Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations—References Committee
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Dear Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into Teaching and Learning (Maximising Our Investment in Australian Schools)*

I have commented below on some of the areas being reviewed.

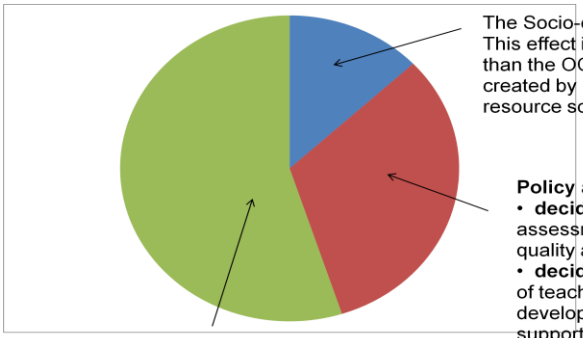
(a) the effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools

Classroom practice in its wider context

Teachers derive their practice from their commitment to children and from their training and ongoing development. The effectiveness of practice is also substantially supported - or handicapped - by the individual and combined capacity of the students in each classroom. Teachers, classrooms and schools are critical to student success, but they are not the only influence on student achievement. Australian schools contribute around one-third – and possibly less – to student achievement as measured in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

There is much more to student achievement than test scores created by PISA or NAPLAN, but it is clear that the combined impact of the socio-economic status (SES)[i] of the family and the SES of the school is substantial.

What contributes to student achievement in Australia?



What matters and who decides?

Classroom practice is substantially impacted by a range of things, some positive, supportive and well-researched – but others which can be intrusive, ephemeral, distracting and too often dictated by political rather than educational priorities. As the above graph suggests, what goes on in classrooms is also driven by policy and practice determined outside the school as well as by decisions made at the school level.

Classroom practice should be driven by evidence, but it doesn't always happen that way. This is easily illustrated. Listed below are some of the practices mentioned in research analysed Professor John Hattie. His work is not without its critics, but is useful to draw broad conclusions about the relative effectiveness of various practices. Which practices below might be ranked quite highly by Hattie and which might not?

1. Group students by ability
2. Class management
3. External testing
4. Student self-reported grades
5. Computer-assisted instruction
6. Teacher clarity
7. Homework
8. Problem-solving teaching
9. Study skills
10. Feedback

They all have some place, and a full appraisal would need to include Hattie's notes and caveats. But in general Hattie's analysis indicates that the odd-numbered practices in the list are not as effective - and the even numbered practices are considered by researchers to be more effective.

There is another difference: the odd numbered strategies are (hopefully) more likely to be the subject of teacher development programs, but the even numbered strategies – including testing, use of computers, homework - are more visible in the interventions and programs preferred by governments.

One implication is that, as long as meaningful accountability exists, decisions about practice should be left to the profession. The effectiveness of many government interventions is often questionable, including in such areas as My School, assessment and reporting, and more fundamentally in the way we provide and support schools. The current Inquiry may seek to identify successful practice, but is perhaps better advised to ensure that the profession is properly supported to do this – and that evidence is a strong driver of their decisions.

The need to do some things differently

But the Inquiry can still make recommendations which will have the effect of improving classroom practice. Good classroom practice is supported by sound teacher training and ongoing development. But it is also impacted by things such as organisation of teaching across the school, quality of leadership, family and community support and more.

The organisation of teaching and learning has a substantial impact, especially in secondary schools where for decades students have progressed lock-step from year to year, their learning compartmentalised into subjects – with curriculum and achievement hurdles imposed from outside the school.

Most students achieve despite this industrial era approach to learning, but significant numbers don't. They are switching off school and underachieving – and appear in statistics about early leavers, unemployment, welfare dependency and physical/mental health problems. They represent a substantial cost to the wider community, one which could be reduced by greater investment in school structures and classroom practices which re-engage young people in learning and achieving. Schools do innovate in teaching and learning, but it is far more limited and difficult than it should be.

Much of this innovation is supported by philanthropic organisations. Low SES schools in particular have adopted support programs, especially in such areas as student well-being and school-to-work transition, grafted onto the school.

Some of these programs are outstanding. Hands on Learning[ii], is a small Victorian program which takes students out of class for one day each week and placed with an artisan-teacher with a substantial mentoring role. The students operate in small groups, creating and completing projects in the school and in the community. The immediate return is in their increased motivation to do well in other areas at school. A report on the program completed by Deloitte shows that this is an investment on which the return is twelvefold over a longer period of time.[iii]

What is harder to achieve, but more important, are programs which will impact on the culture of the school and substantially improve teaching and learning. A model which impacts directly on classroom practice is Big Picture learning[iv] now found in three dozen schools across Australia. Its longer internships are closely linked with each student's interests and these are developed into a learning plan undertaken at school.

The Big Picture model[v] sees groups of 15 students with one teacher/advisor over the final four years of secondary school – a radical departure from the conventional classroom. It is particularly successful at creating links between students, teachers, parents and mentors – in effect teaching one student at a time in a community of learners. And it works, including for Indigenous students, and in ways which are increasingly being researched and noticed across Australia.

What such programs have in common is that they are funded by both school authorities and the philanthropic sector. But the not-for-profit organisations which support the programs constantly struggle to attract sufficient funding. The experience of these schools shows that authentic and sustainable change that reaches into classrooms is long term and difficult – and all too often done on a shoestring.

They also illustrate that this type of school reform doesn't owe much to the reform imposed by governments, improved school attendance, retention and achievement points to their success. Such programs represent a stark policy choice: we invest now in these programs and students, or we face much higher social and economic costs later on.

(b) the structure and governance of school administration - local and central - and its impact on teaching and learning

At first sight it would seem that the innovative approaches mentioned above would be enhanced by greater local control over some school inputs (such as staff and financial resources) and management. But the Big Picture schools in Australia have been substantially developed in relatively centralised State systems. What they do need is some flexibility, but they also greater school control over curriculum, assessment and reporting.

It is not the intent of this submission to investigate the importance of the structure and governance of school administration - beyond saying that the evidence that it makes any significant difference to classroom practice is not at all strong. Good teaching is what matters and it can be found in any school, any system.

The reports from the PISA do say that local management of schools tends to be associated with high school-system performance.[vi] But it is not a significant factor and PISA doesn't show any significant link between autonomy and student achievement in Australia.[vii] Perhaps the parents who are often claimed to welcome autonomy know this: recent polling shows that they don't rank school autonomy as a priority.[viii]

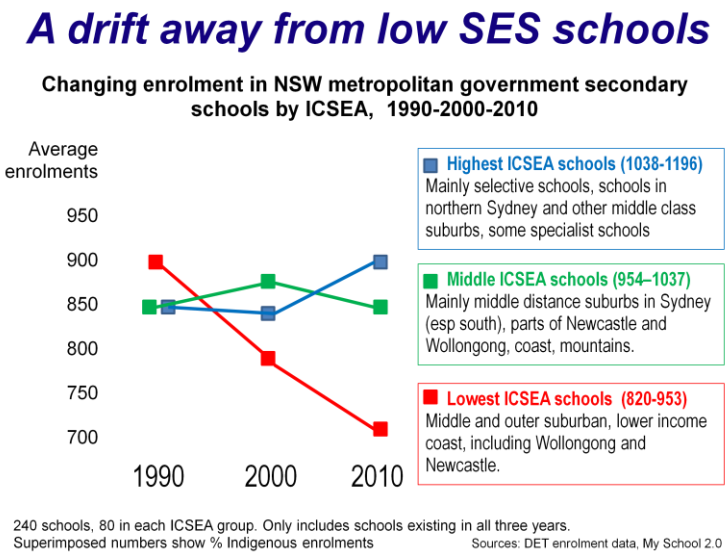
Years of exhaustive research into locally-managed charter schools in the United States finds that they are little different to mainstream public schools – and where there is an edge for charter schools it is usually down to selectivity in enrolments. A 2013 report[ix] into autonomous academies being rolled out in England, notes that they need to be more open in enrolment, that half require improvement in teaching and learning – and that greater cooperation between schools is the key to improvement.

Our moves towards autonomy will accentuate the social and academic gaps between schools created by unproductive competition, further ensuring that the best resources, especially quality teachers and engaged students, are unevenly distributed. If every school chooses all its own teachers the most experienced will gravitate to the schools with the more valued location, perceived easier to teach students and higher salaries. Some independent public schools will join their private counterparts in applying both overt and covert enrolment discriminators, worsening the complex equity problems mentioned in the next section and revealed by the Gonski review. Making schools more autonomous is an inadequate solution looking for an ill-defined problem.

(c) the influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive a quality education

It is likely that most submissions to this Inquiry will stress the important contribution made by parents when they are closely associated with their children's classrooms. The Big Picture model mentioned above gives parents no option: they must attend school as part of the assessment of each student. This positive engagement of parents with the school is part of the reason for measurable improvements in student engagement in those schools.

Parents will always want to maximise the opportunities for their own children. But the way schools are provided and resourced in Australia means that the collective decisions of families is having a substantial and regressive impact on equity in student achievement. There is substantial evidence that family choice of schools is shifting students out of low SES schools into high SES schools. Most of the latter are private schools but high SES government schools also have increased enrolments. This is well-researched and the graph below shows enrolment trends in metropolitan NSW.



Only some people have choice of schools: they must be able to pay school fees, access transport, relocate home, pass a number of tests, present at interview, access the networks and/or press the required buttons. The vision of comparable school choice for all, with every family able to consult a website, weigh up the options and jump through the required hoops is far from reality.

What drives school choice for those who have it? What we know from research is that the two drivers for parents are, in order, the social profile of the enrolment of the school being sought, closely followed by the achievement level of its students.[x] The two are obviously linked but taken together they help explain the enrolment drift to higher SES schools.

The impact of choice on schools

There are a host of arguments about this drift, especially the shift from public to private schools, spawning doubtful solutions such as greater autonomy for public schools to make them more 'private'. But the way we provide and fund schools, with some open to all and others able to discriminate (especially through fees), was always going to create a social and academic divide between schools. That's why the New Zealanders, for example, chose in 1975 not to do what we have done.

What we have done is increase the density of advantaged students in advantaged schools. Again this is not about blaming parents, why wouldn't they seek to advantage their own children? But the flipside is that those without choice, the most disadvantaged, are in schools and classrooms with a higher density of other disadvantaged children. And it impacts on their opportunities and achievement. According to the Australian Council for Educational Research's report on PISA 2009,

> "Regardless of their own socioeconomic background, students attending schools in which the average socioeconomic background is high tend to perform better than if they are enrolled in a school with below average socioeconomic intake."[xi]

Local research on this is even more pointed. Key research in New South Wales shows how the SES of schools, created by their enrolment, can lift or depress individual student achievement.[xii] This work has been replicated

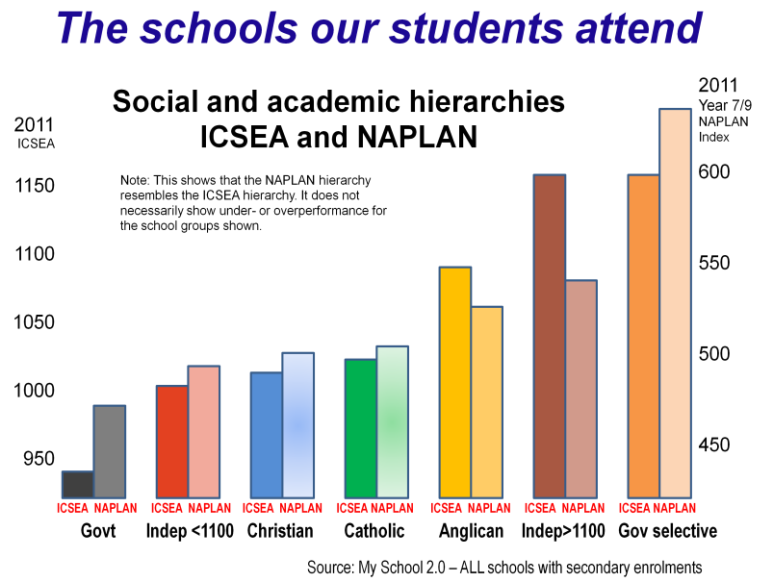
in Victoria.[xiii] The evidence was carefully explained in the research carried out by the Nous Group[xiv] for the Gonski review and was certainly noticed by the review panel.

Students who are engaged and capable bring prior learning, family education, networks and know-how to their school. Depending on who they enrol, schools and their classrooms gradually look and feel different in things such as resources, student discipline and time on task, number and type of welfare issues, teacher qualifications and expectations, curriculum, achievement culture and more. Increasing the density of disadvantaged students in low SES schools has a compounding impact in key areas such as school curriculum offerings and access, and the experience and expertise of teachers.

The measurable result of all this, as I have also researched and published[xv], is that low SES schools have a diminishing share of high achievers. In just eight years (2003-2011) the lowest SES schools in provincial Victoria have lost around 30% of their share of high VCE scores. This affect is discernible for both government and non-government schools. We don't know if they are good or bad schools, but parents with the means to do so have certainly sent their children elsewhere.

How do we lift the schools and classrooms facing such decline? Conventional solutions point to better school leaders and teachers, improved teacher development, school funding and salary rewards, stricter accountability - a mix of carrot and stick policies to lift low SES schools, but with mixed results. But the worsening extent and impact of our social and academic separation of learners will always limit the success of other interventions.

We also know from PISA that higher performing systems tend to be more comprehensive. Unfortunately we are now locked into a very hierarchical arrangement, especially of schools where student achievement aligns with the SES of each school's enrolment, as the graph below illustrates.



The best way for Australia to restore some balance to such a regressive system is to fund schools on need, with the schools that enrol the strugglers getting the most funding. This is the essence of the Gonski recommendations. But Gonski was told that no school was to lose funding - and now apparently all schools are to get more. Hence any equity impact of current government plans will be decades away, unless the school system is going to be flooded with money – most unlikely.

(d) the adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment
(e) factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system
(f) other related matters.
I haven't addressed these matters in this submission. Other respondents to the Inquiry will be better placed to comment.

Conclusion

The Committee can be assured that good teaching and learning can make a difference for any student. Experience over forty years as a teacher, principal, head of a peak group, author and researcher has taught me that.

In some ways the current Inquiry has a choice: it can play out Einstein's definition of insanity by revisiting the same things deemed by governments, school authorities and interest groups to be important – and expecting different results. Or it can revisit some of the matters raised in this submission but which are routinely consigned to the too-hard basket. We can expect limited progress in maximising our investment in Australian schools until they are addressed.

I am available to appear before the Committee if necessary.

Yours sincerely

Chris Bonnor AM

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[i] On the My School website this is more specifically referred to as socio-educational status,
[ii] http://handsonlearning.org.au/
[iii] http://handsonlearning.org.au/DAE_investing_in_preventing_ESL_via_HOL_September_2012.pdf
[iv] http://www.bigpicture.org.au/
[v] The author of this submission is on the Board of Big Picture Education Australia
[vi] http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2009-results-what-makes-a-school-successful_9789264091559-en
[vii] http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2012/s3451569.htm
[viii] http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/voters-back-more-funding-for-public-education-20130202-2dr60.html
[ix] https://dl.dropbox.com/u/6933673/130109%20-%20Academies%20Commission/Academies_commission_report%20FINAL%20web%20version.pdf
[x] OECD Education Working Papers 'Markets in Education – an analytical review of empirical research on market mechanisms in education' 21 October 2010. http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/markets-in-education_5km4pskmkr27-en
[xi] OECD 'Challenges for Australian Education: Results from PISA 2009' OECD 2009 Page 298 http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/PISA-2009-Report.pdf
[xii] https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/news-at-det/announcements/yr2011/schoolfundingreview/submission.pdf
[xiii] http://resources.news.com.au/files/2012/01/31/1226258/621517-aus-news-file-public-schools-in-australia-report.pdf
[xiv] http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/21550
[xv] http://inside.org.au/gonski-and-gillard-wont-fix-this-problem/