

Launch of the AISNSW Institute

Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, Minister for Education and Training

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Principles for Future National Education Policy

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here today to launch the AISNSW Institute and outline some of my priorities for school education as the new Minister for Education and Training.

I am committed to a diverse schooling system that facilitates choice for parents and encourages increased investment in schooling from non-government sources. This enables a strong independent sector which in turn can strengthen the public sector.

I want to commend Geoff [Newcombe] and AISNSW for their initiative in establishing the Institute to think deeply about the challenges and opportunities facing the sector. I know that under Bill's [Daniels] leadership and with a diverse membership of business and policy thinkers, that it will make an excellent contribution to the ongoing national conversations on schooling.

I look forward to continuing this conversation, listening and engaging with you and the broader schooling sector over the coming months - and hopefully beyond - as we work together to build a quality education system.

As a still relatively new education minister I will today outline what I see as some of the key issues facing our schools, what the role of the Commonwealth is and where we should be focusing our efforts in the future.

Key values

Firstly, there are a number of key values that will guide my approach.

Evidence based policy

Future policy reform must be based on evidence of what works, not on ideology.

The decline in Australia's performance in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) over the past decade is widely known.

The countries that have moved past Australia in PISA over recent years are those that have made concerted efforts to systematically overhaul their teaching workforce including initial teacher education, boost the status and effectiveness of the teaching profession, promote increased school autonomy and public accountability and set high standards and expectations for all students.

In Australia, school education debate has been covering the same ground for many years – it has focused too much on funding levels as an ends rather than a means, issues of family income differences and class size rather than on quality and performance.

Australia has been increasing spending for decades, but results have declined for both our high achieving and poorer performing students.

The OECD, McKinsey and the Grattan Institute, to name a few, have analysed the differences to show us what works and what makes a quality education system.

As a nation we must look at these trends and evidence and be honest enough to focus on pursuing policies based on what the evidence overwhelmingly tells us actually improves student achievement.

I look forward to the contribution the AISNSW Institute will be able to make in the development and promotion of independent evidence-based policy that will help governments develop and implement policies that actually improve student outcomes and our nation's productivity.

Consultation and transparency

Good policy is measured in outcomes, but it also requires a sound process, with open consultation and respect for key stakeholders.

I strongly believe that policy should not be developed in isolation or secrecy, but should consider a broad range of ideas.

My approach has always involved connecting with relevant stakeholders to gain an understanding of their ideas and ensure a collaborative approach to policy reforms, as I hope I am already demonstrating in my approach to higher education reform.

I welcome the opportunity to explore new and innovative ideas with stakeholders who have an interest in education, and for us all to challenge the status quo of education practices, without pre-determined outcomes. After all, we encourage students to question and have inquisitive minds, so why shouldn't we?

As Minister, I want to listen, engage with you and test ideas – we may not always agree but my door will always be open.

A focus on the purpose of education

It is time to focus on what the purpose of education is, to equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to successfully transition to further education or training and participate in the future labour force and to be active self-sustaining citizens able to make informed choices about their lives.

Increasingly education is often the first step to solve public policy concerns and problems, many of which are outside the immediate ambit of providing a quality education to students. Schools are involved in a large range of initiatives that promote students engagement, safety,

wellbeing, resilience and social inclusion ... Issues that generally used to be the accepted domain of parents, carers and communities.

While schools have a responsibility to respond to emerging wider social issues, we should not lose sight of the primary purpose of education.

Schools and teachers rightly express concerns that such ‘piling on’ their usual curriculum duties has taken them away from their core business of teaching the courses and subjects that matter.

This is not a rejection of these undertakings, nor a suggestion that all that is taught should be stationary.

Rather, it is a reminder that schools are there to provide students a quality education that involves both the acquisition of knowledge and the desire to seek knowledge and the skills to think critically and analyse issues as they progress through life and the various jobs they inevitably have to do, especially in a period of history characterised by rapid economic and technological change.

Being clear about the role of the Commonwealth in schooling

As we all know, the Commonwealth is not constitutionally responsible for schooling and does not run schools or employ teachers.

We are only responsible for about 34 per cent of the total government spending on schools, though many think we are the prime funder.

I acknowledge that for the independent school sector the Commonwealth provides the majority of public funding, but the majority of schools in Australia are in the hands of the states and territories.

For these schools, states and territories are responsible for their overall funding, day-to-day operations, structure, regulation, approval of establishment and class sizes.

States and territories accredit all teacher courses and register all graduates and are responsible for the regulation of ALL schools.

They also employ most teachers and have responsibility for their pay and conditions and performance. States and territories determine what is taught and how it is taught.

It is the states and territories that are responsible for the overall quality of school education.

This is not to say there is no role for the Commonwealth in schools.

On the contrary, given the importance of education to Australia’s national economy and our national well-being, as well as the expectation that children across Australia will be afforded similar opportunities, the national government has a strong interest in ensuring we have a high quality schooling system that makes a difference for all students.

We in the Coalition have always understood this. After all, we established the federal department of education and began federal funding to schools.

But I highlight the limitations because as Education Minister I am not interested in duplicating the roles of the states and territories, or independent or Catholic education authorities but will instead work in partnership.

The Commonwealth is uniquely positioned and has a clear responsibility to help develop national priorities, identify gaps, support national performance assessment and reporting, monitor international trends, deliver economies of scale, promote coordination and minimise duplication.

And given that the Commonwealth over the next four years is investing \$69.5 billion on schools we have a responsibility to taxpayers to ensuring this investment is used wisely.

This Government and my predecessor have clearly demonstrated that the Commonwealth remains firmly in the school space.

We have retained the existing national education architecture of ACARA, AITSL, My School, NAPLAN and the Australian Curriculum, but made them more effective and more aligned to achieving national education objectives.

Recent Education Council meetings have been characterised by cooperation and a proper focus on national education issues.

There have been real achievements in gaining agreement for NAPLAN Online, changes to the curriculum, developing a national STEM strategy and accepting the Commonwealth's important teacher education reforms.

What we have done with some success is to identify those levers which the Commonwealth can pull that best achieve improved education outcomes rather than seeking to take over the roles of the states and territories.

I will continue to work cooperatively with my state and territory colleagues and the independent and Catholic sectors to both develop our national shared goals and to seek their implementation.

Fair, transparent and needs-based funding for schools

While evidence shows that funding is important, it is clear that the way resources are invested matters just as much, if not more. It is not just a question of how much funding is provided, as evidenced by our increasing investment but declining outcomes.

Schools must have access to adequate funding to operate and the Commonwealth should contribute its fair share.

That includes supporting parental choice and co-investment into non-government schools.

The Commonwealth also has a responsibility to live within its means and to ensure and spending decisions provide maximum value.

As Professor John Hattie argues, if we are to increase student achievement, funding arrangements need stronger links to those things that do affect student outcomes. And where this varies according to the differing needs of different students then it should be reflected in the funding outcomes.

We need simple and fair funding arrangements, that are conscious of the needs of all students, accepts the prime role of the states and territories, and which, most importantly, focusses on the delivery of a quality education that prepares both students and Australia for the future.

Current progress

These five values will guide my approach to education reform through the government's *Students First* agenda.

The four pillars of *Students First* focus on teacher quality, school autonomy, engaging parents and strengthening the curriculum. Evidence informs us that improving these areas will make a real difference to student outcomes.

The Government has already implemented the first wave of measures under these reforms.

A good education system depends upon good educators. The teaching profession deserves to be supported to be the best they can be.

Teacher education reform has been more talked about than done, as the 101 Commonwealth and state reviews into teacher education testify.

I am determined to continue the good work of my predecessor to implement the overdue reforms recommended by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) so as to improve the quality of teachers entering Australian schools.

We are providing \$16.9 million over four years to a revised and more focussed and expert Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) under the leadership of Professor John Hattie to oversee its implementation.

We are working cooperatively with the states and territories and their key agencies that have responsibility for the accreditation of courses and registration of teachers, along with the providers, to ensure TEMAG's recommendations are actually implemented.

Already we have agreement with the states and territories for new guidelines for selection of entrants, the adoption of the new literacy and numeracy test as a means of demonstrating that teacher graduates are in the top 30 per cent of the population for personal literacy and numeracy and support to accelerate the timetable to bring all initial teacher education programs under the new national standards and procedures.

The results of the trial literacy and numeracy test that ran in August and September involving 5,000 students will be released next month.

In December we will seek agreement from Education Council for new teacher training course accreditation requirements in relation to specialisation in STEM and languages, improved

practicum experiences and evidence of the impact of teaching delivered by graduates in their first year.

TEMAG's recommendations will be implemented within the next two years and this highlights how the Commonwealth can help achieve real reform in schools by having a good process, proposing changes based on evidence and working with the existing federal institutional arrangements.

In the future, we need to put better structures and frameworks in place to support our teachers and principals, giving them access to high quality professional development and helping them focus on their core business of delivering a high quality education to every student in their classroom.

In addition to teacher quality, the Government has been expanding our focus on improving school autonomy to support school leaders. All jurisdictions have signed up to our initiative in this area.

Evidence shows that engaging parents in education is also a key factor to improve a child's performance at school. The Government has released the Learning Potential app that gives parents practical tips and information on how they can be more involved in their child's learning – from the high chair to high school.

From 2016, we should begin to see the effects of efforts to improve the take-up and quality of STEM in schools as a result of our investments in Primary Connections and work with the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers and the Australian Academy of Science.

I am also excited about opening up pathways for students through the Preparing Secondary Students for Work Framework and development of tools for schools to improve on how they are currently delivering VET.

The next phase of reform

I see reform of the education sector as an ongoing process to keep up with a rapidly changing economy and workforce requirements.

There are several challenges facing education in Australia I want to share with you.

One of the challenges facing education policy is achieving better policy coherence and getting the sequence of reforms right.

We cannot expect our secondary school students to improve their maths or literacy PISA results, if there are not enough primary school teachers properly trained in these areas.

All parts of our education system from early learning and childcare, schools, VET and higher education need to operate as part of a continuum rather than as separate sectors.

Having the entirety of the span of education within one national portfolio presents me, with a challenge and a unique opportunity to develop a more cohesive education system.

I hope the Institute will contribute to this issue in the future.

I note the release this week of the Mitchell Institute's report 'Who succeeds and who misses out in education'. The report provides insight into why young people are falling behind at different transition points in their education, including the impact of a school's overall performance on student achievement.

We cannot be, as the Prime Minister rightly proposes, an innovative, agile and creative nation, unless we have a quality education system that is interlocked and produces the skills needed in the future.

Finally, there is the technological challenge facing our economy, our jobs, and our way of life.

Technological change is not new, but it is becoming faster and affecting more parts of the workforce.

Research is telling us that more than 40 per cent, or 5 million jobs in Australia face the risk of being replaced by technological advances in the next 10 to 15 years.

The Foundation for Young Australians claims that automation will have a substantial impact on the availability of entry level occupations for school leavers.

Price-Waterhouse Coopers has even warned that Australia risks dropping out of the world's 20 largest economies by 2030 as the mining boom unwinds. It suggests the Australian economy could prosper if there was greater innovation, underpinned by investment in STEM – science, technology, engineering and maths.

The skill levels required of our school leavers are increasing; however educational performance in these vital areas is declining.

So one of the greatest challenges we all currently face in education is how we can prepare our young people to be successful in an age of digital disruption.

It challenges both what is taught and how it is taught.

While we certainly must continue to lay the foundations of literacy and numeracy – these are vital building blocks for success, we must not neglect STEM literacy, to prepare the way for a skilled and dynamic workforce.

For too long the issues about STEM in education have been neglected.

Consequently, I am working through the Education Council to develop a national STEM education strategy.

This is a collaborative effort and as part of that process Minister Piccoli is chairing a special national roundtable in Sydney next week to progress that initial Commonwealth proposal.

Again the Commonwealth's role is to identify a gap, gain support for possible action and to work with the states and territories to develop a long term solution.

School Funding

Let me turn briefly to the issue of school funding.

Too often the national debate about school funding has been dominated by politics over policy and sectorial self-interest rather than a conversation about the national interest and public good, and most importantly our students.

It is time to elevate the national conversation about school funding.

I believe Australians understand that while we have to ensure our schools get the resources they need, this does not just mean throwing in more money and doing the same things that have led to stagnating and declining outcomes.

The previous government proposed an increase in Commonwealth funding from 2018 but they did not budget for it.

Aside from the cost, the current school funding arrangements are complex and inconsistent.

Bill Daniels, the Chair of the new Institute in his evidence to the Senate inquiry last year ably highlighted the many flaws of the current multiple funding arrangements.

They are not transparent, national or equitable.

There are deals and special arrangements relating to the calculations of SES scores, transition pathways and even differences between what each state and territory has signed up for.

A number of changes to the current funding arrangements need to be made, and I intend to consult on a set of principles to guide the development of funding arrangements for 2018 and beyond.

The principles I believe are important are:

Cost conscious – the funding model must be cost conscious on both sides of the ledger, reflecting the real costs of schooling and a realistic understanding of the current economic and budget situation.

A contribution for every student – the Commonwealth recognises the importance of a parental choice and co-investment but also of providing a funding contribution for every student regardless of sector.

Needs based – I support the principle of needs-based funding that, within available funding envelopes, recognises the different costs of educating particular groups of children.

Stable – the funding model needs to be stable and should not change significantly from year to year.

Simple, fair and transparent – the funding model needs to be easy to understand and nationally consistent across states and sectors.

We have time between now and 2018 to agree on these principles and I look forward to starting a conversation, listening and talking with all stakeholders to ensure that this time, we do get it right.

Conclusion

With rapid change in the economy, constrained fiscal circumstances, inconsistent funding models and declining performance it would be easy to be pessimistic about the future of our schools.

But I am not.

While there is clearly work to be done, I believe that we have an opportunity to set out a pathway for the sort of future we want for our children.

A future where they can be educated to participate in the exciting and fast changing world of technology, globalisation and innovation which is on our doorstep.

Similar challenges are faced by countries the world over. As OECD economist Eric Hanusheck best summed up:

“The question we must ask ourselves is how we cannot just react to these changes, but preempt them, how we can manage ongoing change while providing stability, and how the education system can itself be an example of innovation.”

We need to ensure our school system is effectively resourced and agile enough to deliver the critical thinking, intellectual openness and problem solving skills that will be needed to drive innovation and ensure Australia has the human capital it needs to prosper in the future.

We must do a better job of linking our expenditure to what works, not just in schools but across the whole education spectrum.

We must build a national coherent education system and think in terms of national priorities.

We must be smarter in our investment with a focus on funding being used to build a high quality education system that actually delivers for students and for the nation.

Ultimately though, what will really make a difference is ensuring our education system motivates our young people to strive to do their best, to have positive attitudes to learning, their schools and teachers and to develop patterns of behaviour that will stand them well in their progress through life.

They, after all, are the real cornerstone of our education system.

As the grandson of a teacher and the father of two pre-school age girls, I have a personal history and a personal stake in the future. I can think of no more exciting role to have than being our nation's Education Minister and I look forward to working closely with you on these challenges.