

Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment - Education

**QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Budget Estimates 2014-2015**

Outcome 2 - Schools and Youth

Department of Education Question No. ED0323_15

Senator Wright asked on 4 June 2014, Hansard page 109

School autonomy research

Question

Senator WRIGHT: What is the evidence? We are interested to see it.

CHAIR: Senator Wright is quite right, you have placed this before. There is a good dialogue, but we are not going to resolve that this evening. Mr Cook, did you want to make a comment following—

Mr Cook: Obviously, research can mean different things to different people. I have evidence in front of me, the World Bank report. Key findings relating to autonomy from this report conclude that across countries where there is good performance in international student achievement tests they have school level autonomy, which also allows schools to allocate and manage resources.

CHAIR: I think it would be useful if you tabled that for the committee or provided it for the committee with the questions.

Ms Paul: Perhaps we will table some summaries. I think that is a good idea. We have actually been giving evidence for some years now that there is a range of research, anecdotal qualitative evidence and what you might call proxy measure evidence like, for example, the fact that in WA enrolments in public schools have gone up by 25 per cent, which is against national trend for government schools.

Answer

Research summaries

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2013, Evaluation of the Independent Public Schools Initiative

The Melbourne Graduate School of Education's evaluation of the Western Australian Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative found that "overall the story of the implementation of the IPS initiative is a positive one, with the concept of IPS being agreeable to most principals in Western Australia."

In addition, the research found:

- IPS principals overwhelmingly maintain that the initiative has considerably enhanced the functioning of their school, created the opportunity to assess more benefits and will lead to increased outcomes for the school community.
- IPS principals felt empowered and believed they were able to empower their teachers and to better cater to students' specific needs.

- With greater autonomy, principals argued that they were also more motivated and invested in the success of their schools.
- A frequently cited benefit was increased control over staffing, such that principals are able to recruit staff appropriate for their school context.
- IPS facilitated increased engagement with the school community and accountability via the school board, as well as increases in school profile, and school and community pride.
- The IPS initiative has, overall, had a positive effect on the public schools system by raising its profile and contributing to a sense of renewal and positive reform.

Jensen, B., Weidmann, B. and Farmer, J., 2013, *The myth of markets in school education*, Grattan Institute

The Grattan Institute report states that for 20 years some Australian school systems have been world leaders in giving schools more autonomy, and in trying to increase competition among them.

It finds that school leaders should be empowered to run their schools well, but empowerment means much more than autonomy. School leaders are often granted autonomy but lack the direction, support and development they need to lead key reforms in their schools.

The report summarises the key arguments in favour of autonomy:

1. Schools have local knowledge: School leaders know more about their school than a centralised authority does. They can therefore make more informed decisions.
2. Each school must respond to its specific circumstances: central policies designed for all schools may not be the best fit for individual schools. Avoiding bureaucratic processes may allow schools to be more responsive to solving their specific problems.
3. Autonomy allows schools to experiment and find what works: Innovation can increase as school leaders use their greater freedom to come up with new solutions and programs.
4. Using local information can lead to more efficient outcomes: school autonomy over budgets can lead to more specific expenditures that better suit each school, with fewer resources spent on non-essential items.
5. Schools will become more accountable for outcomes: autonomous leaders often feel more responsibility for school performance.
6. Autonomy should foster a sense of ownership in school management: greater school autonomy and accountability can engender a strong sense of ownership among staff and can increase innovation and effective reforms.

OECD, 2013, *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices (Volume IV)*, PISA, OECD Publishing

The OECD report found that: “Since the early 1980s, school reforms have focused on giving schools greater autonomy over a wide range of institutional operations in an effort to raise performance levels. More decision-making responsibility and accountability has devolved to school principals, and, in some cases, management

responsibilities have devolved to teachers or department heads. Schools have become increasingly responsible for curricular and instructional decisions as well as for managing financial and material resources and personnel. These reforms are adopted on the premise that schools themselves are more knowledgeable about their own needs and the most effective ways to allocate resources and design the curriculum so that they can better meet the needs of their students.”

The Productivity Commission, 2012, *Schools Workforce, Research Report*

The Productivity Commission report states that: “Increased school autonomy removes impediments that can prevent principals and other school leaders tailoring school operations to best meet the needs of the local communities they serve. It thus has the potential to improve student outcomes. The full realisation of these benefits is contingent on schools having the necessary:

- leadership capacity to manage the responsibilities delegated to them
- governance arrangements, which ensure that school leaders are held accountable for student outcomes, including:
 - sufficiently representative and competent school boards or councils
 - effective oversight from education departments, and regional and diocesan education offices
- funding and resources, as well as support on matters such as training, professional standards and curriculum, from education departments, regional and diocesan education offices, and other sectoral organisations.”

The report also makes policy-related findings, including on the importance of school leadership and autonomy in driving workforce innovation.

OECD, 2011, *PISA in Focus 9 – School autonomy and accountability: Are they related to student performance?*

The OECD paper states that PISA results suggest that, when autonomy and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance. The key findings are that:

- in countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better
- in countries where schools account for their results by posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to show better student performance than those with less autonomy, however, in countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, schools with greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to perform worse.

The paper states that greater autonomy in decisions relating to curricula, assessments and resource allocation tend to be associated with better student performance, particularly when schools operate within a culture of accountability.

The World Bank, 2011, *Making Schools Work: New Evidence on Accountability Reforms*

The World Bank report highlights that there is a trend in many countries toward increasing autonomy, devolving responsibility, and encouraging responsiveness to local needs, all with the objective of raising performance levels.

The key findings relating to autonomy include that there is an association across countries between good performance on international student achievement tests and local- and school-level autonomy to adapt and implement education content and to allocate and manage resources.

The report also supports school-based management (SBM), which is the decentralisation of authority from the government to the school level and may include attempts to strengthen parental involvement in the schools, sometimes by means of school councils.

The World Bank, 2009, *Decentralized Decision-Making in Schools, the Theory and Evidence on School-Based Management*

The key findings regarding autonomy from this report include:

- Across the countries in the OECD there is a trend toward increasing autonomy, devolving responsibility, and encouraging responsiveness to local needs, all with the objective of raising performance levels.
- Most countries whose students perform well in international student achievement tests give their local authorities and schools substantial autonomy over adapting and implementing educational content, allocating and managing resources, or both.

Wößmann, L., 2007, *International Evidence on School Competition, Autonomy and Accountability*, Peabody Journal of Education, Volume 82, Issue 2-3

Using TIMMS, PISA and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) data, this study found that students in these assessments performed better when:

- schools have freedom to make process and personnel decisions
- regular tests monitor student progress
- external exams provide a basis to hold students and schools accountable
- competition in school choice leads to greater student performance.