# Table of Contents

1.0 Protecting the Vision  

2.0 What has changed since 2009?  

3.0 What constitutes a ‘highly effective’ school?  

4.0 Why does Independence matter?  

5.0 Whither Independence?  

6.0 AISSA and School Governance
1.0 Protecting the Vision

In 2009 AISSA published a thoughtful paper by Luke Thomson, then Headmaster of Trinity College, on the characteristics of Independent schools in the 21st century. Entitled Independent Schooling: Protecting the Vision, his paper identified key strengths of the sector and some of the challenges facing Independent schools, and was intended to ‘…facilitate discussion…about emerging structural arrangements for the funding of schools and associated demands of an increasingly regulated bureaucratic environment in which these arrangements operate.’

These schools, he argued, had a proud record of achievement, measured not only in academic terms but also in building communities, building a liberal democratic nation and supporting social justice, and had contributed significantly to enacting Commonwealth and State policy reforms. Moreover their ‘unique characteristics…could be emulated by the State government in establishing a more responsive, effective and autonomous school system.’

But as the first decade of the new century drew to a close this record of achievement was not always apparent to governments of any political persuasion. The focus increasingly was on compliance with centrally imposed objectives. This approach did not recognize the special characteristics of Independent schools. In this environment, Thomson argued, it was well worth taking time out to reflect on two fundamental questions: (1) What special characteristics of Independent schools are worth fighting for; and (2) How best to do this in the new regulatory environment so that individual schools and the sector as a whole flourish? Little more than two years later these two questions are as valid as ever but the goal posts, the regulatory framework within which Independent schools operate, keep shifting. It is doubtful in fact that any other two-year period has seen the regulatory framework shift as fast as it did between 2009 and 2011.

This paper looks at the two questions Luke Thomson posed and asks what has changed since 2009. Its methodology is different insofar as it is based largely on discussions, in January and February 2012, with 12 Heads from a representative sample of Independent schools, and AISSA would like to thank them for the time they generously made available. Their interest in the project, and the passion with which they spoke about Independent schooling in general, and their own schools in particular, goes a long way towards explaining why their schools are flourishing. At the same time, they were keenly aware of the challenges now facing Independent schools. Some were openly posing a third question: ‘How independent can Independent schools be in the new regulatory environment?’ Others were adding a fourth question: ‘What opportunities are there for us in this brave new age?’
This paper is part of a wider AISSA strategy designed to:

- Foster discussion in school communities and at school board level about the new government agenda;
- Encourage schools to build these discussions, (the opportunities they present as well as the threats), up-front into the strategic planning process rather than responding on an ad hoc basis as new initiatives are rolled out by governments; and most importantly
- Facilitate the efforts of each member school to strengthen its organizational capacity to implement its unique vision and respond positively to the new regulatory environment.

2.0 | What has changed since 2009?

In some ways the answer is ‘more of the same’ – the compliance agenda which might be said to have been instituted by the Howard Government has continued apace by the Rudd and Gillard governments.

There was broad agreement amongst principals that:

- Formalised compliance requirements are now much greater than even three years ago.
- This places a significant additional financial burden on schools, the equivalent of about a full time salary, the Head of a larger school thought.
- The focus on compliance risks taking attention away from a school’s core business; i.e. what goes on in the classroom.
- Governments have every right to expect accountability from schools in receipt of taxpayers’ funds but accountability is not new to Independent schools.
- Heads have always been accountable to school boards and Heads and boards alike to parents and students who will vote with their feet if they feel the school is underperforming.
- The issue is not accountability/compliance per se, rather the particular model imposed on Independent schools.
- The government accountability seems to be underpinned by a deficit approach, one which takes scant account of proven track records and requires schools to demonstrate how they add value.
Implicitly, this model levels down rather than up; the danger one Head noted, is that under this regime accountability can very quickly become compliance with centrally imposed minimal standards.

Moreover a ‘one size fits all’ model means it is sometimes harder for Independent schools to demonstrate how the education they offer differs from that of other schools.

There was also agreement too that the new regulatory framework imposed by governments was not the only factor reshaping the environment in which Independent schools operate, even if it was the most important. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) may have begun only in late 2008 but some schools were feeling its impact within 12 months. Since then it has had a significant impact on the way they operate. Some Heads also pointed to a willingness on the part of parents and students to migrate from one school to another to an extent unknown even a few years earlier.

Taken together, the new regulatory framework, the GFC and other developments mean that Independent schools increasingly are aware that they have to be more ‘business sensitive than before and faster to respond to challenges and opportunities; as one Head put it ...the ‘we’re immune to business trends’ de fault position cuts no ice. Increasingly school boards operate more like company boards. Heads, like CEOs, are preoccupied with future business; the same Head felt it now takes up 80 per cent of his time. More than ever the focus is on effective governance so that schools can continue to deliver excellent outcomes for young people in times of rapid change. If the Heads interviewed for this report agreed on one point, it is that the unique structure of Independent schools means they are generally well placed to meet this challenge and become, in the preferred term of Professor Geoff Masters, ACER’s CEO, ‘highly effective’ schools.
What constitutes a ‘highly effective’ school?

Highly effective schools, Masters suggested in ‘What Makes a Good School?, an article first published in The Courier-Mail, Brisbane, on 22 January 2004, have six characteristics.

‘First, highly effective schools have strong and effective school leaders whose primary focus is on establishing a culture of learning throughout the school. The school is organised, and resources are allocated, in pursuit of this overarching purpose…

Second, in these schools learning is seen as the central purpose of school and takes precedence over everything else. High expectations are set for student learning, whether in classrooms or other learning contexts. There is a deep belief in the ability of every student to learn and to achieve high standards with appropriate and sensitive teaching. Class time is used as learning time; classrooms are calm and busy; and interruptions to learning are discouraged. Outstanding schools recognise and celebrate successful learning and high achievement.

Third, in highly effective schools, teachers have a thorough and up-to-date knowledge of their subjects and a deep understanding of how students learn particular subjects. This understanding includes an appreciation of how learning typically proceeds in a subject and of the kinds of misunderstandings learners commonly develop. In these schools, teachers know their students well: their individual interests, backgrounds, motivations and learning styles. These schools insist on the mastery of foundational skills such as reading and numeracy, and also work to encourage high levels of critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and teamwork. Teachers in highly effective schools encourage students to accept responsibility for their own learning and teach them how to continue learning throughout life.

Fourth, highly effective schools are characterised by outstanding school cultures. In these schools students have a sense of belonging and pride. They enjoy learning and are engaged and challenged. The school provides a physical and social setting that is safe, well organised and caring. Values of respect, tolerance and inclusion are promoted throughout the school and cultural and religious diversity are welcomed and celebrated. In such schools there is a strong commitment to a culture of learning and continuous improvement and an ongoing search for information and knowledge that can be used to improve on current practice.

Fifth, highly effective schools have well-developed systems for evaluating and monitoring their performance. They promote a culture of self-evaluation and reflection and collect and use data to inform decision making at all levels. They
recognise the importance of providing meaningful performance information to a range of stakeholders, including parents. These schools place a high priority on the early identification and remediation of gaps and difficulties in student learning. They give timely feedback to students in forms that can be used to guide further learning, and they encourage students to develop skills in monitoring their own progress.

Finally, effective schools have high levels of parent and community involvement. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting their children’s learning. Parents are involved in setting goals for the school and in developing school policies. The school itself is seen as an important part of the local community and these schools often find ways to involve business and community leaders in the work of the school, as well as to establish partnerships with other agencies and businesses to advance school goals.'

Highly effective schools, as measured against Masters’ six markers, are to be found in all school sectors. However there is reason to think that their relative autonomy of Independent schools leaves them particularly well placed to meet the effectiveness test.

4.0 Why does Independence matter?

‘Governance and ownership are what set Independent schools apart,’ one Head said. ‘Everything else follows from there.’ It was a sentiment echoed by all Heads interviewed for this paper. Independence matters as experience suggests well managed schools can use it to good effect. For ‘Independence’ means local school governance. Other things being equal, decades of experience suggests local school governance is more likely to translate into richer and more diverse outcomes for all stakeholders, the hallmark of the highly effective schools of which Masters writes.

Broadly, local school governance, with the control of finances, curriculum, staffing and day-to-day management implicit in this model, is more likely to:

- Empower schools to fashion distinctive cultures, often but not always faith-based;
- Foster both a learning culture based on excellence and respect, one which recognizes individual achievement in its many forms, and a service culture which acknowledges an obligation to the less fortunate;
- Generate local solutions for local needs as opposed to decision making based on centrally imposed directives;
Multiply choices for parents seeking appropriate schools for their children, surely a fundamental right in Australian society;

- Invite parental involvement at school governance level as well as in the education of the individual child;

- Foster effective school governance in all its guises – educational delivery, financial management and administration - because responsibility can be sheeted home unambiguously to a board and a Head;

- Facilitate swift, flexible decision making as opportunities and challenges emerge;

- Build communities in an increasingly atomized and secular age, communities which sometimes extend beyond the school gates to villages and schools in developing countries; and

- Above all, provide a learning environment in which individual children feel safe, valued and understood, and can engage with learning, the core business of educators.

These themes – learning, achievement, community, diversity and choice - emerged time and again in conversations with Heads, and all are consequences of each Independent school’s capacity, as one Head put it, ‘to determine our future.’ They are the spin-offs of autonomy and take very different forms from one AISSA-affiliated school to another. While the nature of the education may vary between schools, Heads agreed that parents value autonomy, the ‘clarity of focus’ (another Head’s term) it brings to schools and the ‘quality and personal touches’ they see. They have a vested interest in the Independent schools their children attend, so much so that some schools have associations of former parents as well as old scholars’ associations. The benefits of autonomy are so abundantly clear, several Heads noted, as did Luke Thomson in 2009, that DEDS is making limited moves in this direction for its new super schools.
5.0 Whither Independence?

Autonomy then is the bedrock on which Independent schools rest. At the same time, the Heads interviewed for this report were aware that in the future the Commonwealth’s compliance agenda conceivably might threaten that foundation. The crunch would come, one said, if the Commonwealth were to require any school in receipt of government funding to set aside a seat on its board for a government appointed representative, or if it were to dictate what should be taught, and how it should be taught, in a manner and to a degree the school considered likely to compromise its bedrock assumptions about faith or pedagogy or both. Compliance issues now ‘irksome and onerous,’ in the prevailing view, would then take on a very different hue.

This emphasis on autonomy is not to imply that Independent schools are marked by a narrowness of vision and ‘head in the sand’ dogmatism. Pragmatically, Heads recognize that there are limits to independence; it could not be otherwise given the reliance of many schools on government funding as their primary income stream, the growing interconnectedness of the world in which we live, the Commonwealth’s national education agenda, and social changes including greater population movements between States. While they may have reservations about centrally imposed compliance models, Principals made it very clear that they are not opposed to greater co-operation. They value both the collegiality AISSA fosters between Heads and the knowledge that all member schools have an equal right to a place at the table. They appreciate AISSA’s role in facilitating the sharing of ideas and best practice between schools. At another level, they see AISSA’s role in the roll-out of the BER as a fine example of what can be achieved. AISSA co-ordinated the roll-out on the sector’s behalf, simplified processes and accountability, and effective governance at board level ensured individual schools were able to do the rest. Independent schools did well out of the BER. This model, which might be called pragmatic co-operation, delivered good outcomes for the sector.

Some Heads argued that the next step is for the sector to do more to shape the national education agenda. Independent schools often represent best practice in education and are highly regarded in the community. But they have often been reticent, individually and collectively, and often for good reason attempt to lead the national debate on education. To give one example, these Heads suggested AISSA work with governments to develop a new compliance model, one that empowers individual schools at the local level and facilitates the sharing of good ideas between schools in all sectors. To that end, they suggested AISSA commission action research into aspects of Independent schooling which might translate successfully across sectors.

The mantra for Independent schools, one Head noted, should be ‘work with but not for,’ and this might happen on two levels: informally as two or more schools find
common interests bringing them together on specific issues, and formally through AISSA, the peak body, on issues of wider significance.

6.0 AISSA and School Governance

As the peak body for Independent schools in South Australia, AISSA’s role in all this is to facilitate the efforts of individual schools to take full advantage of the opportunities inherent in the autonomy they enjoy. It is not to direct schools. Rather it is to help schools build their own capacity to fashion quality educational outcomes for the young people they exist to serve, and not merely to help them respond more effectively to the new educational agenda of the Commonwealth.