



Independent Schools  
Council of Australia

## **INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AND ACCOUNTABILITY: THE NATIONAL AGENDA**

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**Bill Daniels, ISCA Executive Director**

*Bill Daniels, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, argues that the Australian Government's new accountability arrangements for independent schools are part and parcel of the government's long-term agenda to improve school quality.*

New conditions apply to Australian Government general recurrent grants for the 2005-2008 schools funding quadrennium. Regulations to the *Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act* were legislated in August 2005 and cover:

- Participation in common national testing for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9
- Participation in and reporting to parents on benchmarking tests
- Setting of national standards
- Commitment to all students achieving national benchmarks
- Reporting of student performance information by background characteristics
- Form and content of student reports
- Reporting on and publication of school performance measures

The regulations follow closely the initial draft issued to the sector in a consultative process managed by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) earlier this year. The independent sector was active in this process. ISCA and all state and territory Associations of Independent Schools made representations to DEST and there were also direct representations to the federal Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson.

While these submissions differed in detail – reflecting the different impact of the new regulations according to state and territory – common to all were concerns regarding the educational value of some of the reporting requirements and the administrative burden and associated costs of meeting the new regulations. For some schools the federal reporting requirements are a duplication of already onerous state requirements.

Dr Nelson has made it quite clear, however, that 2006 is the crunch year on performance reporting.

### **A developing agenda**

The federal government made plain its intentions for schools well before the 2004 federal election.

On 13 November, 2003 Dr Nelson announced the government's 10-point National Education Framework for Schools:

1. Supporting the professional standing of teachers
2. Attracting the best to the profession
3. National consistency in schooling
4. Giving more autonomy to school principals
5. Intolerance of poorly performing schools
6. Providing meaningful information to parents
7. Making values a core part of schooling
8. Creating safer schools
9. Accelerating indigenous education outcomes
10. Creating smooth transitions from school to career

Up to this point the government's main concerns had been improving literacy and numeracy outcomes (through the introduction of benchmarking testing and targeted programs) and improving the education outcomes of indigenous students. It was also interested in maths and science teaching, quality teaching in general and quality schooling in general. The government remains interested in all of these areas, but the 10-point framework developed by Dr Nelson marked a substantial broadening of the government's agenda.

In 2004 there was a gradual fleshing out of the Minister's key concerns.

On 11 March 2004, the government announced that there would be an additional \$8 billion for school education in the 2005-2008 quadrennium linked to what it described as an 'enhanced performance framework' for all Australian schools.

New reporting requirements would help parents make informed decisions and enable poorly performing schools to be 'identified and targeted for action'. Public reporting on school performance measures would cover academic outcomes, VET options, school leaver destinations, teacher qualifications and professional development, absentee rates for students and teachers and the reporting of student performance against national benchmarks.

School authorities would also be required to sign up to:

- a uniform school starting age by 2010
- common outcomes testing in the key areas of Maths, Science, English and Civics and Citizenship
- formal commitment to a national safe schools framework, and
- school reports that give parents timely, plain language feedback on their child's performance.

There was also mention of performance measures covering scientific literacy, ICT literacy, VET in schools and Civics and Citizenship.

On April 30, 2004 the government stipulated that public reporting of school performance measures should be accessible on the internet. It was also suggested that schools might want to publish the information in annual reports or on signs at the school gate. The Minister offered an example of what such a sign might look like.

On 22 June 2004, when the quadrennium funding legislation was introduced in Parliament, the Prime Minister issued a joint statement with Dr Nelson that described the government's intentions in regard to new funding conditions under several key themes:

- Greater national consistency in schooling
- Better reporting to parents
- Transparency of school performance through reporting
- Safe schools
- Greater autonomy for school principals
- Physical activity
- Values

In addition to plain language student reports, schools would now have to report student benchmarking results relative to the child's peer group at school. Further, at least two hours per week of physical education in the compulsory years of schooling was to be a condition of funding, as well as commitment to the National Safe Schools Framework and the requirements that schools have a functioning flagpole, fly the Australian flag and display the national values framework in a prominent place.

The government has been consistent in articulating what it wants in return for its considerable investment in Australian schools. It went to the 2004 election on this education agenda, it was prepared to fight the states over it (the states and territories only signed off on their funding agreements in June 2005), and it will not back down.

### **Politics and ideology**

Driving the government's agenda is a determination to make schools and school authorities accountable for the education they deliver.

There is no doubt of the Government's interest in raising the quality of Australian school education; evidence the \$33 billion it is prepared to invest in the current funding quadrennium. The Government is also committed to supporting a viable non-government sector – not because it wants to undermine the government sector, as is often claimed – but because it sees competition in schooling as an important means to leverage quality gains across all school sectors. Hence the repeated claims from the Government that it supports choice in schooling. This is not empty rhetoric; it is market ideology applied to schools.

From this perspective, new conditions such as those relating to the publication of school performance measures and reporting to parents can be understood as facilitating competition and choice, and as the application of external pressures on schools to do better.

Benchmarking and standardised national testing are further powerful indirect pressures on schools and what they teach. There has been a gradual acceptance that such testing is inevitable. To appreciate just how far and how fast we have moved as a nation on this issue, recall that just eight years ago state education ministers were vehemently opposed to the Commonwealth's intervention on literacy and numeracy.

Benchmarking and standardised testing are also part of the government's push for greater national consistency in schooling. The government also wants a uniform school starting age by 2010. At the other end of the schooling cycle, it is aiming for a common national tertiary entrance scheme, and the Minister is investigating options for a national Year 12 Australian Certificate of Education.

### **New federalism**

The Australian Government's readiness to buy and regulate its way into what has traditionally been the domain of state and territory governments has coined the phrase 'new federalism'. The education sector has not been immune from the government's centralist tendencies, examples being:

- \$700 literacy tuition vouchers
- Direct capital grants to government schools
- Right to hire and fire for government school principals
- The establishment of Australian Technical Colleges
- Common school starting age
- Australian Certificate of Education
- National testing
- National student data collection
- Increasing federal regulation

The new reporting requirements, the tuition vouchers, the channeling of additional capital funding through government school organisations rather than state bureaucracies and the establishment of the Australian Technical Colleges also show the government's interest in empowering parents as consumers of education.

### **Future challenges**

Looking to the future, we can be sure that the new Australian Government funding conditions will impose a costly administrative burden on our schools. We can be equally certain that benchmarking and national testing and the reporting requirements around them will exert a strong conforming influence on what happens in the classroom. And as government schools are encouraged to become more like independent schools through increasing autonomy for principals, then a very real challenge for independent schools will be how to remain distinctive education communities.

Patrick Bassett, President of the National Association of Independent Schools of the United States has written that:

Within each of our schools, to the extent that we retain the ability to stand apart, we need to work continuously at developing a local consensus about the meaning of quality. It is the particular definition of quality that makes an independent school distinctive and generates enthusiasm among its constituencies.

Developing that consensus on the meaning of quality is a challenge for individual schools, and it is the challenge we must also take up collectively if we are to retain our place in Australian schooling. Given the track record of independent schools as quality education providers to the Australian public, I believe it is a challenge that can be faced with great optimism.

*This article is based on a presentation delivered by Bill Daniels at the Association of Independent Schools of Queensland 2005 Biennial State Conference, Townsville, 27-29 July 2005. The theme of the conference was 'Riding the wave: Maintaining independence in the face of increasing accountability'.*