an invitation from a senior official in a department of the federal government in 2016 to consider a study of how the two levels of government worked together in the cause of school education. Agreement was reached with the Department of Education and Training for a funded project that would be of value to the Department as well as make a contribution to ISSAL. This project was conducted in 2017 with integration of research reports in a book (Caldwell, 2018). There were five objectives:

1. How have high-performing jurisdictions achieved strategic alignment across different levels of government when formulating and implementing policy to improve student performance?
2. What role is played by a higher level of school autonomy, especially professional autonomy, in achieving this alignment?
3. How have principals and teachers exercised professional autonomy to build a capacity for transformational change?
4. What approaches to the preparation and professional development of principals and teachers have proved effective in systems where higher levels of autonomy have been extended to schools?
5. What factors have constrained efforts to achieve transformational change as efforts have been made to improve performance?

A large amount of information was gathered in respect to #4 above, and this will be of interest to the Productivity Commission and jurisdictions around the country.

Information was gathered about alignment in four federations (Australia, Canada, Germany, United States) and nine unitary states (England, Estonia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Korea [South], New Zealand, Singapore and China [Hong Kong]). Narratives on alignment yielded 15 benchmarks with 12 that facilitate comparisons on roles in accounting for current high performance and three on roles in adaptability or sustaining high performance in the longer term.

Based on what is contained in the Interim Report and the additional information provided above, I recommend that the next NSRA include an agreement to build the capacity of schools, further and urgently, in respect to their professional autonomy. It is acknowledged that programs in initial teacher education should make a contribution. The Interim Report deals comprehensively with this matter and secretaries of education in the states and territories are providing a report to the Education Ministers Meeting in December.

Note on transparency

I read the response to the Interim Report from the National School Resourcing Board which called for more transparency in the way money is allocated, across a system and within schools.

Government schools with a relatively high level of autonomy in most jurisdictions as well as non-government schools already prepare their budgets with a high degree of transparency and make them available to their policymaking bodies such as a school board or school council, who must approve them in most instances. The style and substances of these budgets does not match what is reported on the My School website, but they make sense in the local context.

This is particularly evident in public schools in Victoria where there has been more than 20 years' experience of school-based program budgeting. I chaired a committee in the 1990s that

made the “first cut” of such an approach which was based on experience of needs-based system and school level budgeting in the landmark reforms in Edmonton Public Schools in Canada. A range of funding models, including the Edmonton approach, is contained in Chapter 11 of Caldwell and Spinks (2013). In other words, there is extensive knowledge of how to achieve a high level of transparency in the allocation of resources at the school level, so the Productivity Commission is well-placed to recommend speedy action in the next NSRA. Developing a one-best-way to secure transparency that suits all schools and contexts across the country may not be possible. There should at least be a review of the way the allocation of funds is reported on My School. The school’s budget should be reported in its My School profile.

The National School Resourcing Board believes it is important to establish the relationship between funding and outcomes. While funding is important, it is critical to recall the findings of the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools cited above. Four forms of capital are necessary to securing high performance: intellectual, social, spiritual (defined broadly to include values) and financial, with all four integrated through good governance. Two schools receiving identical funds and with the same level of socio-educational advantage may have dramatically different outcomes for students because they have paid attention to the other forms of capital.

SUMMARY

The starting point in this response to the Interim Report was the statement on page 22 that “the NSRA will need to close the distance between national policy making and classroom practice.” This framed the analysis and recommendations on targetted interventions, teacher and principal time, and the role of the principal under conditions of autonomy. I have no doubt that jurisdictions recognise the importance of the matters raised, and many strategies have been tried, but measures taken to date are simply not working if the goal of improved outcomes is to be achieved.

The next NSRA should reflect an acceptance of the need for a relatively high degree of school autonomy. A summation of the evidence on the impact of school autonomy was provided by OECDs education chief Andreas Schleicher who reviewed findings on most aspects of schools and school systems in *World class: How to build a 21st-century school system* (Schleicher, 2020). He concluded:

The data from PISA suggest that, once the state has set clear expectations for students, school autonomy in defining the details of the curriculum and assessments is positively related to the system’s overall performance. For example, school systems that provide their schools with greater discretion in student assessments, the courses offered, the course content and the textbooks used, tend to be the school systems that perform at higher levels on PISA, whatever the causal nature of that relationship. (Schleicher, 2020, p. 109)

Consistent with analysis in the preceding pages, the focus should be on professional autonomy and the capacity of teachers and school leaders to succeed in approaches along the lines of targeted interventions. Structural autonomy is high in Australia, well above the OECD average; it is professional autonomy that is uniformly necessary across the nation.

While the role of the Commonwealth has expanded over the last 50 years (Caldwell, 2022b), it is likely that expectations for a national approach with implementation by all are too high. States and territories should act more like unitary states. Almost all of the high-performing countries are unitary states. System personnel should immerse themselves to a greater extent in

what occurs in schools and in building the capacity of schools. Securing a high level of alignment between system expectations and what occurs in schools is an important priority and should appear prominently in the next NSRA. At the same time systems should back off dysfunctional compliance requirements and allow an innovation culture to flourish.

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