INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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1. Introduction

This paper has been prepared to facilitate discussion within the Independent sector about emerging structural arrangements for the funding of schools and the associated demands of an increasingly regulated bureaucratic environment in which these arrangements operate. The paper identifies key strengths of the sector and some of the challenges facing Independent schools. It argues that Independent schools:

- are high achievers and make a significant contribution to enacting Federal and State government policy reforms and strategic objectives in areas such as meeting targets for national literacy and numeracy, year 12 results, participation rates in Languages education and the sciences
- have unique characteristics that could be emulated by the State government in establishing a more responsive, effective and autonomous school system
- have a long history of supporting social justice and the development of a liberal democratic nation
- contribute to community building at a local and wider community level

The paper also raises two central questions for discussion: what have we got that is worth keeping - what are the specific characteristics of Independent schools and school systems that must be preserved in order to ensure that we can continue to provide an excellent education for our students? How are we going to achieve this - what strategies should we implement to ensure that the characteristic strengths of our sector continue to flourish?

The answers to these questions will inform the engagement of the AISSA and member schools with governments and will shape our response to the review of funding by the Federal government which is due to commence in 2010.

2. What are the characteristic strengths of the Independent sector?

There are a number of key matters relating to the nature of independent education that should be foregrounded in our continuing advocacy, and especially in relation to the question of government funding and its relationship with recent major policy initiatives. The first is to identify and promote the key strengths of the sector, including the governance model within which Independent schools operate, the diversity of educational offerings encompassed by the sector, the concomitant
feature of parent choice that this affords, and the very significant contribution made by Independent schools to social justice and educational equity.

2.1 Independent governance

Independent schools are by their nature self-governing and as such able to make decisions across all areas of operation that support and further their underpinning vision and aims. In accordance with their established core values, they are free to respond to the needs of their communities, cultivating relationships with all stakeholders in a manner that sustains continuing enrolments.

In most cases Independent schools are incorporated bodies: businesses limited by guarantee and/or that function in a semi-autonomous relationship to a ‘system’ that has formed, often on the basis of a common faith, a common set of values and culture. The vast majority of Independent schools are not for profit organisations and are recognised as charities for tax purposes. As such they are required to function within the legislative and regulatory framework relevant to not for profit organisations.

The hallmark of self-governance is the ability to govern and manage in a manner that protects the foundational aims of the institution. This means governing within a constitutional and/or policy framework that responds to the community it serves and to the educational and the business needs of the organisation.

In all areas of school life, the success of an Independent school is reliant on the effectiveness of its governance ensuring that all aspects of the organisation are soundly managed. The relationship between the CEO (Principal/Head) and the Governance structure (Board/Council) is a crucial one. Independent schools have spent many years refining the nature of this relationship ensuring that they are able to respond to the increasing complexity of the educational landscape and to adapt to national and international trends in good governance and excellent education.

Self-governance generates a culture of community support and ‘ownership’ of the school. There develops a willingness within the community, to contribute to the future viability of the school. In this context parents accept that they will contribute to the cost of educating their children and to the wellbeing of the school community. Through building social capital in this way, schools become a focus for innovation and change and often extend their social outreach into local and even international communities, creating a dynamic cultural reality which extends far beyond the school’s immediate locale.

The majority of Independent schools succeed because they have the necessary autonomy to respond to their community needs and manage change in a way that protects the core of their organisational vision and culture. This decision making power extends to the selection of staff and to a large degree the development of curriculum and the approaches to teaching and learning.

The Independent school sector feels that some of the fundamental characteristics vital to independence are being compromised by the desire of governments to regulate them. This seems to spring from misperceptions about the nature of, and possible solutions to perceived problems in education generally; problems often not
shared by the sector. Independent schools already work within a regulatory environment. They are required to be registered as educational providers. While the regulatory environment differs across states and territories, there are common elements. All Independent schools must have sound economic credentials, approved curriculum, appropriate governance models and operational policies, particularly in the areas of OHSW, legislation requirements such as school leaving age, and the use and management of physical plant. In South Australia all Independent schools are registered by the Non-Government Schools Registration Board every five years.

They are not subject to the vagaries of educational fads and fancies unless they wish to be, or in some unfortunate circumstances forced to be, and believe that exploring new approaches are generally in the best interests of their community. This has been the case even in instances when schools have had to ‘reinvent’ themselves as a consequence of dramatic shifts in enrolment markets and community expectations. One has only to consider Independent school amalgamations, the introduction of co-education and increasing enrolment share in a limited enrolment market to understand how it is that Independent schools, at different times in their history, have needed to respond in dynamic and forward thinking ways.

Historically Independent schools have been successful. Very few fail. Governments tend to develop regulatory and legislative frameworks which focus on the few failures or the few problems associated with a small number of schools, or in the case of State governments, problems associated with the State sector. This deficit approach has the tendency to perpetuate a desire to intrude into the governance and management of schools.

Independent schools provide an excellent example for governments when considering how they might implement greater local school autonomy in state sector educational provision. Independent schools are an excellent resource for the government, educational researchers, and communities that wish to explore how schools can be established and sustained without state-style bureaucratic structures and excessive regulation.

The success of the Independent school model is borne out in ways that include excellent results, prudent and self-improving budgeting, excellent facilities and physical infrastructure, responsiveness to the myriad needs of students, high retention rates, high levels of participation in teaching and learning programmes, value added programmes such as sport, performing and visual arts, religious traditions, ceremonies and community engagement and service. It is imperative that any future government-driven reform in school education acknowledges this fact. If a key policy initiative for government is to establish new models of school accountability then this must be done in light of the success of Independent schools, which are already answerable to the demands of their communities.

**It is the ability to fulfil, and through so doing protect, the core vision and aims of any one, and all, Independent schools, that must not be compromised.**
2.2 Diversity and Choice

Independent schooling is diverse by nature. The diversity within the sector reflects the diversity within our society. The establishment of schools based on a well recognised but non-mainstream educational philosophy (e.g. Steiner and Montessori) has added to the diversity within the Independent sector. Just as, historically and currently, States have established government selective schools that cater for the brightest students in their system, and specialist schools based on a particular discipline, such as agriculture, music, languages etc.

The growth of low fee Independent schools and the historical mission of many Independent schools to educate children from all economic and social backgrounds challenges the perception that only the rich and remarkably bright have access to Independent schools. It is now, and has been historically the case, that many government schools in affluent and even middle class suburbs are attended by children from relatively high socio-economic backgrounds whose socio-economic index is higher than many Independent school communities.

This is a crucial point. It is not the case, and never really was, that Independent schools are for the rich and Government schools for the poor, or that Independent schools are only for the academically gifted and Government schools for the rest. Political sloganeering based on this view is wrong. Parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds have been enrolling their children at Independent schools in droves for the last 30 years, even longer in many examples. Why? Precisely because they do not want economic status to be a determinant of educational outcomes for their children. If continual growth in enrolments is used as a measure, Independent schools continue to be remarkably successful at encouraging children to consider education as a means of transforming their lives. In many cases this means parents have encouraged their children to think beyond their current domestic circumstances to other possibilities, possibilities generated by sound education.

Hence, choice of school is not driven solely by the ability to pay. Parents will not enrol a child at an Independent school, even if they have the financial means, if they are convinced that their local government state school will provide their child with all they need. This is a fact of the market place. It is not necessarily affordability that determines school choice: it is the ethos, culture, educational offerings and support services provided by a school and the relationships that parents and children form with a school and its community that inform such decisions.

There are many students attending government schools who are very happy with the education they are receiving, even though their family have the means to pay for an independent education. Equally, Independent schools attract many parents who can only just afford school fees or are supported on bursaries, even though they could receive an education free of tuition fees within the state sector.

Independent schools welcome, accept and support government funding because they believe that the government’s contribution recognises the importance of choice and diversity to a healthy pluralistic democratic society and that Independent schools give excellent value for money. All parents, all tax payers, deserve a contribution to their child’s education. The SES model of commonwealth school funding distribution is not without its critics, but regardless of the critique, it is built on the principle of responsible economic distribution determined by a measure of community need.
This, it seems to me, is a sensible approach. Balancing the economic burden of educating Australian children throughout the private and public economy is also crucial to sustaining diversity, mirroring, as it does, the multitude of possible responses to educating our children and to remaining affordable to governments.

2.3 Independent schools and social justice

Historically, the co-existence of state and private educational institutions has its roots in strong democratic principles. The 19th century notion of universal education that sought to address the demands of an industrial age that required greater levels of community education, was not formulated on the basis of eradicating non-government educational institutions. It was not an ‘either, or’ philosophical model, regardless of partisan rhetoric to the contrary. 18th and 19th century progressive educational ideas were indebted to the many religious and philanthropic organisations that had sought to educate children well, regardless of and well before the governments’ desire to do the same.

There has always been a place for the Independent sector and its place has grown out of, and meaningfully contributed to the impetus for social justice and equity in education. The reduction of political debate to public versus private and by explicit and implicit inference, the linking of state education with social justice and equity and independent education with private, elitist self interest, is patently wrong and is rightly challenged.

The enrolment profile of the Independent school sector includes ever increasing numbers of students with disabilities and learning difficulties, rural and remote students, recent arrivals from overseas, and Indigenous students. The sector is subject to the same anti-discrimination legislation as the government sector. All school communities would sensibly maintain that they should receive substantially more public funds to educate and provide the necessary support services for these students. The principle of funding following students with special needs has strong support within the Independent school sector.

Independent schools have no doubt about their ability to deliver exceptional outcomes in these areas, and regardless of a lack of adequate public funding support, already have enviable programmes in place. They do not, however, receive the level of financial support from governments or adequate access to a wide range of government services that students and families attending government schools enjoy. Currently Independent schools are not in receipt of even a sensible fraction of financial support for such programmes that the government sector receives, when combining state and federal funding.

In spite of this, Independent schools across the country are engaged with a range of social justice activities that are successful, innovative and sustainable. Governments need to consider this fact lest they miss an opportunity to engage in and support programmes that work, that are community based and inspired, and that are not bound by ideological wars or bureaucratic tendencies to thwart innovation.
3. Key Challenges - The relationship between compliance and independence

Despite their strengths and relative success, Independent schools face some key challenges to maintaining their ‘independence’. Some of these challenges result from a lack of understanding on the part of Federal and State bureaucrats about the nature of independent schooling and the high accountability context within which Independent schools operate.

A current threat facing Independent schools and systems is that they fear some accountability and compliance measures are eroding their ability to exercise their independence. Independent schools were recently required, for example, to commit to a Commonwealth funding agreement that asked them to ‘sign on’ to National Curriculum without a clear and unambiguous understanding of what that curriculum is (it is still being written), or whether there were acceptable alternative curricular programmes such as the International Baccalaureate.

The latest Commonwealth funding agreement also contains a wide range of accountability requirements including the collection and publication of comprehensive data on each school. The State government is also seeking to establish a new funding agreement with another layer of accountability requirements.

Currently Independent schools are required to provide information regarding their financial health. Again, while some of the sections of the ‘financial health checklist’ are valid, others are poorly considered within school contexts. It is perplexing why most Independent schools are asked for additional financial information at all. Independent schools produce annual reports to their communities or systems which include full disclosure of their financial health and status. One only needs to ask.

This new way of operating is a challenge to Independent schools that are responsible business enterprises engaged in building school communities around shared values and principles that are clearly articulated, historically rooted and crucial to a sustainable educational future. No sensible Independent school board will risk signing up to ‘unknowns’. Due to the threat of funding withdrawal, however, it has been regarded as less of a risk to sign than not to sign. It is prudent and pragmatic governance provided that the cost of signing does not significantly undermine the foundational values of Independent schools.

Therefore our overwhelming concern is: just how independent can Independent schools remain under such circumstances? When does compliance with government accountability measures become a threat to independence? It is not simply a question of accountability for public funding, because by any measure Independent schools achieve stated government educational outcomes and priorities admirably and almost universally.

In those areas where under representation remains an issue, in special needs and indigenous education for example, it is precisely because of a lack of governmental financial and infrastructure support that Independent schools cannot further develop their offerings. In spite of this, Independent schools continue to run programmes that work effectively and in some cases that serve as examples of best practice across all sectors.
Governments are yet to argue their money is not well spent within the Independent school sector. So why the new and unnecessary bureaucratic burdens? Many of us feel that governments are in fact unaware of how Independent schools operate, which is different to the State and Catholic sectors. Governments are perhaps confused and misinformed, as a consequence unaware of the tremendous examples of outstanding, innovative educational practices that exist within an educational sector that is diverse, independent and fiercely loyal to the communities it serves and the principles upon which each were founded.

A fear shared within the Independent schooling sector is that such ignorance leads to demands that are in fact politically driven. The current Deputy Prime Minister has said that what was asked of one educational sector must be asked of another. There is a clear desire to co-merge and unify federal support to school sectors so that the long standing problem of having to face an unsettled political climate regarding non-government and government schools is minimised. ‘What’s good for the goose is good for the gander’ – the government’s educational maxim in tackling what Ms Gillard describes as: the end of educational ideology.

This strategy is flawed, even if it is ultimately used to lift standards in any one sector, if it is not predicated on a very clear understanding of the differences between the sectors. It makes no sense, for example, to work through National Partnerships to distribute funding when working directly with state Associations of Independent Schools is much more efficient, merely for the sake of political principle. At the moment, however, all AIS’s and ISCA are concerned about being bogged down in unnecessary and inefficient bureaucratic processes. The cost of ‘partnering’ is something all sectors have been spared under previous governments. This is not because sectors do not wish to cooperate. In the case of South Australia, that cooperation has been evident and consistent for many years. It is simply because it is inefficient and wasteful of resources.

Equally, it makes no sense to request performance data as a strategy for improving student performance from a sector that consistently operates well above average national and international benchmarks for any reason other than to draw wisdom from the excellent strategies that are being employed by these schools. And why stop at data analysis alone? Why not engage with the knowledge and expertise of those excellent schools in order to learn how that excellence is achieved through a much deeper narrative on school improvement, well beyond data collection and data publication?

It is not clear however, given the preliminary information, how the government intends to use school information. Publication of this data may well undermine community confidence in schools further even though the Independent sector will manage this new ‘league table’ approach better than many others. Independent schools are accustomed to working within the market and responsive to changing community need and perception. The opportunism implicit within an ill conceived school measurement system is worrying for the state of education as a whole. Literacy and numeracy outcomes are only part of the story of helping to develop the citizens of tomorrow.
4. Concluding Comments

The real danger facing Independent schools is reducing performance within the Independent sector. The greater the demands made on Independent schools and their sector associations to move attention and resources away from their core business of providing an excellent education, to the business of compliance, the more they will suffer from an over bureaucratised system. At worst this is procrustean, at best a misguided view of how to improve schooling and its outcomes. Improve educational outcomes by diffusing energy and rechanneling the very resources that underpin success in schools, rather than celebrating excellence regardless of the sector? This is not an outcome the Federal government can sensibly support. Any statistical analysis of the results students achieve in the Independent sector of each State and Territory relative to all other schools testifies that the sector is achieving significantly above National and State and Territory averages. Surely the last thing any government would wish to do is to effect overall improvement by ‘dumbing down’, or sabotaging an education sector that is thriving?

It seems staggering that government engagement with the Independent sector has generally been characterised by moves to make it fit into existing and new bureaucratic structures and processes, rather than enquiring into how it is that Independent schools govern and manage their schools, achieve good results and generally meet the needs of their communities as well as they do. I would suggest that rather than driving the Independent sector into inefficient and cumbersome processes, governments might look to the sector for examples of a new future for schooling. Why aren’t we all, especially governments, engaged in an energetic enquiry into what makes an excellent school - Independent, Catholic or state? It is certain that such an enquiry will conclude that tying up resources and time with burdensome bureaucratic processes and “one size fits all” models will most definitely not contribute to excellent educational outcomes in any sector.

We invite you to engage energetically in this important discussion on the strengths of the Independent education sector in Australia, the immense contribution that Independent schools make to the educational landscape in this country, and the challenges to continuing excellence in the sector presented by recent changes in government policy.

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