

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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RESEARCH AFFIRMS IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CHOICE

From the CEO

School choice has been a feature of Australia's education system since our nation's early colonial beginnings more than 200 years ago.

Generations of Australian families have sought out schools with an education mission or approach that aligns with their own values, beliefs and aspirations for their children. This desire has fuelled ongoing growth in Australia's independent schooling sector.

Analysis of 20 years of enrolment data by Independent Schools Australia (ISA) reveals "the independent sector has increased its enrolment share every year since 2000, starting at 12.5% and climbing steadily to a high of 16.2% in 2020".¹

Further research by ISA also confirms that Australian parents with children in all school sectors value the role of independent schools in the nation's educational landscape and the choice they offer families.

These are among the many positive findings contained in the recently released ISA report, *School Choice: A Research Report 2021*.²

According to ISA's 2021 survey of almost 2,000 parents in state, Catholic and independent schools, parents from all school sectors agree or strongly agree that independent schools:

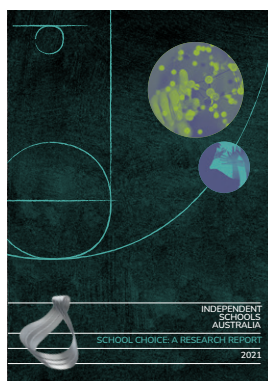
- allow parents to choose in line with their values and beliefs (85% independent, 85% Catholic and 67% government)
- are accountable for the education they provide (84% independent, 80% Catholic and 65% government) and
- give greater choice to parents in the type of education their children receive (83% independent, 79% Catholic and 58% government).

This parental endorsement of the sector is both refreshing to read and in contrast to the adversarial public narrative that so often sets schooling sectors against one another, most notably over funding.

Despite the many challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past 18 months, this period of change and uncertainty has allowed autonomous independent schools to demonstrate what they do best – deliver quality education programs in a caring close-knit community environment.

Australian parents with children attending independent schools who were surveyed by ISA agreed.

A majority of independent school parents (82%) confirmed that their school had adapted well to the changing environment, identifying good communication (68%) and moving quickly to online or remote learning (74%), as central to this success.



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SHIFTING PARENTS PRIORITIES:

30%
Safe environment –
down from 43% in
2016

9%
Affordability – down
from 23% in 2016

11%
Extra-curricular
activities – up from
5% in 2016

HOW PARENTS CHOOSE A SCHOOL:

Interaction with school staff

40% Independent
29% Catholic
32% Government

School rankings

31% Independent
8% Catholic
9% Government

Social media

10% Independent
0% Catholic
0% Government

Independent schools' standing as respected learning institutions during this period is evidenced in public commentary, school-related academic discussion papers on COVID-19 and most convincingly in the enrolment surge the sector has been experiencing.

The ISA survey confirms what surveys, including Independent Schools Queensland's (ISQ's) own *What Parents Want* survey, have shown over more than 20 years. That is, families choose independent schools for their educational excellence, good teachers, good facilities and supportive and caring environments.

According to the 2021 ISA survey academic achievement has become more important for independent school families of both primary (22% in 2021, 19% in 2016) and secondary school-age children (37% in 2021, 25% in 2016).

However, parental expectations about the outcomes they want for their children have shifted, most markedly for secondary school students.

In 2021 the top three aspirations independent school parents held for their high-school age children were for them to gain confidence and high self-esteem (62%), to be able to think for themselves (60%) and to achieve academically (57%).

In contrast in 2016 these parents most wanted their teenager to be prepared for employment (61%), be happy (60%) and to think for themselves (58%).

In the primary years, independent school parents have different, but

unsurprising expectations for their children.

They want them to acquire reading, writing and numeracy skills (61%), gain a love of learning/curiosity (60%), to grow in confidence and self-esteem (57%), to be happy (57%) and to think for themselves (56%).

But what do students want from their 13-year education journey?

Leading Australian social research company, McCrindle, surveyed almost 1,200 students aged 16-24 in 2021 to understand the education experiences and future expectations of this generation of young people.

Positively the majority of students surveyed (94%) "truly value having access to an Australian education"³.

In further good news for the nation's school and higher education providers four in five (81%) students "feel at least somewhat equipped by their education to thrive in the workplace in the decade ahead".

What students value from their education experience is also instructive for schools. According to the McCrindle research they appreciate "individualised learning with 72% wanting to see more of it in education in the future. Students would also like to see more open plan learning environments (73%), collaborative classrooms (71%) and inquiry-based learning (71%)".

These Generation Z/ Alpha students – the children of Generation X – also have some definite ideas about what they want from their future employers and jobs.

3 McCrindle (2021). *The Future of Education*. <https://educationfuture.com.au/>

The ISA survey confirms what surveys, including Independent Schools Queensland's (ISQ's) own What Parents Want survey, have shown over more than 20 years. That is, families choose independent schools for their educational excellence, good teachers, good facilities and supportive and caring environments.

The majority (64%) want to undertake work that has "a positive impact on the world around them. Three in five believe it is extremely/very important for there to be investment in their professional development (63%) and engaging and enlarging leadership that grows their strength and capacity."

For schools, the ISA and McCrindle survey findings deliver some telling insights into what parents want from the education they choose for their child and what students hope that choice will equip them with for the future.

As this is the final ISQ Briefings for the 2021 school year, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the independent schooling sector – ISQ's Board, staff and the sector's member schools – for their generosity - for sharing their stories and deepening my knowledge and understanding of the diversity of the

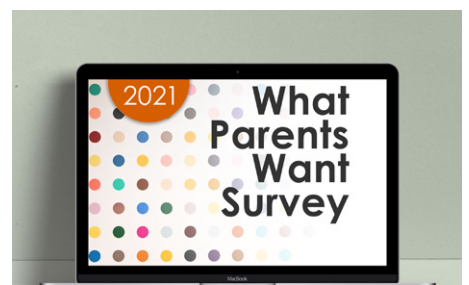
sector and the dedication of those who lead and serve it.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in the state and Catholic sectors for their warm and collegial welcome and valuable partnership.

May the final months of 2021 be kind to us all.



CHRISTOPHER MOUNTFORD
Chief Executive Officer



Thank you

Thank you for sharing the *What Parents Want – An Independent Schools Queensland Survey* with your parent communities.

A full report will be released in Term 1, 2022, detailing why parents choose to send their child to an independent school and how they came to make that decision. In addition, schools that collected ten or more survey responses will receive a school-specific report.

REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM



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Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society, and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing.

The preamble to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, agreed to by all Education Ministers across Australia states that:

Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society, and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing.

Perhaps that is why what is taught is always so fiercely contested given the stakes are so high. The current review of the Australian Curriculum is the latest fertile ground for skirmishes around what should be taught to Australia's children. School leaders and teachers would be used to History and English being the main areas of battle, but recently Maths has joined the fray. This research feature will explore how the Australian Curriculum got to this point of significant division by providing background on the history of the development and various reviews of the Australian curriculum, before looking at specific feedback provided from independent schools in Queensland on the latest draft of the curriculum.

Background

It is a requirement of both the Queensland Government and the Australian Government that independent schools implement the Australian Curriculum (or one of three recognised equivalent curricula) across Years P–10. In late 2012, and the initial implementation

of English, Mathematics and Science, independent schools in Queensland have been meeting this requirement. Queensland's decision to implement the Australian Curriculum in its present form means independent schools do not have the extra layer of a state syllabus but instead plan, teach, assess and report on the Australian Curriculum as provided directly from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

Brief History

The National Curriculum Board first met in 2008 and agreed to a national curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History (National Curriculum Board, 2009). Although Australia had identified Key Learning Areas (KLAs) from the time of the Hobart Declaration in 1989, Ministers were reluctant to start the new national curriculum with all eight KLAs. The decision was made to begin with four core subjects: English, Mathematics, Science and History. The National Curriculum Board was responsible for determining the form of the national curriculum and provided public consultation opportunities. The National Curriculum Board held a key national forum in June 2008 to discuss the *National Curriculum Development Paper*, which was also published on their website (National Curriculum Board, 2008a).

In light of numerous discussions at state and national level, the Board published the document *The Shape of the National Curriculum: A proposal for discussion*, which then became the first

version of *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* developed in early 2009 (National Curriculum Board, 2008b) (refer Figure 1).

The National Curriculum Board recruited a lead writer for each of the four curriculum areas and each writer worked with a small advisory group to draft an initial advice paper. More detailed framing papers were posted on the Board's website with a public invitation to comment and provide advice in the period up to 28 February 2009 (<https://www.acara.edu.au/>). Final recommendations to guide curriculum development were posted on the Board's website following its April meeting and the first approved national curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History were made available in late 2010.

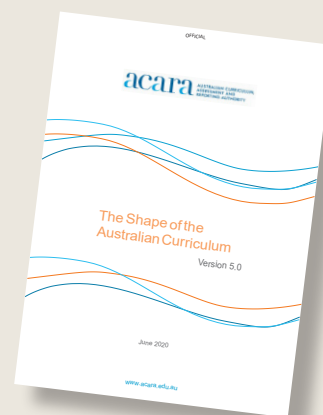
To postulate, the Australian Geography Teachers' Association (AGTA) may have considered inclusion in the curriculum as indicative of what is valued and what is not included, less so. Nevertheless, the AGTA mounted an intensive campaign to have Geography included as the fifth subject of the national curriculum, which was ultimately published in May 2013. Their advocacy was subsequently followed by similar lobbying from various professional associations until all eight learning areas were officially included, along with general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities (ACARA, 2021).

Figure 1: The Shape of the Australian Curriculum v. 5.0

"Version 5 of the Shape Paper was developed and approved by the ACARA Board in April 2020 to reflect the changes in the *Educational Goals (Mparntwe) Declaration on Schooling*.

In this document, on p. 1 is an amendment version history outlining how the Shape Paper has changed over time. Version 3.0 (published in October 2011) included references to the three pillars of the Australian Curriculum i.e. learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities."

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING AUTHORITY, 2020



Previous reviews of the Australian Curriculum

The 2014 review undertaken by former teacher and education researcher Kevin Donnelly and business academic Ken Wiltshire, with the brief to "consider the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian Curriculum (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2015)". The reviewers made 30 recommendations in total, including:

- more emphasis on our Judeo-Christian heritage, the role of Western civilisation in contributing to our society, and the influence of our British system of government
- more emphasis on morals, values and spirituality
- there should be a renewed focus on monitoring students' progress
- a smaller, more parent-friendly curriculum should be developed
- examples of A to E standards of work should be created as markers of quality
- the amount of content in the curriculum should be reduced,

especially in the primary years. Prep to Year 2 should focus on literacy and numeracy

- more research should be undertaken into different methods of teaching, with the results to inform future evaluations of the curriculum
- a restructure of the curriculum authority, ACARA, should take place so it is "at arm's length" from education ministers and the education department
- the curriculum should be reviewed every five years.

By December 2016, the Foundation – Year 10 (F – Year 10) Australian Curriculum was complete with the publication of the remaining languages subjects and frameworks. In 2015, the Ministers agreed that ACARA should undertake a review of the Australian Curriculum each six years.

In 2020, the Ministers agreed to the Terms of Reference for the current curriculum review and gave ACARA until the end of 2021 to complete the work (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021c). The key question the Ministers

REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM CONTINUED

FIGURE 2: Terms of reference

Review of the Australian Curriculum 2020. Specifically, the review will:

- a. **refine** and reduce the amount of content across all eight learning areas of the Australian Curriculum F-10, with a priority on the primary years, to focus on essential content or core concepts
- b. **improve** the quality of content descriptions and achievement standards by removing ambiguity and unnecessary duplication, and ensuring consistency and clarity of language and cognitive demand
- c. **rationalise** and improve content elaborations, ensuring they are fit for purpose and they suggest to teachers the most authentic ways to treat general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities when teaching the learning area content
- d. **improve** the digital presentation of the Australian Curriculum in line with agreed content changes and user experience requirements

want answered is, 'Does the Australian Curriculum for F – Year 10 still meet the needs of students and provide clear guidance for teachers?' (Refer Figure 2).

The current review of Australian Curriculum has been heavily influenced by:

- Successive monitoring and evaluation reports (since 2015)
- ACARA's program of research including comparisons of the Australian Curriculum other similar curricula across British Columbia, Singapore, Finland and New Zealand.
- ACARA officers working with academics, professional associations and others.

Monitoring and evaluation

Close examination of the data contained in the monitoring and evaluation reports from 2015 highlights some clear patterns relating to the future direction education authorities may consider in implementing the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021b).

For example, Queensland has consistently raised criticism of:

- Lack of an overarching curriculum framework for all eight learning areas

- Too much content is expected to be covered in the primary years at the expense of students delving deeply into topics of interest
- Lack of attention to the cognitive verbs being used in content descriptions and achievement standards.

ACARA has strongly suggested that the findings from these monitoring and evaluation reports will have a significant role in informing the review of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2021b).

International comparisons

ACARA officers have undertaken a desktop comparison of the curricula in four countries to see how the Australian Curriculum compares and assist with ongoing monitoring and evaluation (Australian Curriculum, 2021). These four countries were chosen because of similar cultural heritage, e.g.. New Zealand and British Columbia, or their standing in international testing regimes, such as PISA, e.g. Singapore and Finland.

ACARA found that the Australian Curriculum compares favourably with the curricula from these four countries. The three pillars of the Australian Curriculum are of international standing. Although there may be slight differences in the interpretation or status of different elements, all three pillars are evident in the four international curricula examined.

ACARA found some differences in the degree of specificity of some of the international curricula to the Australian Curriculum. For example, some curricula, such as Singapore's curriculum, are less prescriptive than the Australian Curriculum. However, others, such as the curriculum from New Zealand, are more prescriptive.

Work with academics, professional associations and others

ACARA officers have built close working relationships with various professional associations, academics, and others whose work, research, and activities provide rich information to support the Australian Curriculum review.

ACARA officers have engaged with academics, including Charles Fadel, Founder and Chairman at the Centre for Curriculum Redesign.

ACARA officers have worked closely with the OECD as active participants in the Education 2030 Project. Initially, officers mapped the Australian Curriculum to numerous elements. Officers then held broad discussions across a large number of countries to finally agree on “the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need to thrive in and shape their future” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021).

Independent schools in Queensland and the current review

To ensure practitioners from the independent school sector in Queensland inform the current review, ISQ collected feedback from member schools via multiple channels for inclusion in a response document to ACARA. ISQ hosted a series of 14 face-to-face workshops for curriculum leaders around the state, an online workshop, and an online survey.

ISQ received over 120 responses. The majority of respondents believed that ACARA had not met their remit to declutter and reduce the curriculum. However, many of those same respondents acknowledged that the curriculum had increased clarity. In many cases, teachers commented that although the changes would

The current policy landscape for the Australian Curriculum.

A useful starting point is Australian Government Minister Tudge’s first significant speech about his new Education portfolio.

- Minister Tudge has set a 2030 target [for Australia] ‘to be again amongst the top group of nations across the three major domains of reading, Maths and Science’. This is in the context of the long-term decline in 15-year-old students’ PISA scores in literacy, numeracy and Science and for the first time in the assessment’s history, Australia’s failure to meet the OECD average in Mathematics performance.

Minister Tudge argues that this can be achieved through three key initiatives:

- ‘Our curriculum must reflect our aspiration to be among the best in the world again. Education Ministers have given ACARA the job of refining, updating and decluttering the content across the current curriculum. By the start of next year, we will have a more streamlined, coherent, focused Australian Curriculum available to be implemented in our schools. Our revised national curriculum will put us on a pathway over the next decade that will see Australia rise to the top tier of global reading, maths and science standards’.
- Initial teacher education
- Formative assessment.

(TUDGE, 2021).

necessitate changes in programming, they were prepared to simply ‘get on with the task’ and teach the curriculum in whatever form.

Although some respondents reported dissatisfaction with several proposed changes, some of the angst is related to matters outside the control of ACARA. These included implementation timelines, support for professional learning, seamless transition into senior subjects, significant differentiation demands, the need for new standard elaborations and teaching outside the subject area.

Reflections on learning areas

ENGLISH

Recently, there has been publicity surrounding the philosophical differences of opinion concerning Phonics in the proposed new English curriculum. This debate is largely centred around a whole language approach versus a phonics (including synthetic phonics) approach in the early years.

The draft curriculum includes elements seen as part of the whole language, or balanced literacy approach, including predictable readers and predicting words through their context. Predictable texts are books designed to support children as they read by allowing them to guess or predict a word based on the repetitive use of the word or from a picture etc. It is argued that these strategies run the risk of sending mixed messages to teachers. With a phonics approach, students decode words by using the relationships between letters and the sounds they represent (Ashman, 2021a).

The NSW Education Minister announced in March that they would no longer use predictable texts as preferred reading material for junior primary classrooms. Additionally, South Australia has adopted the phonics screening test with Year 1 students. In 2018, 43 per cent of students demonstrated phonics skills at the benchmark level or higher, compared with 52 per cent in 2019 and 63

REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM CONTINUED

per cent in 2020 (South Australia Department of Education, 2020).

Most independent school responses to the draft English curriculum have indicated that they do not see this debate between whole language and phonics as a dichotomy and believe there is a place for elements of both approaches to teaching reading. Most independent school responses were positive of the increased focus on phonics in the early years with many making the comments that the changes mirror their current practices. Some responses were resistant to any further increase in focus on phonics (particularly synthetic phonics) in the curriculum, while others were very supportive and did not think the changes went far enough.

ISQ member schools have a variety of positions on the use of predictable and decodable texts and these different philosophical positions have been shared with ACARA. Apart from these philosophical differences, most respondents to the English curriculum were positive of the changes, noting an increase in clarity.

MATHEMATICS

There have also been discussions in the mainstream media about philosophical differences of opinion regarding Mathematics. The initial draft approach was supported in a joint statement endorsed by the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers (AAMT), Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance (ATSIMA), Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia, Australian Academy of Science, Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute (AMSI):

"We need education systems and curricula that help deliver students to society who are up for such a challenge – just having knowledge is no longer enough. Instead, the abilities to problem-solve, mathematise, hypothesise, model are all skills that add worth to acquired knowledge. Mathematics learning cannot sit in silos that focus on content and procedures. Instead, it must be something that gives the knowledge purpose" (Dougan, 2021).

This approach was supported in opinion pieces by other academics (Holmes & Attard, 2021; Ketchell, 2021).

Ashman (2021b) made explicit the difference between the two different approaches to Mathematics teaching.

"Mirroring other subject areas, there are two main approaches to teaching Mathematics and they each have their advocates. The first is to explicitly teach students mathematical content and how to solve specific kinds of problems, with lots of practice. Over time, the teacher introduces new classes of problem, more complexity and new contexts as students become more independent. The alternative is to focus on problem-solving and investigations, with the idea that exposing students to non-routine problems will help them develop mathematical problem-solving skills of some kind.

What does this have to do with the curriculum? The answer is that it should have nothing to do with the curriculum because the curriculum should be neutral on teaching methods. However, the draft math curriculum document backs the problem-solving approach. It waxes lyrical about problem-solving in the lengthy blurb at the start of the document and many of the content strands require problem-based learning methods which becomes more explicit in the elaborations. For instance, Year 7 students have to 'investigate exponent notation' rather than simply learn about it by whatever approach the teacher and school decide."

In an open letter of their own, signed by dozens of senior Maths academics from across the country, opponents to the draft Maths curriculum state that:

"... whatever the role of problem-solving in the Singaporean curriculum, this curriculum is also very demanding in terms of fluency with basic skills; no comparable requirements exist in the current Australian Curriculum, and the draft curriculum only pushes to weaken these requirements. The further elimination and weakening of fundamental skills will contribute to

There have also been discussions in the mainstream media about philosophical differences of opinion regarding Mathematics.

the root cause of Australian students' slipping in international comparisons: the students end up knowing less Mathematics" (Ashman, 2021b).

Interestingly, as a result of this push back, AMSI, one of the signatories to the original joint letter defending the problem-solving approach subsequently released a statement stating that "... now with the opportunity to provide comments on the draft curriculum, many of AMSI's members have expressed concern at numerous proposed curriculum changes" (Marchant, 2021).

In response to some of these criticisms, David de Carvalho, the ACARA CEO, defended the problem-solving approach by saying, "*Problem-solving is at the core of the Singapore Mathematics curriculum, and it is no coincidence that they are among the top performers when it comes to Mathematics performance*" (Baker et al., 2021).

Those opposed to the changes argue that this is cherry picking because if we are to look at PISA results to justify a particular approach then we should also look at those countries with a heavy emphasis on problem-solving that are declining in PISA results, such as Scotland and New Zealand.

Responses from ISQ member schools have largely indicated support for the philosophical position being taken by ACARA although those same teachers were not necessarily satisfied or supportive of the wording of dense content descriptions and achievement standards.

OTHER SUBJECTS

ISQ received positive comments about the new HASS curriculum. Where reductions are seen, these are welcomed and the removal of discipline-specific achievements standards in F-6 HASS was endorsed. However, ISQ received many negative

comments about the draft HASS curriculum with a strong concern that an overall reduction/decluttering had not been achieved plus a concern that a significant amount of new content had been included, that will require training and resourcing. There was also concern for an increased 'politicisation' of the curriculum – particularly around making matters of character a curriculum to assess.

Regarding the Arts, a significant number of the Music teachers who responded were concerned about changes to the curriculum, and what they feel was a dumbing down of expectations relating to what students know and do in terms of music.

Feedback to ISQ on the other learning areas was largely positive. ISQ also received mostly positive responses from member schools about Critical and creative thinking and Intercultural capability.

This was similar for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures. Some respondents expressed concerns that perhaps this cross-curriculum priority had gone too far, although the majority of respondents were very supportive of the increased focus and attention on First Nations peoples.

Conclusion

Consultation on the draft Australian Curriculum closed on 8 July 2021. ACARA has analysed the feedback from thousands of submissions and is now working with the various reference groups to develop the final version of the next Australian Curriculum.

Ministers are due to sign off on the final version in early November 2021 and if approved, ACARA will have until second half of January 2022 to publish this version online to their new website. The current curriculum will remain on the existing website

while sectors develop implementation plans. In the case of Queensland, no timeline for implementation of the new curriculum has yet been agreed upon. ISQ will keep member schools informed of next steps.

It will be interesting to see the extent to which the same issues that were raised in the 2014 review will surface again this time, and perhaps again in six years when the next review is scheduled.

REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM CONTINUED

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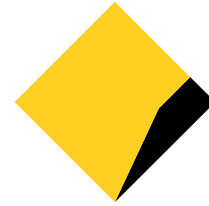
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