



Independent Schools  
Council of Australia

## **SURVIVING IN AN AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **Independence**

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**Bill Daniels, ISCA Executive Director**

*Bill Daniels, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, argues that independent schools must embrace increasing demands for accountability if they are to remain competitive.*

Independent schools now operate in a dynamic accountability environment. As well as facing increased scrutiny of their financial and operational arrangements, the sector must accommodate a demand for professional accountability of teachers and administrators, and respond to rising demand for greater educational accountability.

With the introduction by the federal government of new regulations for the 2005-2008 funding quadrennium, to a significant degree the demand for educational accountability is now expressed as conditions of government funding.

Regulations to the *Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act* were introduced in August 2005 and cover:

- Data collection on student background characteristics
- Participation in common national testing for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9
- Participation in and reporting to parents on benchmarking tests
- Commitment to all students achieving national benchmarks
- Commitment to the National Safe Schools Framework and the National Values Framework
- Two hours' physical activity per week for students of compulsory school age
- Principals' autonomy to hire and fire
- Form and content of student reports
- Reporting on and publication of school performance measures

The independent sector has been active in negotiations over the new regulations. ISCA and all state and territory Associations of Independent Schools made representations to the federal Department of Education, Science and Training and directly to the Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson. In general, the sector queried the educational value of some of the regulations and the administrative burden and associated costs of the reporting requirements which – for some schools – are a duplication of already onerous state reporting requirements. There is sector-wide concern over reporting student assessment by quartile rankings, particularly for students in the early years, and a sense that school autonomy is being eroded to the detriment of educational quality.

I am sometimes asked whether independent schools would be better off to forego their government funding and retain their autonomy. However, while meeting the conditions of funding represents a huge administrative burden and therefore cost to schools, relief from that burden should not be confused with autonomy. Governments have the power to regulate our schools and enact legislation governing our operations whether or not they contribute to school costs. In some states and territories, curriculum and reporting on school performance measures are already part and parcel of school registration requirements.

### **Emerging accountability demands**

It is far more helpful to view government funding as the sweetener for a bitter pill than as a poisoned chalice. That pill is certainly getting larger and more difficult to swallow, but it is not going to disappear. All the evidence points to a ramping up of external pressures on schools, not just through government regulation, but through the evolving profile of students and their families as consumers of education.

Just as schools are being asked to comply with accountability mechanisms shaped by legislation, regulation and mandatory reporting requirements, they are also faced with the need to respond to non-mandatory accountability demands. That is, they must be not only compliant, but responsive; not only responsive, but responsible.

The notion of responsibility is an important aspect of accountability. In the United Kingdom and New Zealand, for example, schools are subject to inspection procedures that shift the locus of responsibility for a range of functions from schools back to government. In Australia, in the independent schools sector, the locus of responsibility for educational and financial accountabilities largely rests with the school or its owners. Because of this it can be said that there is a large measure of public trust in independent schools.

The growth of the sector is testament to the fact that independent schools have been and continue to be worthy of this public trust. However, to retain that trust in the future – and to continue to attract students in an increasingly competitive environment – schools must be prepared to embrace emerging accountability demands. In short, they must be prepared to demonstrate how they ‘add value’.

### **US trends**

Earlier this year the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) in the United States asked opinion leaders in education, business and the media to predict the trends that

will impact on independent education in the US over the next two decades.<sup>1</sup> NAIS then suggests action steps that schools may take to respond to these trends. Independent schools in the US do not receive general recurrent funding from governments, yet there are startling parallels between the strategies proposed for voluntary adoption by these schools and what has been mandated by government here in Australia. Consider the following.

Noting demographic trends, such as increasing racial diversity and an ageing population, NAIS suggests that schools base their strategic response on sound research, beginning with their own school. It is proposed that schools chart and analyse their enrolment history, including the geographic location of their students, the feeder schools students come from, and the racial makeup of the student body. In Australia, schools must now collect student background characteristics to meet federal funding conditions. The implication for our sector, then, is to view enrolment data collection as not just a burdensome administrative task undertaken for government but as an important means to help maintain enrolments.

NAIS also suggests that schools periodically survey their parents to gauge parental satisfaction and whether parents' perceptions of the school are in line with the school's messaging. The satisfaction of parents, teachers and students is one of the school performance indicators on which the Australian Government now requires schools to provide information. Again, the implication from the NAIS study is that savvy schools will be using a mandated activity for their own strategic advantage.

Of further interest in the NAIS report is the suggestion that alumni tracking should be tied to the independent school accreditation process as an accountability mechanism. Under the new Australian Government regulations schools must report on school leaver destinations – an onerous and costly exercise yet one which NAIS has identified as a viable marketing tool for US independent schools. NAIS suggests alumni tracking may also prove useful in helping schools develop their communities and diversify their revenue streams, such as by offering courses and international tours for alumni.

### **The importance of communication**

The NAIS survey notes that leaders of US independent schools report that they are finding it harder to manage the growing consumerism in education; meet demands for specialised and individualised services; and provide the level of information that parents ask for. School leaders also report that they are finding it increasingly difficult to communicate effectively with parents. Suggested responses include communicating clearly with parents about the mission and culture of the school and following up the admissions process with frequent communication with parents. Parental education and outreach and parent contracts are also suggested as ways that schools can balance parents' and students' expectations with sound educational practices.

This advice would appear to resonate well in the Australian context. In response to the new educational accountability requirements of both federal and state governments, including national benchmark testing and the ranking of students by quartile bands, some heads of independent schools in Australia have identified the need for principals to communicate better to parents, politicians and the community about what it is that makes a good education. There is a concern that if school leaders do not adequately explain the educational

philosophies that inform curriculum development, pedagogy, assessment and reporting in their schools, then it will be left to politicians and the media to define what is a good education.

The message from some Australian heads is that independent schools must genuinely seek a new relationship with their stakeholders if they are to remain leaders and innovators in education, and if they are to retain the freedom to develop as distinctive educational communities.

The NAIS report quotes Grant Wiggins, President of Authentic Education, a US schools consultancy group, who notes that the trend for accountability is accelerating in both the public and private sectors:

Independent schools that continue to stiff-arm the public's need for data and its wanting to give feedback will suffer a backlash. Schools will need to become more results-driven and client-friendly as tuitions [fees] rise.<sup>2</sup>

At the recent Association of Independent Schools of Queensland conference on accountability<sup>3</sup>, it was apparent that there is considerable alignment between what is being demanded of Australian schools by the federal government and the kind of information that parents want. What the NAIS strategies for US independent schools suggest is that independent schools would do well to use what is mandated by government as the foundation of their response to the demands of their present and future clientele.

While there is much in the US that mirrors the experience of Australian independent schools, we need only consider our own environment to be certain that government-mandated accountability regimes for schools are here to stay. What the US experience confirms for us, however, is that if independent schools wish to remain leaders in Australian education they must embrace these regimes, develop them, even re-model and transcend them. Most certainly we must grasp the opportunity to use them to retain our edge in an increasingly competitive environment.

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<sup>1</sup> NAIS Opinion Leaders Survey: Forecasting Independent Education to 2025. A report by the National Association of Independent Schools, 2005. Available at <http://www.nais.org/files/PDFs/OpinionLeadersSurveyJune05.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 13.

<sup>3</sup> 'Riding the wave: Maintaining independence in the face of increasing accountability', AISQ biennial state conference, July 27-29, 2005. Proceedings are available at [www.aisq.qld.edu.au](http://www.aisq.qld.edu.au).