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ASSOCIATION OF HEADS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS OF AUSTRALIA

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National Education Evidence Base
Productivity Commission
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MELBOURNE VIC 8003

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Response to the National Education Evidence Base Draft Report

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) submitted to the initial consultation phase of the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the national education evidence base.

In that submission we addressed developments in school-level data collection on student achievement and the issue of creating a Unique Student Identifier for all school students. We further suggested some principles that might be applied to the development of a 'long term vision for educational data holdings' or any proposed framework to guide data collection, access and use.

It is not our intention in this response to revisit our recommendations. Rather, we aim to interrogate assumptions informing key points made in the Draft Report. Where possible, we also comment on the possible impact on school educators of some of the Productivity Commission's recommendations, should they be implemented.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND ITS MEASUREMENT

The Draft Report makes clear that the Productivity Commission's recommendations and positions hinge on the proposition that the national education evidence base should support the 'overarching policy objective' of improving student outcomes.

The Commission differentiates between 'data' and 'evidence' (page 48ff), and further notes in the Draft Report:

> […] top-down monitoring and benchmarking alone are insufficient to drive improvements in education outcomes. Measuring and monitoring performance does not automatically lead to insights as to what policy and practice can do to help students to learn better, teachers to teach better, and schools to operate more effectively. (Page 6)

To support improved student outcomes, the Commission proposes that the national education evidence base should have two capabilities:

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About AHISA

The primary object of AHISA is to optimise the opportunity for the education and welfare of Australia's young people through the maintenance of collegiality and high standards of professional practice and conduct amongst its members.

The membership of AHISA Ltd comprises principals of 410 independent schools with a collective enrolment of some 418,000 students, representing 11.2 per cent of total Australian school enrolments and 20 per cent of Australia's total Year 12 enrolment. AHISA's members lead a collective workforce of some 40,000 teachers and 25,000 support staff.

Some 80 per cent of AHISA's members' schools provide for early childhood education and care through early learning centres.

- a 'top-down' capability, for monitoring, benchmarking and assessing the performance of the education system at all levels in achieving stated objectives, promoting transparency and accountability, and informing resource allocation; and
- a 'bottom-up' capability that uses data to evaluate effectiveness of education policies, programs and teaching practices, enabling systematic identification of ways to improve outcomes in schools. (Page 47)

The Commission sees these capabilities as expressed in four interconnected processes (page 5):

1. Monitoring of performance
2. Evaluation of 'what works best'
3. Dissemination of evidence
4. Application of that evidence by educators and policy makers.

AHISA supports many of the points made by the Productivity Commission in relation to creating, disseminating and applying 'high-quality evidence' and acknowledges that there may be useful interconnections made between NAPLAN and other standardised testing data and the identification of education research priorities. However, AHISA is concerned by aspects of the Commission's recommendation that these interconnections should be formally linked through a new national Education Agreement and establishment of an institution to progress the functions of such an Agreement (page 195). AHISA believes this model requires further investigation before it is offered as a recommendation to governments, for the reasons outlined below.

a. The problem of political interventions

The potential for 'what works' (a concept that presents its own difficulties, which we discuss further below) to become mandated classroom practice under the model proposed by the Productivity Commission is alarming. Nation-wide adoption of A to E reporting on student achievement – a recent and unhappy example of the imposition of political will on schools – was introduced by the federal government as a condition of its funding to schools, a simple but effective form of mandate. AHISA is concerned that formalising connections between data collected for the purposes of

monitoring schools, the direction of education research and the prosecution of application of any resulting 'evidence' of that research, could be used to support similar political impositions on schools. Further, if such was the result, we are concerned that the model would achieve little more than a self-fulfilling cycle of political expediency.

It is AHISA's view that identifying the foci of research in education, including evaluation of 'what works best', and the dissemination and application of that 'evidence', can be made to work as an effective cyclical model without formal links to a national standardised testing program. Indeed, the cycle of research or evaluation, dissemination and application is already effectively in operation in various forms and at various levels of practice in school education, including in schools and classrooms – with and without the support of academic researchers.

In its first submission AHISA noted schools' engagement in action research. Less formal evaluation of classroom practice is also evident, with some Australian schools using tools such as *The DIY Evaluation Guide* developed for the UK's Education Endowment Foundation by Durham University.[1] Professional learning networks on Twitter and other social media, and professional exchange at TeachMeets, conferences and seminars – such as the popular 'ignite' sessions at AHISA's own conferences – and through publications such as AHISA's free-to-view journal, *Independence*, are just some forms of the national and international collaboration that is already occurring within Australia's teaching profession and between schools. None of these exciting, collaborative ventures has been mandated by government. As far as AHISA is aware, only TeachMeet Sydney has received direct government funding, via AITSL's Innovation Grants Project.[2] Yet 'collective teacher efficacy' was ranked as second only to 'teacher estimates of achievement' in effect on student achievement by Professor John Hattie in 2015.[3]

To recognise and foster the professionalism of school educators and the autonomy of schools that helps such ventures flourish must be an aim of any model in which school performance monitoring is linked to the application of government-initiated education research in schools.

We make further reference to the importance of school autonomy and teacher agency below.

b. What is 'evidence of what works'?

The term 'evidence of what works' has moved fast into the lexicon of Australian political rhetoric in relation to government policy making in school education. It is therefore not surprising that this concept informs recommendations in the National Education Evidence Base Draft Report. However, it is important to recognise that elements of this concept – like so many concepts and practices in education – are highly contestable. Even the Australian Curriculum, although mandated for adoption nationally, is still contested within the sector and in public debate. Similarly, the effect size of teaching quality on student learning is also contested, with at least one researcher demonstrating that the effect of a 'better' curriculum can be greater.[4]

While research into the effects on student achievement of various pedagogies is valuable to educators, that value is contextual, not absolute. Research by its nature must engage with past or current practice, and must therefore be understood as evidence of 'what works' with one cohort of students at one point in time. However, school education is undergoing dynamic reshaping as a

result of rapid technological development; it is a 'disrupted' sector, and must also adapt to rapid social change. Critically, schools more than ever need freedom to innovate and explore new – and therefore untested – pedagogies.

AHISA recognises and agrees that there is great value in disseminating evidence of 'what works', but we argue that this can only be fully leveraged if schools have autonomy over the practices they choose to adopt or adapt. If political will locks schools into practices that may have a short shelf life or which are less effective for some students, 'evidence of what works' – no matter how well researched – is unlikely to achieve the student gains assumed by the Productivity Commission.

c. Standardised testing and 'evidence of what works'

Standardised testing is a form of summative assessment (typically used for grading students or for school accountability purposes). For learning purposes in the classroom context, teachers primarily use formative assessment. While summative assessments that test student mastery of concepts and content (such as term tests) are an essential tool in the teaching and learning process, it is formative assessment that helps teachers adjust classroom practice to suit students' immediate learning needs.

As mentioned in our first submission to the Commission's inquiry, many schools are successfully adapting NAPLAN data for formative assessment purposes, for example by using it to triangulate student data obtained from other testing regimes. That is, even though it could be argued that NAPLAN data is not the best source of guidance for effective classroom practice, it can contribute to the development of good practice. But it is vitally important to note that the locus of this process is at the school and classroom level. AHISA would be concerned if the Productivity Commission's recommendations, should they be adopted, were to result in an attempt to replace the professionalism and agency of educators rather than support them.

Academic opinion arising in the United States, which is questioning the effects of responses to standardised testing results, further suggests that interrogation and investigation of the Productivity Commission's rationale for its recommended model is warranted prior to the model's adoption.

The recently released analysis of reading results in standardised testing regimes in the United States and France by influential American educator, Emeritus Professor E.D. Hirsch Jr, shows that not only are national outcomes on standardised tests flat lining but that in the United States individual student achievement in reading is declining as students progress through school.[5]

Hirsch suggests it is standardised tests themselves that are contributing to the nugatory or depressed results for reading in the United States because these tests are skills-based rather than linked to a curriculum – and interventions to remedy achievement gaps identified by such tests tend to be skills-based as well. That is, the responses proved not to be saving interventions but reinforcement of a failed concept. He goes on to demonstrate why skills-based instruction cannot produce the same reading competencies as content-based learning and concludes:

> By an iron law of unintended consequences, the low scores of seventeen-year olds were probably caused by misguided, time-consuming efforts to raise scores. (Page 19)

Hirsch has long argued for knowledge acquisition as a key function of school education and his interpretation of standardised test data is certainly influenced by this view. Even so, Hirsch's analysis is a timely warning that Australia should be cautious before giving standardised testing further influence over the spend of Australia's research dollar or government education policy making if the intent is to mandate classroom practice.

The concept of linking standardised testing to classroom practice via a research program on 'what works' certainly demands further investigation. As Hirsch points out, 'what works' in regards to skill development may lead to an unintended decline in the development of understanding and therefore student achievement by senior secondary school age. Clearly there are lessons we must learn – and learn quickly – from nations that are now evaluating the impact of responses to the results of standardised testing regimes.

d. The practice of blaming and the rhetoric of improving student achievement

Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of North Texas, Mark Hlavacik, recently described the role of public blaming in the rhetoric of education reform in the United States. He notes:

> Arguments for reform in the era of achievement begin by addressing the nagging question: Who or what is to blame for the unacceptable state of America's public schools?[6]

As can be seen from the key points list in the Commission's Draft Report, the inference of the Report and its recommendations is that a lack of 'evidence' of 'what works' or lack of appropriate dissemination and application of the evidence of what works are contributing to the apparent flat-lining of Australian students' results in national and international standardised tests. In other words, schools are at fault: teachers are using the wrong pedagogies because they are ill informed and the solution is to link analysis of NAPLAN data more directly to education research on 'what works' and encourage its application to classroom practice.

AHISA has attempted to illustrate above that, while such an approach may have political currency, it should not be assumed that it will achieve the desired improvement in student achievement.

Hirsch notes that teacher quality has become a topical issue in what he describes as the 'scapegoating of teachers'. He suggests this may be due to 'reform fatigue' or 'desperation':

> We are blaming teachers because of our disappointments with the results of our reforms.[7]

Hlavacik points out the paradox that 'although the targets of blame are said to be at fault, they are simultaneously accorded difference-making agency'.

These views offer a context for evaluating the key points and recommendations set out in the Productivity Commission's Draft Report and the assumptions that inform them. They are also a useful reminder that, whatever model is finally recommended by the Commission, schools will be accorded difference-making agency either by default or design.

AHISA suggests that before the Productivity Commissions finalises its recommendations on the national education evidence base it reviews the assumptions at play in its Draft Report and reviews whether its recommendations purposely accord greater agency to schools.

At the very least, if it is to make a final recommendation that a national education research body be instituted, the Commission should consider recommending the inclusion of a nominee of the four national principals' associations on the board of governors of such an institution. AHISA notes that the Commission's Draft Report recommends that the institution would 'enable direct involvement by non-government schools and ECEC services' (page 197); however, AHISA believes the inclusion of school instructional leaders would provide an invaluable and practical contribution to the deliberations of such an institution and its governance.

AHISA would welcome questions from the Commission on this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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Further inquiries may be addressed to AHISA's Chief Executive Officer, Ms Beth Blackwood; telephone (02) 6247 7300; email ceo@ahisa.edu.au.

NOTES

[1] See https://v1.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/EEF_DIY_Evaluation_Guide_(2013).pdf

[2] See http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/innovation_grants_report.pdf?sfvrsn=2

[3] 'Hattie Ranking: 195 Influences And Effect Sizes Related To Student Achievement', published by Visible Learning: http://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/

[4] Hirsch E D (2016) *Why knowledge matters: Rescuing our children from failed educational theories*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press; page 39.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hlavacik M (2016) *Assigning blame: The rhetoric of education reform.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press; pages 3-4.

[7] Hirsch, op cit; page 35.