

# The essential elements of school autonomy

Many professionals in independent schools are concerned the trend towards greater government regulation will erode the educational benefits of school autonomy.

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In the following article, Ms Lang highlights the benefits of school autonomy, and identifies its key elements that she believes are essential for distinctive and quality independent schooling.

The greatest asset of independent schools in Australia has been their relative degree of autonomy as individual organisations. This has enabled them to respond flexibly as professional educational organisations to the needs of particular local communities and individual students.

This point of view leads me to argue strongly for a careful balance between government directives and the independence of education professionals in schools.

In my experience, independent school autonomy does not mean that the school lacks educational, social and financial accountability. On the contrary, autonomy tends to increase the range of accountabilities of school boards, principals and staff. This is because the accountabilities of independent schools do not begin and end with national and state educational authorities, but also include high levels of accountability to fee-paying parents and students, and affiliated organisations and founders.

Hence, the greater the autonomy of a school, the more its principal, board and staff bear responsibilities to meet the priorities of the school community, and to develop and improve the school.

Why is this so? Well, the reality is that independent schools need to remain competitive to survive. Independent schools that don't enhance outcomes for their students will not thrive. Furthermore, dwindling student numbers and outcomes can lead to loss of employment within the school, or even school closure.

I am not claiming that autonomy alone guarantees distinctive and quality schooling. But it does allow the school to be responsible for its own destiny, to be innovative, flexible, driven by the school community, and responsive to change.

As a principal, I would nominate six key areas of school autonomy that are critical for independent schools. These are:

- the school's vision and values
- school board membership
- allocation of school income and development plans
- staff appointments and salaries
- curricula and cocurricula content
- student behaviour management.



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She is a former Queensland branch chair of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia and also represents independent schools on the Schools Working Party with the Gold Coast City Council Regional Economic Development Advisory Board. She is a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators and is currently undertaking a PhD on school transformation.



### Vision and values

The vision and values of an independent school are constantly being developed and adapted by its stakeholders. Those involved include the school principal and board, staff, parents, students, founders and affiliated religious authorities, and those that espouse particular educational philosophies related to the school. The school's vision and values form the reference point on which most aspects of school life are founded and give an operational framework. As the diversity of the Australian independent schools sector attests, an independent school's vision and values are often highly individual to the school.

Parents and students attending the school are expected to share and support the school's vision and values, and to contribute to developing them. In this way the school community grows with a common educational perspective. Obviously, the school's determination of its individual vision and values is important in achieving high levels of cohesion and direction, which cannot easily be matched when values are imposed from outside.

### School board

Being the controlling management and decision-making body of most independent schools, the school board needs individual members who are fully committed to the school's vision and values, as well as appropriately experienced to be stewards of the school's development goals and financial operations. Like most independent school principals, I regard my board as essential for sound guidance of the school, providing me with a range of support and expertise in my leadership role. It is clearly not the role of any other organisation, other than the school itself, to select and appoint appropriately qualified individuals to the board of an independent school.

With my board, and in consultation with others, I have responsibility to develop the school budget and deciding how income will be spent. While some public funding is provided for a proportion of our recurrent costs and a minimal amount of our capital costs, most independent schools receive the bulk of their income from parents, through fees. Our school's individual educational priorities guide our decisions on expenditure and help us identify and target resources. This financial control helps us to meet our commitments to our school community and individual students.

As with any organisation, it is extremely important that independent schools are free to appoint their own staff. As principal, often with the input of board members and senior staff, I have the authority to advertise for and select staff, and negotiate employment conditions. This autonomy is crucial because it ensures that we can make our own decisions about staff appointments, and that we know prospective staff are freely **choosing** our school and are motivated to work successfully with us.

## Curriculum

Autonomy over curriculum and the matriculation assessments offered within independent schools allows them to choose the best from around the world, such as internationally recognised matriculation programmes developed by the International Baccalaureate organisation and Cambridge University, as well as Australian state/territory curricula. Independent schools can also use their considerable expertise to develop curricula and teaching styles that best suit the needs of their students. Over the years, I have found that individual school curriculum content is often an important aspect of school choice for parents who are discerning about education.

Autonomy also enables independent schools to develop cocurricular programs that are suited to their families and to the school's local environment. Some independent school communities have the resources and expectations to support costly activities, while others need more economical programmes. Autonomy also enables independent schools to include cocurricula involvement as part of staff responsibilities.

Finally, I believe management of student behaviour must also be within the individual school's control. Most independent schools require parents and students to formally agree to the school's behaviour management policy at the time of enrolment. On the whole, this means that independent schools usually enjoy the support of most parents and the cooperation of students in maintaining standards of behaviour.

As Australian schools and their various representative bodies continue to consult with governments regarding school regulation, all parties would do well to remember the record of excellent student outcomes achieved by the independent schools sector where school autonomy has, in the past at least, been given the respect it deserves.

The views expressed in this article are those of Ms Lang and are not necessarily those of an Association of Independent Schools or of the Independent Schools Council of Australia.

