

The national education agenda

ISCA POSITION STATEMENT

Independent Schools
Council of Australia

This document summarises ISCA positions on a range of national education policy issues that affect the independent schools sector, including federal funding arrangements for non-government schools. It is set out in three sections.

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Education policy issues
ISCA positions in relation to a range of issues currently the subject of national debate.

2

Funding arrangements for independent schools
ISCA positions in relation to federal funding arrangements for the 2009-12 quadrennium.

3

Principles and assessment criteria for the funding of independent schools
A statement of concepts, principles and assessment criteria that ISCA believes should be reflected in government funding for school education, and against which funding models can be assessed.

September 2008

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Education policy issues

School autonomy

- It is a fundamental tenet of the independent schools sector that principals and school governing bodies are responsible for the efficient and effective operation of their schools.
- In exercising the responsibilities which come with autonomy, independent schools should promote and implement best practice in school management, including employment relations with regard to relevant state and federal legislation.
- The independent schools sector recognises the need for all schools to be educationally accountable in meeting community standards and national goals for schooling. However, schools must retain sufficient autonomy to be responsive to the needs of their community, build distinctive school cultures and be educationally innovative.

National curriculum

ISCA supports in-principle the development of national curriculum that:

- is developed in cooperation with national and state school authorities across all school sectors
- identifies the core content and achievement standards
- incorporates generic cross-curricula competencies
- does not explicitly prescribe assessment strategies or specific pedagogies
- enables schools to localise the curriculum content, meet the needs of individual learners and provide a variety of recognised study pathways for students
- enables schools to use other recognised curriculum such as the International Baccalaureate
- enables schools to deliver the curriculum within a recognised educational philosophy such as Montessori or Steiner
- facilitates the reporting of students' results against achievement standards that recognise the different approaches to assessment across the years of schooling.

National Assessment Program

- Independent schools recognise the primary importance of helping all students achieve the highest possible standards of literacy and numeracy.
- The independent sector, representing 15 per cent of all Australian students, should be partners in decision-making processes on all education initiatives involving students in independent schools.
- Reporting of student results and school performance data should be efficient and educationally effective.
- The full cost of assessment and reporting programs which are mandated by state and territory Ministers and by the Australian Government should be met by governments, irrespective of the school sector in which students are educated.

Ownership and access to independent school assessment data

- Assessment data is owned by individual schools and school authorities, and access to data should occur only within the terms of formal protocols accepted by the school authority.
- As a general principle, aggregated independent sector data should be de-identified for reporting purposes, and protocols should ensure the security and confidentiality of sector data.
- Responsibility for collecting, aggregating and storing data for the independent sector should reside with an agency that is independent of government departments of education.
- ISCA supports the development of national protocols to govern ownership, storage and access to assessment data. The non-government sectors should be equal partners with other jurisdictions in developing and implementing the protocols.

Reporting student achievement

Reporting to parents

- Reporting to parents is integral to the teaching and learning program. It should provide clear and meaningful information on student progress and be set in the context of the stage of learning.
- Implementation of government reporting requirements should allow flexibility to take account of different education philosophies.

Reporting school performance

- As recipients of government funding, independent schools must be accountable for the education that they provide. Educational accountability measures should be based on sound educational principles.
- Testing data and other measures should not be used out of context to create simplistic league tables that may trivialise student achievement and create misleading comparisons.
- Reporting school performance should not impose an onerous administrative burden or cost on schools and should not be duplicated across levels of government.

Teacher quality and performance

Accreditation

- The independent sector supports cooperative approaches for registration and accreditation of teachers and for recognition of teacher qualifications.
- Registration and accreditation requirements should recognise differing pathways and qualifications for teachers.
- The accreditation of programs for the professional preparation of teachers needs to be consistent but not necessarily uniform across the states and territories.
- ISCA seeks to be involved in national approaches to improving teacher accreditation arrangements.

Ongoing professional learning

- Ongoing professional learning is vital for teachers to be able to maintain their currency of information about teaching and learning as well as to improve levels of performance and student learning outcomes.
- Professional learning must recognise that individual state and territory requirements for teacher registration are different.
- Financial support from governments for professional learning to improve the quality of teaching is essential.
- Independent schools should be able to determine professional learning programs appropriate to their individual school requirements.

Performance/merit based pay

- Performance based pay for teachers warrants consideration if it has a role to play in:
 - attracting and retaining high quality teachers
 - developing teacher leaders
 - enhancing student learning outcomes.
- ISCA would support a serious examination of a standards-based approach to performance pay.
- Consideration of performance based pay must take account of the impact of any model on student learning.

- The complexity of teaching and other variables influencing student learning outcomes should be acknowledged.
- ISCA seeks to be engaged in the development of public policy on the issue of performance pay for teachers.
- ISCA does not support mandated requirements from governments for performance based pay schemes.

Early childhood education and care

- All Australian children have the right of access to high quality and integrated childhood education and care services.
- Independent schools play an important role in the mix of public and private providers of early childhood education through their early learning centres, kindergartens and pre-school programs.
- The Australian Government and state/territory governments have a shared responsibility to support quality early childhood education and care services.
- Schools are well placed to provide integrated and high quality early childhood education and should be encouraged to do so through sustainable financial arrangements and streamlined regulatory requirements across the age levels.
- The development of policy and programs in this area should be inclusive of school authorities from the non-government school sectors at both national and state levels.

Nationally consistent school starting age

- ISCA supports in principle the implementation of a common *minimum* school starting age.
- Parents should have the right to decide when their child starts school up to the *compulsory* school starting age, which is set under state/territory government legislation.
- In any proposal to mandate a minimum starting age, Ministers need to ensure that adequate notice is given to allow a planned implementation of an agreed common school starting age.

Indigenous education

- Independent schools recognise the importance of schooling for the future prospects of young Indigenous Australians and are keen to work with governments to encourage greater participation and to close the gap for Indigenous students in education achievement and retention to Year 12.
- The sector supports COAG's priority to improve school attendance in Indigenous communities while minimising additional reporting burdens on individual schools.
- ISCA endorses the Australian Government's decision to provide maximum general recurrent funding to independent schools that are part of defined Indigenous communities and enrol a significant percentage of Indigenous students.
- Independent schools which cater predominantly for Indigenous students also require special consideration in relation to their capital needs, recognising their very limited capacity to raise funds.

Digital technologies for learning and teaching

- With advances in information and communications technologies (ICT) leading to a fundamental shift in the nature and cost of schooling, ISCA supports initiatives that help schools address the needs of students in accessing new technologies.

- ISCA welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to assist schools to provide computers and fast broadband connections and to develop support mechanisms for the deployment of ICT in schools.
- ISCA recognises that provision of ICT in itself will not enhance teaching and learning and therefore welcomes additional support for schools through online curriculum resources and tools, training in the use of ICT and ongoing professional development for teachers.

Vocational education and training

- ISCA supports the achievement of national targets to increase the proportion of students achieving Year 12 or an equivalent qualification through the delivery of high quality trade training in schools to ensure that flexible academic and trade pathways for students are maximised.
- ISCA supports Australian Government initiatives to improve the capacity of schools to help address skill shortages in traditional trades and emerging industries through programs such as the *Trade Training Centres in Schools*.
- Independent schools should be able to access national, state or territory government initiatives available to other sectors of schooling to expand the range of vocational education and training options for independent school students.

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Federal funding arrangements for independent schools

The cost of educating students in the independent schools sector is primarily borne by parents. Most of the government funding available is from the Australian Government in the form of general recurrent grants. These grants are allocated on a needs basis under the SES funding model.

SES funding model

ISCA is generally supportive of current funding arrangements. The SES model, based on the socio-economic status of school communities, is an improvement on previous funding models and is widely supported by the independent sector.

ISCA supports continuation of SES funding arrangements over the 2009-12 quadrennium in order to ensure stability, continuity and certainty for schools, students and parents.

Funding transition arrangements

The *funding guarantee* has worked successfully since the introduction of the SES scheme in 2001. Downward changes in schools' funding entitlements following recalculation of SES scores, using the latest available ABS census data, should be phased in under funding guarantee arrangements.

ISCA supports *funding maintenance* provisions as an essential element of the operation of the SES scheme. The level of support provided over many years by successive federal governments before the commencement of the SES model was the minimum amount needed by a significant group of schools in order to be viable. ISCA supports the continuation of funding for these schools at least at the level of their pre-SES rate in real terms.

Affordability

Under current arrangements the levels of funding provided to schools are failing to keep pace with rising costs. The continuing growth in independent school enrolments, particularly in schools that wish to be 'low fee schools', is becoming more difficult to sustain. Schools are only able to keep fees low if governments provide substantial support. There is an increasing gap between the rate of growth in school costs (for all schools) and growth in average family incomes.

ISCA believes the Australian Government should review the overall level of its funding to schools.

Indexation

It is essential that governments contribute to the increasing costs of schooling through annual indexation of grants based on a specific schools index.

ISCA supports the AGSRC as an index to supplement general and targeted recurrent funding over time. Given the significance of indexation, it would be appropriate for the AGSRC to reflect more accurately and transparently the actual costs of schooling.

Capital

Parents meet around 90 per cent of all capital costs in the independent schools sector. Any additional support by governments is welcomed.

ISCA strongly supports an injection of substantial additional capital funds, targeted in particular to schools at the lower end of the SES range that are experiencing strong enrolment growth.

Students with disability

Recurrent funding for non-government schools does not meet the specific educational support needs of students with disability and is unrelated to the number of students with disability in a given school or to each student's particular needs.

Support for these students should be based on the level of funding required to allow them to achieve their educational goals. Governments need to address this serious issue and in particular ensure that funding follows the student.

Remote areas

The Australian Government's recurrent funding arrangements should take account of the circumstances of schools in remote areas. Independent schools that operate in remote regions, or in other special circumstances of very high need, should be entitled to receive maximum recurrent funding without regard to the SES of the school community.

Regulation

The increased government regulatory environment requires schools to divert resources from their core business of teaching and learning and risks diminishing the sector's highly valued independence and autonomy. A review and stock-take of government regulatory requirements should be undertaken with a view to reducing the burden on schools.

ISCA strongly supports the COAG agenda to reduce red tape and duplication of regulation across levels of government. This commitment should include child care and education services and schools.

Principles and assessment criteria for the funding of independent schools

Fundamental concepts

Funding models for school education should reflect *three fundamental concepts*:

1 Individual choice of schooling

Community attitudes to education are changing rapidly and there is a demand by parents for choice not only between government and non-government schools but among government schools. Enrolment trends over the past 30 years demonstrate that more and more parents are prepared to pay for their children to attend their school of choice.

2 Diversity of schooling options

Families increasingly expect government funding schemes to support the access of their children to education services rather than focus on institutional ownership. ISCA's view is that in the near future the community will assess funding models on the extent to which these recognise supplier diversity in schooling and support school choice.

To encourage diversity, funding models need to acknowledge the importance of autonomy in quality schooling provision. All schools should be accountable for their use of public funds, but government accountability requirements should not limit the ability of schools to be innovative and provide diversity and choice in school education.

3 Committed partnerships between schools, parents and governments

Non-government schooling is supported and sustained through a partnership comprising the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and parents. With one-third of Australian students now educated in non-government schools it is vital that this partnership is reliable, stable and sustainable if the overall quality of schooling in Australia is to be maintained.

Funding principles

ISCA advocates *four key funding principles* that should underpin recurrent funding policies for independent schools:

1 Basic entitlement for all

It is a fundamental right for all children to have access to schooling in the compulsory years, and it is a core function of governments to provide this access. Successive federal governments have recognised their responsibility to support a school education for each Australian child, irrespective of family background or school. Future governments should continue to do so.

A basic funding entitlement for all students provides incentive and support to parents who are willing to pay substantial after-tax dollars for schooling. It also acknowledges that every student is a member of the wider community, and that all schools bring benefits to society.

2 Additional needs-based support

The basic per student grant should be supplemented by a needs-based approach, which recognises the relative educational disadvantage of students, including students with disability, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from rural and remote areas.

3 Stability and predictability

Stability and predictability in funding is critical for quality school provision. The Australian Government's established policy of providing legislated quadrennial funding for government and non-government schools, adjusted annually to meet cost increases, is strongly endorsed. This facilitates financial planning and management within schools, enhancing their capacity to provide the best quality education with the resources available to them.

Stable and predictable funding arrangements also support families in planning for the private funds that they commit to their children's schooling.

4 Annual indexation

The increasing costs of schooling reflect improvements in quality as well as movements in salaries and conditions for staff. Consequently the costs of schooling increase at a greater rate than for most other services in the community. It is important that governments continue to fully contribute to these cost movements through annual indexation of grants based on a specific schools index.

Criteria for assessing funding models

Six essential criteria for assessing school funding models are:

Equity – per student funding for schools serving communities with similar attributes should generally be comparable.

Incentive – the funding arrangement should support students in a way that encourages, not discourages, parental investment in schooling.

Flexibility – schools should not be locked into a particular funding level that impedes them from responding to changes in their school community.

Transparency – assessment of need should be based on reliable and transparent data.

Simplicity – the funding arrangement should be simple to administer, with low administration costs for government and low compliance costs for schools.

Predictability – schools should have a high degree of certainty about future funding to facilitate financial planning and management.

ABBREVIATIONS

AGSRC — Average Government School Recurrent Costs

COAG — Council of Australian Governments

DEEWR — Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

ICT — Information and communications technologies

ISCA — Independent Schools Council of Australia

SES — Socio-economic status