AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL

Representing parents with children attending non-government schools to achieve choice, quality, equity and voice.

SUBMISSION

NATIONAL EVIDENCE BASE INQUIRY DRAFT REPORT

The Australian Parents Council (APC) represents the interests of parents with children in non-government schools, and Australia's parent population more generally. These interests extend down to early childhood learning and development, and up to post-school transitions.

Context of the Australian Parents Council's Response

The inquiry into the further development of our national early education and schooling evidence base is timely. A substantial reform agenda has been implemented over the past eight years with mixed results. As the Commission notes, increased funding, large-scale accountability and transparency initiatives, and the deliberate (APC considers misguided) spurring of competition between schools have not produced the anticipated improvements in education outcomes for Australian students overall.

APC notes the impetus from various quarters to now focus on micro-level reforms, most particularly through the identification and dissemination of 'what works' in terms of teaching practice at the classroom level. We also note the emphasis on providing decision makers at all levels in the education system with fit for purpose data and robust evidence to drive improvement.

APC points to the recognition of parent engagement as a core component of high equity-high quality schooling systems (Australia & Gonski, 2011), and its recent inclusion in the Australian Government's policy platform.

APC is of the view that parent engagement – specifically conceptualised in terms of parent/family actions, attitudes and behaviours that have significant positive effects on young Australians' learning/schooling experiences and outcomes – unjustifiably continues to be downplayed in policy and evidence-informed practice contexts. We contend that parent engagement (in learning) must be fully positioned in education policy and micro-level reform initiatives.

In proposing a framework to improve evidence-based education policy and multi-level decision-making, the Australian Parents Council respectfully requests that the Commission looks further at:

1. Assumptions and directions relating to the policy-preferred school/education effectiveness (SE/EE) and school improvement paradigms.

2. The conceptualisation and treatment of parental engagement as an 'external influence'.

3. The positioning of parents as decision-makers.

Assumptions and Directions Relating to Policy Preferred Paradigms

The draft report notes that many factors influence development and learning, and classifies these as *within-school influences* and *external influences*. Citing a significant report commissioned by the Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012), the Commission states

'studies of student achievement suggest that [influences external to the education system] could make a larger contribution to students' education outcomes than do school factors'.

APC considers it erroneous to say 'could' given consistent findings from effectiveness and other research, and questions the alacrity with which the report then adopts the view that micro-level reforms should essentially focus on classroom teaching practices.

The draft report creates the case thus:

> *Research has found that only a small share (typically about 20 per cent) of variation in individual student outcomes is explained by differences between schools. The majority (about 80 percent) is explained by differences between students within schools. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of evidence suggesting that teachers have the greatest impact on student performance outside of students' own characteristics, and that directing attention to higher quality teaching can have large positive effects on outcomes across the board. All of this suggests that looking within the classroom, particularly at teaching practices, can be more effective at providing insights into how to improve education outcomes across schools and students* (p. 7).
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> *Crucially, most of the variation in student outcomes, in countries such as Australia, is attributable to variation between individual students ('within school' rather than 'between-school' variation) (Masters, 2016). Evidence points to teacher quality as the key driver of this student-level variation in outcomes (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). In view of this, policy makers are increasingly turning to a closer examination of the role of evaluation in identifying and implementing 'what works best' to improve outcomes and achieve learning objectives at the classroom level (OECD, 2013c) (p. 61).*
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> *Research has generally found that only a small share (typically about 20 per cent) of variation in education outcomes is explained by differences between schools. The majority (about 80 per cent) is explained by differences within schools … Differences within schools include differences in student characteristics as well as differences in teachers and teaching practices. Research has shown that there are large differences in teacher effectiveness within schools (Hanushek, 2016). Hattie (2003) has suggested that teachers have the greatest impact on student performance outside of students' own characteristics, and that directing attention to higher quality teaching can have large positive effects on outcomes across the board (p. 95- 96).*

APC observes that the 'yes but let's move on' treatment of student characteristics typifies policy and professional paradigms that derive from selective attention to and application of SE/EE and school improvement theory and research. We urge the Commission to further interrogate its assumptions and proposed directions in this respect.

We refer the Commission back to Emerson et al. (2012, p. 20 -25) and to Reynolds, Sammons, De Fraine, Townsend and Van Damme (2011) and, in so doing, note:

1. The influence of schools on student achievement has been extensively investigated in landmark school effectiveness (Coleman, 1966; Plowden, 1967) and other research. Taking into account

conceptual and methodological tangles, Teddlie, Reynolds and Sammon (2000) report school effects as being in the order of 8 – 15%. In crude terms, this means teachers potentially exert 'the most significant influence' on student achievement within an influence sphere of approx. 8-15%.

2. It is generally acknowledged that student characteristics explain 60% or more of achievement, with methodological decisions (e.g. unit of analysis) producing somewhat higher or lower estimates of both 'non school' (or beyond school) and 'school' effect sizes.

   Non-school factors include student/family background variables like SES status, parent education levels (especially those of mothers), Indigeneity and ethnicity which are well recognised in education and health policy.

   However, as Emerson et al. (2012) summarise, the constellation of non school factors also includes particular aspects of parenting and parent engagement that have been consistently and strongly correlated with positive and significant improvements in students' social, behavioural and academic outcomes, and which can be constructively supported and influenced by public policy settings.

   Emerson et al. (2012) also provide highly relevant, alternative commentary on Hattie's (2009) findings regarding the relative influence on student achievement of indicators in six domains (student, home, school, teacher, curricula, teaching approach).

3. At the system level, parent engagement (however defined) may be conceptualised as an 'external factor' – a student/family variable that is beyond the control of schools. But in reality, this is not so. Schools, teachers, policy makers and other invested stakeholders have considerable capacity to support, influence and facilitate effective parent engagement in young Australians' formal schooling and informal learning. Parent engagement, including through the committed development of home-school partnerships focused on learning should be considered core school/teacher practice.

4. Emerson et al. (2012) concluded from the best available evidence that parent engagement (in learning) improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, and that the progress of policy and practice in this domain is important, if not essential, to Australian education reform. In a subsequent paper, Emerson, Fox and Fear further observed that without a concomitant effort in the parent engagement domain, the magnitude of change expected from other schooling reforms may well not be achieved (Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau, 2012).

5. School effectiveness and improvement research has identified parent partnerships/participation as a characteristic of highly effective/high performing schools. The expert panel chaired by David Gonski also provided considered opinion on this in the *Review of Funding for Schooling* (Australia & Gonski, 2011).

An evaluation by Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) identified nine global factors (correlates) of school-level effectiveness. One was parent participation, with the sub-components defined as the buffering of negative influence and the promotion of positive interactions. Bergeson (2007) references this global factor as 'a high level of parent and community involvement', observing that 'high performing schools intentionally link family involvement strategies to academic goals. They make family involvement part of their school improvement plan and develop collaborative relationships among teachers, parents and the community'. Masters (2015) is less explicit but has associated the strategic development of partnerships with parents with highly effective schools, as have other researchers (though conceptualisations as to the purpose and character of parent or home-school partnerships vary).

The final report of the *Review of Funding for Schooling* (Australia & Gonski, 2011) outlines the expert panel's considered views on the key components of a high equity – high quality schooling system. Parent engagement is one of these.

6. Reynolds et al. (2011) provide a useful perspective on EER, presciently noting this 'repeatedly now argues for the primacy of teacher effects' (p. 217) and a commensurate emphasis on 'what works'. Shorthand points include that EER is still an infant discipline and that correlations rather than causalities abound.

The Australian Parents Council appreciates that the Commission has expanded its initial focus from national-level data to a broader consideration of how sound evidence might drive improvements in young Australians' education outcomes (and learning experiences). We offer the above comments to encourage deeper consideration of the Commission's 'yes but let's move on' logic, and thus the proposed compass points for policy settings and implementation of a bottom-up approach to evidence collection and creation.

For an insightful policy perspective, which also addresses data driven education reform and the transformation of low performing schools including through data sharing, we refer the Commission to a Harvard Family Research Project paper (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010).

Conceptualisation and Treatment of Parent Engagement

The Australian Parents Council considers that parent engagement (in learning) must feature as a core, integrated component of micro-level reform.

The Commission notes the inclusion of parent engagement in the Australian Government's plan for an effective education system, it being one of four pillars in the StudentsFirst policy platform (p. 179). It also references some participant inputs about data needs beyond the background information included in education data sets or potentially accessible through data linkages (p. 92), and acknowledges data gaps regarding the nature of parents' engagement and home learning environments (p. 14).

In this latter context, the Commission again emphasises that 'research evidence generally suggests that the type of external influence included in research that makes the largest contribution to student outcomes is socioeconomic status … Although other external influences have been associated with education outcomes, their contributions to variation in education outcomes tends to be smaller (p. 92-93).

We offer a number of comments for consideration and references for review.

7. As Emerson et al. (2012) summarise, parent engagement in children's learning (at home, in schools and in the community) is conceptually different from parent involvement in schools (e.g. serving on boards, as volunteers and attending events). The demonstrated positive and significant effects on academic, behavioural and social outcomes derive from parent engagement in learning (although involvement can also produce benefits for young students).

8. Socioeconomic status (low) mediates the effects of parent engagement (which schools can encourage and facilitate including through home-school partnership approaches linked to learning) but engagement still has a significant effect. This has been demonstrated consistently.

9. Emerson et al. (2012) note that research and exemplary practice reveal 'it is all but impossible to separate the interests and influences of educators, parents and other education partners on student achievement, attitudes and behaviors'. Citing Epstein and Sheldon (2006), they further emphasise that although it is difficult to examine more than one area at a time, 'it is critical for researchers to recognise the simultaneous and cumulative effects of home, school and community' (p. 20-21).

   The demonstration of causality is a hallmark of quantitative research and a researcher's dream. However, it must be recognised that much education effectiveness, school improvement and school autonomy research is characterised by correlational findings, as is parent engagement research. The evidence in support of the effects of parent engagement is more than sufficient to warrant its embedment in Australian schooling policy and micro reform efforts. We refer the Commission to Desforges (2003), Henderson and Mapp (2002), Houtenville and Conway (2008), Jeynes (2005, 2007, 2013) and Australian Parents Council (2009).

Positioning of Parents as Decision-makers

At one point, the draft report clearly and correctly acknowledges that 'data and evidence are used by decision-makers across the education system, including children and young people and their families' (p. 48). However, this recognition is not routinely evident throughout the report. For example:

> *An effective evidence base supports decision makers at al levels of the education system (including national, jurisdictional, school, early childhood education and care service, and teacher levels) to make informed choices about programs, policies and practices (p. 47).*
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> *Effective evaluation requires a rigorous, systematic approach, with strategic policy direction and collaboration between researchers, schools, ECEC services and teachers (p. 62).*

> *Finally, evaluation requires that key research findings are summarised and reported to inform decisions at the classroom and school leadership level … (p. 64) [APC note: requires referencing of school community at the minimum to inform and engage parents, families and communities and support and empower knowledge mobilisation and capacity building].*
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> *Even the highest-quality evidence based on the most rigorous analysis cannot improve education outcomes if it does not find its way into classroom practices in schools and ECEC services (p. 65) [APC note: and into school culture, continuous improvement and partnership change efforts].*
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> *Dissemination involves distilling evidence from monitoring and evaluation and communicating and sharing this evidence in a usable form with relevant decision makers, particularly teachers and school leaders (p. 66).*
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> *Dissemination of evidence can take a variety of forms such as … through the networks of schools and ECEC providers (p. 66) [APC note: also through national parent organisations and networks].*
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> *[In relation to an institution to oversee priority research projects] The proposed governance arrangements of the bottom-up institutional role are as follows … it would enable direct involvement by non-government schools and ECEC services (p. 20) [APC note: and peak parent organisations?]*
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> *[In relation to the same organisation] The institution would be responsible for the following functions … translating research findings into guidelines and sharing them with schools, ECEC services, teachers and policy makers (p. 20).*

Separate to how parents are irregularly recognised as decision-makers throughout the draft report, we point the Commission to Weiss, Lopez and Stark (2011). This paper focuses on the sharing of individualised and aggregated student data to improve family engagement and teacher-parent communications, and provides policy recommendations to support trends relating to 21st century learning and the role of technology. Relevant to the current inquiry, the authors note:

> A data pathway follows the progress of children from early childhood through high school, college and career. This is a challenging proposition as data systems across schools, early childhood programs and youth-serving organisations are different: states and districts collect different types of information; privacy and confidentiality issues must be addressed; and resources are needed to do the work right. However the evidence is clear: if we are going to use data systems to drive decision-making and reform, engaging families in this process and looking at data and outcomes over time is critical to its success (p. 3).

Finally, it is significant that the Commission has identified parent engagement as a gap, and the Australian Parents Council hopes this will provide much needed impetus.

Ms Caz Bosch MAPS
President

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