

Position Paper: School Autonomy

In this position paper School Autonomy is broadly defined as the authority of school communities to improve student learning outcomes through a formal governance structure which allows local decision-making in the allocation of human and physical resources, curriculum implementation and collaboration with other schools.

The extent of local decision-making and the aspects of school leadership and management that are accepted as being most effectively devolved to the school level must reflect the individual circumstances of each school and its community; a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach will not work.

Generally speaking, there is a greater degree of school autonomy existing in the Independent School sector than in the Catholic and Government sectors due to their systemic nature.

APPA supports primary schools having increased decision-making capacity, working in collaboration with their local community.

The Challenge

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments must work collaboratively with each other and consult widely with principals, staff, parents and the broader school community about school autonomy, while ensuring that all schools are provided with the wherewithal to ensure students meet the ‘Educational Goals for Young Australians’. ⁽¹⁾ There is a need to ensure the healthy diversity of schooling in Australia is not confined or constrained by any blanket policy that shifts responsibility for appropriate resourcing of education away from Governments and onto local communities.

Governments and education authorities must base their approach to school autonomy on credible research into those aspects of schooling that make a difference to student learning when they are controlled by the school. The OECD states, “*School leaders need time, capacity and support to focus on the practices most likely to improve learning. Greater degrees of autonomy should be coupled with models of distributed leadership, new types of accountability, and training and development for school leadership.*” ⁽²⁾ It is a further imperative for governments and education authorities to ensure that primary school principals be held accountable only for those aspects of school governance over which they have authority and control.

The OECD also identified four major domains of responsibility as a key for school autonomy to improve student outcomes:

- Supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality
- Goal setting, assessment and accountability
- Strategic, financial and human resource management
- Collaborating with other schools

The Current Situation

There is a wide divergence in the degree of local decision-making that currently exists within and across Australian schools and school sectors. In a submission to the current Review of Funding for Schooling, APPA states, *“Primary schools are extremely diverse in respect to a wide range of attributes including size, location and socio-economic status. These multiple realities for Primary School Principals, the staff they lead and the students and families they serve, mean that it is not possible to define a single model of school leadership that is most effective in Primary Schools. Furthermore, any externally developed ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to school governance will not address the needs of every school or assist them to achieve the expectations set for them by the Australian people.”* (4)

The Australian Government has decided that principals, parents and school communities will have greater power to determine how their school is run. This will include greater responsibility for school budgets, determining the right mix of staff and setting local priorities. In order to achieve this, \$484m has been allocated for expenditure through to 2018 and will see participating schools receive a start up grant of between \$40000 – \$50000 as well as support and training to effectively undertake these new responsibilities.

The Opportunity

Research into school autonomy indicates what makes a school effective in promoting student learning and achievement. A system or school wide vision, a whole school approach with comprehensive professional learning, partnerships with parents, and a restructuring of the way schools are managed and administered have the most impact.

Empowering primary schools with clear authority to establish well-structured governance arrangements and decision-making processes about what is best for students and their learning will improve student achievement. This means more than simply providing primary school principals ‘token’ authority in these areas.

Increasing school autonomy in the area of teacher appointment and staffing mix is a key factor in ensuring improved student achievement.

The Australian Primary Principals Association believes that the Australian Government has a pivotal role to play in creating and supporting a well-resourced national education system that empowers principals, in collaboration with their local communities, to make decisions that benefit student learning.

Recommendations

1. Education authorities develop a nationally consistent definition of school autonomy and clarify the parameters of local governance and decision-making.
2. The Australian Government, in collaboration with State and Territory governments and education authorities, implements a public policy agenda for school autonomy. This agenda must focus on those areas in which research demonstrates school autonomy will make a difference to student learning.
3. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorses a range of school autonomy options from which schools may choose to draw based on their circumstances. Such options must range from extensive systemic support to a more comprehensive model of school autonomy.
4. All Governments, working together, should ensure any new funding model for schooling, including the level of funds available to schools from all sources, supports increased school autonomy. There must be careful monitoring of any requirement that diminishes the ability of schools to access the range of options for school autonomy.
5. Schools must be equitably resourced to implement and sustain their own site specific, evidence-based strategies through their chosen school autonomy option. These resources would include professional development, administrative support and community engagement, and not be limited to a one-off grant or payment.

References

- 1) *“Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians”* – December 2008
- 2) *OECD Report: Improving School Leadership Vol 1 Policy and Practice* – 2008
- 3) APPA submission to *Review of Funding for Schooling* – 2011