

# Review to **Achieve Educational Excellence** in Australian Schools

SAPPA Submission

## Overview and Introduction

The South Australian Primary Principals Association (SAPPA) is a professional association for primary school leaders, representing over 550 principals from Government schools in South Australia. SAPPA advocates for primary schools, supports school leaders and promotes public education in South Australia. We fully support the intent to attain educational excellence through this review and we are grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission.

## Review themes

### ***What students learn and how they learn***

Students learn in a contextual, integrated and connected way. Students learning is enhanced when they are engaged and the learning is relevant and meaningful for them. Adequate and equitable needs based resources are necessary for students to reach their potential.

Students learn best when they are scaffolded in a socio-cultural context to reach levels of understanding they could not reach on their own. In this model teachers are positioned as the experts, providing differentiated scaffolding according to student need. Over time, with a variety of rich, focused learning activities, students appropriate the language resources to turn experiences into knowledge. Training teachers to understand and effectively use Vygotski's theory in teaching and learning is neither quick nor easy, but well worth investigating how this would benefit students in a variety of settings.

We need to value the evidence and judgment of teachers. SAPPA recommends strategies that enhance and value the judgement of teachers and school leaders. Ideally feedback on student learning needs to be formative, not after a test or standardised assessment.

Digital technology is a learning area of the curriculum, that can be integrated into other learning areas. SAPPA sees an opportunity for education jurisdictions to inject resources into building the competency and confidence of teachers to lead and deliver this learning. In addition, students need to be taught strategies of *how* to learn especially within a continuing globalisation and digitally enabled workforce. The AC covers the 'what' but there are very few resources that cover the 'how'. The Framework for Effective Learning (TfEL), an Australian publication, provides the 'how' of quality teaching and school leadership. SAPPA recommends that TfEL is promoted broadly as a recommended resource for sound pedagogical approaches.

The Australian Curriculum (AC) is still over crowded, despite modifications and changes. Teachers must be unencumbered by the pressure to cover content and constant new initiatives. They need time to imbed effective learning. It would be very helpful if ACARA developed a guide identifying

the *core* essentials of the AC. This would ensure that the most important elements of the AC are addressed by all schools.

The General Capabilities within the Australian Curriculum are integral to the development of the 'whole' student, especially in the primary years. Literacy and Numeracy are General Capabilities that are currently prioritised by state and federal politicians and their education departments through NAPLAN but the other General Capabilities - ICT capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding - have a diminished presence in our schools. Australian schools need to focus strongly on *all* the General Capabilities. All states, systems and jurisdictions must meet this expectation.

### ***Teachers and school leadership***

SAPPA strongly supports the focus to lift teacher education standards so that teachers entering the classroom have the necessary skills, training and education, and work through a rigorous teacher training course that is contemporary, preparing our teachers to be 'classroom ready'. There is an oversupply of people undertaking Bachelor of Education degrees because universities are readily able to financially benefit from teacher training courses. There needs to be restrictions on these numbers which will result in more competitive intakes. The ATAR level must be raised and the testing for suitability needs to occur at the beginning of the degree course, not the end.

SAPPA recommends more in school experience for practical learning for graduate teachers - at least 100 days - including an 'intern' practicum of a full school term during the final year of study. Quality teaching and learning in every classroom across Australia is vital to improving student achievement. However, attracting and retaining teachers is a considerable challenge for principals and communities. It is important to have incentives in place within policies and practices that enable schools to attract, develop and retain highly effective teachers and leaders.

SAPPA recommends the following:

1. An intentional national campaign with strategies to increase the status of teachers in Australia. Lifting the level of community respect for our educators will help attract and retain teachers and leaders in all settings and locations.
2. Provide incentives, including salary and conditions, housing, and professional support for attracting and retaining teachers and leaders in hard to staff remote areas.
3. More capacity for school communities and school leaders to select their staff.
4. Increasing professional development support for country school staff, especially those in remote and isolated regions. This could be done by establishing regional centres to provide the necessary support.
5. Establish a national registration body for teachers. This would enable teachers to move across state jurisdictions with ease and lessen the bureaucratic process currently in place.
6. Consistent policies that address inappropriate parent behaviour and allows school leaders and staff to focus on student learning, in safe conditions.

SAPPA recommends professional learning be provided for teachers in developing skills of collaboration and team teaching. Improvement in learning will result when effective leaders and teachers have opportunities to share their practice with their peers.

SAPPA is aware of the challenges facing authorities and communities in attracting and retaining school leaders. Recent research highlights the increasing workload and accountability requirements impacting on principal health and wellbeing. Changes to policy and practice are required to improve the health and wellbeing of our leaders. To not do so, will result in more leaving the role or others not being attracted to the role.

Professional development that is provided by profit making organisations needs to be regarded very cautiously. The optimum professional development occurs when school leaders and teachers share conceptual understanding and effective practices with their peers – this endeavour needs to be professional and altruistic, not profit driven.

SAPPA recommends an increase in administration support for primary schools. It is important to increase the leadership density of primary schools to address the current inequities, simply based on historical practice. This action will result in strengthening the focus on learning improvement.

### ***Parent and community engagement***

The early years and parent engagement are both important. Parent and community engagement with the school is more likely to occur when children are very young. This is the time to target resources and to capitalise on the more common presence of parents in the primary setting. The connection between school and home in supporting the learning of children is vital. This partnership can be strengthened by:

- Development of a school-family partnership resource package to support schools.
- Raising awareness amongst parents and school staff about the importance of developing high functioning relationships, which in turn yield high returns for student learning.
- Increased efforts to improve the collective impact and capacity building of community and NGO services.
- Active encouragement of community access to school facilities.
- The establishment of virtual schools to allow students, teachers and parents to access courses and expert support.

### ***Defining and measuring success in education***

Schools need the autonomy to locate and identify the tools that measure *their* success, relevant to their context, location and uniqueness.

There needs to be a rethink on the definitions and descriptions of student success beyond that of NAPLAN results and growth. For example, in primary schools the development of appropriate social skills and the capacity to collaborate with others successfully are strong indications of developmental success.

Success should not be measured by NAPLAN. A 'one size fits all' approach is not aligned to personalised and differentiated learning being implemented in schools. Standardised testing is not congruent with the 21-century learning approach. Students want to know where they are with their learning progression. Parents want to know if their child is learning at the rate and level expected. Teachers have this knowledge in the primary setting.

The use of means and averages will always have schools below and above the line. Even if every Australian school improves, there will still be schools below average and 'in the red'. SAPPA advocates for the abolishing of national testing.

Primary schools are currently mandated to report on grades from A - E. SAPPA disagrees with this practice as grading very young children has the potential to unfairly give labels at an age when developmental rates vary enormously. Schools have their own means of accurately moderating the assessment of student progress and this needs to continue. Accountability and transparency within school communities are important and as such, we support student growth being clearly communicated to parents within the local school community.

SAPPA is not supportive of the My School website. SAPPA supports *sample* testing for schools and system data collection rather than testing all students and schools.

The My School website has not contributed to any significant change to school performance. Since My School was introduced there has been a flattening of results and a narrowing of the curriculum. We have also seen an increase in the focus by system leaders and politicians on simplistic rankings and 'league table' journalism.

The My School website, NAPLAN and education generally are highly politicised in Australia. The major political parties use the education agenda to win votes. Education is too important to be used in this way. Other countries that perform well in education have a political bipartisan approach to education. Australia needs to emulate the practice of these successful countries. This could begin with a ten year bipartisan education strategy.

Experienced school leaders have resisted the push to overemphasise the NAPLAN results. However, our most experienced educators have little say in the policy development at the systems level. Credible school educators must be consulted in systemic policy development.

The use of the My School website as the reporting mechanism for NAPLAN has moved NAPLAN into an unwelcome high stakes environment. Australia needs a national approach to assessment for *learning* rather than the current focus on assessment for *reporting*.

SAPPA advocates for the withdrawal and discontinued use of the My School website. An increased focus on the learning and developmental progress of the General Capabilities, in addition to Literacy and Numeracy, would be a sensible and positive move. This needs to involve assessment of progress through teacher judgement and scope for sharing these subjective decisions through professional development of moderation and opportunities to share assessment techniques.

***Identifying, sharing and driving good practice and continuous improvement***

The focus of continued student improvement is the core business of all schools. However, the focus should be on empowered accountability, not compliance accountability. Compliance will not drive better achievement or improvement. Empowered accountability occurs in the presence of collaboration and consultation.

The sharing of practice needs to happen in networks where schools work collaboratively not competitively. This will allow personal learning to flourish.

SAPPA sees strong benefits of a long-term, bipartisan, national strategy to continuous improvement with endorsement by principals and teachers and with adequately resourcing. Any initiative to be implemented in schools will have a far greater success rate if developed in partnership with principals. Education must not be influenced by elections, politics or populism. Our young people deserve no less and need certainty in a changing world.