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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations – References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Senate Inquiry: Teaching and Learning - Maximising Our Investment in Australian Schools

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) representing the principals and heads of school in government, Catholic and independent primary schools in all states and territories welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. Our submission is based upon the professional opinions of primary school leaders, position papers of our association and reports of research projects undertaken on behalf of APPA.

APPA's response is organised under the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

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

Primary schools have developed complex and sophisticated approaches to teaching. Currently, resourcing is focused on the early years of schooling and the last few years of high school – the beginning and end of schooling – yet it is during the middle and upper years of primary schooling that the gap between the most and least successful learners widen. Closing this achievement gap, while simultaneously ensuring our highest achievers have results that match the best in the world, will be a resource intensive process. Furthermore, this challenge cannot be met by just a “more of the same” approach. APPA believes primary schools must be transformed in the following ways:

- Teaching and Learning Leadership and professional support must be provided to every teacher.
- Administrative support must be to a level which allows school leaders to focus on student learning and teacher professional development, and ensures that teachers can focus on teaching in the classroom.
- Early, focused and sustained intervention that addresses both learning and wellbeing must be available for every student in every school.
- Technology to enable 21st Century learning, and the skills to use and maintain that technology, must be present every school and classroom.

APPA argues that if Australian students at all levels are to achieve their potential then an increased investment in the primary years is essential.

There is considerable concern among primary school principals about the influence of NAPLAN testing on curriculum and pedagogy. APPA is increasingly anxious about the effects of this practice on students. Primary school principals have consistently reported to APPA that they observe negative impacts on student wellbeing, particularly from Year Three students, as a result of the pressure participation in NAPLAN testing places upon them. Their observations are supported by The Foundation for Young Australians which states, "Considerable evidence may be found in the international literature regarding the negative impact of high stakes testing on students' wellbeing."

APPA believes that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) should initiate a comprehensive research project drawing on the experiences of students to identify the impact of high stakes testing on student wellbeing. There is little doubt that when their wellbeing is threatened the chances of students reaching their academic potential are reduced.

APPA recommends that, when ACARA introduces online test formats and administrative procedures, teachers control when students undertake the tests. The removal of a single week of NAPLAN testing will dampen media interest in the annual event, lowering this aspect of the high stakes nature of the tests.

In APPA's view the current practice of supporting the significant number and growing proportion of students with disabilities in primary classrooms through the employment of non-teaching staff members poses serious questions at both school and system level. In 2007, teachers reported to APPA that, "Because these allocations are tied to individual student classifications, the staff are employed part-time and on contracts; a job ceases if a student moves to another school. As a result, individual non-teaching staff members may work with a number of students. Their availability is then subject to their timetables rather than the convenience of the students and the class teachers." (Angus et al 2007)

Generally, APPA believes inclusive classroom practices for students with disabilities are enhanced when specialist are available to provide classroom support, focused withdrawal activities, and full service units and schools. The capacity to vary the placement of students with disabilities as their needs change is vital for meaningful inclusion.

The Building the Education Revolution Program provided a significant improvement in the facilities available in Australian primary schools. However, the vast majority of our primary classrooms compromise the capacity of schools to implement 21st Century curricula. Particularly concerning are spatial restrictions that limit group learning, poor connectivity that limits the use of interactive technology and the absence or limited availability of climate control that exacerbates poor concentration and off-task behaviour.

APPA has research evidence from two major projects, *Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL)* and *Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC)*, highlighting that literacy learning practices in primary classrooms are more effective when principals have the necessary skills and repertoire of strategies to lead literacy teaching and learning in classrooms and the community. For all principals, the provision of professional learning which links leadership with literacy and numeracy teaching is essential if whole school improvements in classroom practices are to be achieved.

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

The discourse around the structure and governance of school administration in Australia today is confused by the number of ill-defined terms that are used interchangeably e.g. empowering local schools, school based management, principal autonomy, school autonomy, local governance, school boards, school governing bodies, etc. APPA always uses the term school autonomy when discussing governance options to indicate our

belief that the locus of control in autonomous schools must be situated in a group drawn from the school community and not from the position of principal.

APPA believes any process to increase autonomy in primary schools must be based on an understanding that the evidence shows a spectrum of valid governance and administrative structures can operate effectively and that this is the current reality in Australian primary schools. In school governance, one size does not fit all at the moment and it will not in the future.

Any process to increase school autonomy must focus on those areas where local decision making will improve student learning outcomes such as curriculum implementation, pedagogy, assessment, staffing mix and school improvement planning. The responsibility for managing human and physical resources, often expressed as the right to hire and fire, is beyond the capacity of many primary schools because of the limited administrative support available to them. This situation is exacerbated for small or remote schools.

Even in those primary schools where there is capacity and support for greater autonomy, APPA views professional development and training for school staff, particularly principals and community members, as prerequisites to any process to increase school autonomy. In all primary schools, greater school autonomy must be supported by an increase in resources to successfully meet new responsibilities.

In regard to central governance structures, APPA believes there is a role for external support and leadership. Indeed it is difficult for APPA to envisage a situation where small, remote challenging and hard to staff schools could operate without the support of central or regional structures. The 2010 *Targeting support for high-need students in primary schools* report, clearly articulates APPA's concerns regarding the way decisions are made centrally:

While education authorities subscribe to policies that promote 'personalised' education that takes account of the uniqueness of each student, in practice they are reliant on schools to put those policies into effect. From a position of some distance, education authorities tend to privilege the general over the particular, building on commonalities among students rather than differences and on abstractions rather than actualities. This is why targeting is so difficult. Given the diverse range of limiting factors the most likely outcome of any systemic innovation is that it will assist some students and not others.

Therefore, considerations should be given to extending the focus of the National Partnerships to include building the capacity of schools to solve their own problems in ways that complement the interventions developed centrally."

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

APPA supports the right of family members to advocate for their children's right to a quality education and encourages everyone to exercise that right whenever they believe they should. APPA also points out that primary school principals are advocates for each individual and every student. This complex role deserves wider recognition and support. APPA believes that all advocates for individual students achieve more when they act as partners.

This is most contentious when the child is a student with disabilities and the principal must consider whether the rights and needs of all students including the one being discussed can be met without unreasonable hardship. Schools and teachers cannot be the sole agents for providing a quality education in these circumstances. Systems, funding authorities and governments also have responsibilities to ensure access to appropriate and supportive learning environments.

Any expansion in the support provided by primary schools or increased complexity in implementing that support caused by changes such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme must be preceded by increased levels of resources.

(d) The adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment

The nature of the tools available to teachers is rapidly changing, as is the way we view an optimal learning environment. APPA has made numerous submissions to ACARA regarding the development of the Australian Curriculum. The online nature of the curriculum, the capacity for teachers to interact with the document in a number of formats and the presence of general capabilities and cross curricula perspectives all serve to make the Australian Curriculum a very useful document for teachers. The adoption and full implementation of the Australian Curriculum by all jurisdictions will be applauded by APPA. However, APPA is concerned that the curriculum is still too crowded and that this will force teachers to either disregard local content or compromise the integrity of the Australian Curriculum.

The concurrent development of an extensive bank of online support resources by Education Services Australia (ESA) in a format accessible to all Australian teachers is a very useful tool that will grow in importance and utility over time. To achieve maximum effectiveness, this bank of resources must include diagnostic and standardized test instruments at no cost to schools.

Primary teachers would welcome tools that facilitate the recording of professional judgments about the achievements of students in ways that allowed those interested in the effectiveness of schools and systems to evaluate their performance. APPA believes such tools would contribute to optimal learning environments by removing the need for high stakes NAPLAN testing. The tools and evaluations made from them could be verified by the application of sample tests.

(e) Factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system

APPA believes the accreditation of teacher preparation courses which encompass the requirement for early, substantial and ongoing practicums in classrooms is a vital factor in ensuring quality teachers are in every classroom. Such accreditation must fall within a nationally consistent framework while the nature of practicums must be considered and the quality of teacher educators improved. Both these latter challenges are made more difficult because there is essentially an unlimited entry into teacher preparation courses and, for a number of reasons (not least being the need to stay near part-time work locations), large numbers of student teachers seek practicum placements in those schools in reasonable proximity to universities.

The induction of beginning teachers into the profession is a concern for APPA. In no other profession does a neophyte have exactly the same workload and responsibilities on their first day at work as their most experienced colleagues. This situation can only be addressed in primary schools through the application of more appropriate staffing models.

The Teacher Professional Standards, the Principal Standard, the Teacher Performance and Development Framework and the Professional Learning Charter developed by AITSL are high quality resources available to all schools and teachers, and will inform the professional development of teachers for the foreseeable future. The process of certifying highly accomplished and lead teachers, and any future certification process for principals and school leaders, will have a positive effect on the profession. APPA recommends a strict separation of these processes from any career progression arrangements or performance management practices to maximise positive outcomes.

(f) Other related matters

APPA believes a number of other matters could have a very positive effect on teaching and learning in Australian primary schools:

- A nationally consistent starting age for students and a standardised nomenclature for year levels;
- The administration of the online NAPLAN tests, if they continue to be required, at a time chosen by the classroom teacher;

- Introduction of a school resourcing model based on a Schooling Resource Standard and need-based loading; and,
- Implementation of coordinated and coherent strategies to support schools teaching Indigenous students.

Finally, APPA recognises that the Australian Community is increasingly and acutely aware of the reforms occurring in school education today. In saying this, APPA has continued to work positively with government, education bodies and schools in relation to the various changes that have impacted upon primary school education and commits itself to maintaining this approach long into the future. The association has also maintained a research focus in its work and willingly shares this with individuals, interested bodies and studies.

APPA appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission and wishes the Senate Committee well in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Norm Hart
APPA President

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