

The importance of independence



Independent schools have a well-deserved reputation as providers of quality education in Australia. They are also recognised for their leadership and innovation in school education, and enjoy a high level of public trust. Underpinning the success of independent schools is their autonomy as self-managing schools.

Australia's schooling provision is usually described as a dual system of government and non-government schools. Government schools are those owned by the state and territory governments. Non-government schools are either independent or Catholic schools. Most of the nearly 1,700 Catholic schools belong to systems operated by Catholic education authorities throughout Australia. Amongst independent schools, there are also more than 70 independent Catholic schools, many of them managed by religious orders.

Independent schools are so called because they are self-managing entities, not governed by a centralised authority. Some independent schools belong to small systems or networks but most are managed by their own board of governors or management committee.

International research has linked school autonomy to student academic achievement. In Australia, self-management is a key to the success of independent schools (see **The essential elements of school autonomy, page 11**).

Responsive to family and community need

Many independent schools have sprung from the unique vision of an educator or from community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include the independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas (see **Students from rural and remote areas, page 50**), and boarding schools (see **Future directions for boarding schools, page 52**). There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that seek to practice an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Rudolf Steiner or Montessori schools (see **Affiliations of independent schools, page 65**).

The right of parents to take an active role in the education of their children, and their right to choose the educational environment that best suits the needs of their children are important freedoms that Australians value highly. They are freedoms that underpin the development and growth of the independent schools sector and explain its diversity.

School autonomy is vital to sustain this diversity and offer meaningful choice to parents.

Governance and accountability

Self-management is not only the key to ensuring independent schools are responsive to their communities, it is the primary means by which independent schools meet public standards of social and financial accountability. Like the members of a corporate board, independent school governors are individually and collectively responsible for compliance with the legislation, regulation and mandatory reporting requirements that apply to schools (see **Accountabilities of independent schools, page 14**).





Because independent schools are corporate entities or incorporated associations, governors are also responsible for making sure their school meets the same standards of business operation and reporting expected of other corporations.

Some state governments have moved recently to impose further accountabilities around the appointment and operations of independent school boards beyond those already regulated by corporation law. Generally the new requirements become part of the regulations covering school registration.

Some state governments are reviewing the legislation governing registration of non-government schools. For example in 2005, the Queensland Government legislated to ensure non-government schools deal with external parties on an 'arm's length' basis. Non-government schools receiving government funding cannot have connections with for-profit entities that might compromise the independence of the school's governing body when making financial decisions.

The legislation also strengthened regulation covering the matters that can be taken into account for assessing the suitability of a non-government school's governing body. These matters now include the conduct of the governing body or individual directors, its relationship with other entities and its handling of conflicts of interest.

The legislation was designed to prevent for-profit schools, or a not-for-profit education provider managed by a for-profit company, from receiving government funding. The effect has been to increase further the regulation and accountability of Queensland's independent school boards and potentially undermine a fundamental characteristic of independent schools, namely their autonomy and right to determine their own governance structures and operations.

Independent school systems

There are some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies that are governed within approved systems. Altogether, some 17 per cent of the sector's students are enrolled in schools that belong to systems.

School systems in the independent sector vary considerably in their degree of development and in the nature of the relationship between the centre and constituent schools. All approved systems are required by law to be state or territory based, although some show stronger national focus in their operations than others. Some systems represent a loose collection of schools, while others possess stronger systemic arrangements with greater central influence and provision of services.

The most notable systems within the independent school sector are the Lutheran, Anglican and Seventh Day Adventist school systems. There are also three small regional Christian systems and an ecumenical system.

There are Lutheran systems in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria involving 71 member schools from a total of 82 Lutheran schools throughout Australia. They provide member schools with a variety of services including a national staffing policy, church approval for the establishment of new schools, curriculum development, general sharing of resources for school development, and distribution of funds based on need.

There are five Anglican systems – in Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. Each operates an individual organisational model. There is also an Australian Anglican Schools Network, which encompasses these systems and other independent Anglican schools.



The nine Seventh Day Adventist systems operate with a range of services provided to member schools both locally and from a national office.

There are also groupings of independent schools that are not defined as 'approved systems', from which member schools receive a level of service. There are numerous such organisations throughout Australia.

For further information:

Australian Anglican Schools Network: www.aasn.edu.au

Sydney Anglican Schools Corporation: www.sasc.nsw.edu.au

Queensland Anglican Schools Office: www.aso.qld.edu.au

Anglican Schools Commission Inc: www.asc.wa.edu.au

Adventist Schools Australia: www.adventist.edu.au

Lutheran Education Australia: www.lea.org.au

Swan Christian Education Association: www.scea.wa.edu.au

Information for school governors is published by a number of Associations of Independent Schools and is available on their websites (see **Key contacts in the sector**, page 67)