The Program
Outcomes based education, performance based contracts for CEO’s, national benchmarks, and standards in basic skills areas, are characteristic of the current era which demands increasing accountability in the education sector. We have seen both nationally and internationally, benchmarking and standards setting being used for a variety of purposes both educationally sound and unsound. Educational accountability for the Australian independent sector has long been linked to student achievement, university placement and in some cases to a more subjective and less tangible analysis of the personal growth and development of students; including aspects of character development, leadership ability, sporting or cultural success and demonstration of the values consistent with the school’s ethos. In the current environment, it will no longer be sufficient to ask how long the waiting list is or what the year 12 results were. Principals and School Councils will need a range of means for collecting accurate and objective data, on which to monitor the effectiveness of the teaching and learning programs, the management and organisational practices, and the leadership and culture of the school to inform their annual planning for school improvement.

Effective school leadership is concerned with striving to close the gap between the school’s vision and stated aims and the current reality of the day to day operation of the school. However doing more of the same type of evaluating is not enough – clearly we need to do things differently. Old ways of evaluation will not provide information of sufficient depth or reliability upon which to base important decisions concerning school resource allocation, strategic and operational planning or the maintenance of an enrolment base.

Independent schools have always considered responding to the needs of parents and students to be one of their most important tasks. It can be seen over the last decade however that the power of parent perception, and their adoption of a consumer focus to their choice of independent schools, requires schools to be constantly in touch with these perceptions and their current satisfaction levels across a range of key areas. One method of monitoring a school’s effectiveness is to survey all parents regularly to establish benchmarks for school improvement over time. Collection of this data needs to be unbiased, accurate and inclusive in its collection.

Similarly just as in all service based industries, staff satisfaction in the workplace is a key factor in client satisfaction. In the case of schools not only is there a strong link between staff satisfaction and commitment to best practice and professional growth, but also this is a critical determinant in ensuring high levels of parent and student satisfaction with the educational services offered by the school. Allowing staff to have input into the evaluative process demonstrating that their opinions are valued in a confidential, objective manner will also enhance the evaluation process.
The national school effectiveness monitor developed by Service Management Australia Pty Ltd, surveys parents and staff and provides Principals and School Councils with data which will:

- Identify what parents consider to be important and where expectations are exceeded, met or not met
- Identify the key components of parents’ decision making when considering enrolment
- Make general comparisons of the school’s performance with other independent schools
- Understand what staff consider to be important about their work and the school climate and identify where expectations are exceeded met or not met
- Assist staff to understand and effectively manage change in the complex school environment
- Monitor the development and enhancement of school culture
- Bring clarity to decision making about resource allocation for annual planning
- Have on hand objective data for the school’s public presentations and marketing activities
- Monitor the school’s performance over time against internal benchmarks.

Monitoring school effectiveness in this manner by the systematic collection of objective data from parents and staff supports school leadership and management in working toward school improvement in a proactive way. The collection of subjective, ad hoc and anecdotal evidence which is not set within a coherent framework and is often gathered in a reactive environment, can sometimes work against effective or accurate evaluation. In a climate of competition between government and non-government education, independent schools can lead the way by being proactive in setting their own benchmarks for school effectiveness.

The surveys created for the Benchmarks for School Effectiveness – Australia 2000 program, first ask the clients their perceived importance of the item and then how satisfied they are with the school’s performance on that item. Clearly, knowing what is important to parents and staff will be invaluable to all school Principals and School Councils. A weighted satisfaction index is then created. Critical gaps between the management’s perception of performance in key areas of school management and the actual levels of satisfaction as far as stakeholders are concerned, become obvious points for further investigation and for setting targets for school improvement. Our experience shows that the problems identified will most likely fall in the realm of three key areas – people, processes or perceptions. Future planning following participation in the Benchmarks for School Effectiveness – Australia 2000 could well centre on these areas in each of the key areas of independent school operation.
Early Results
Results from parent and staff surveys conducted in early 2000 are now providing important data on which schools can base their school improvement initiatives. The response rates for the parent survey ranged from 21% to 59% with surveys received from 4800 parents.

In rating the importance of each item on the survey, parents indicated the following to be the top 10 items of importance:

- Ensures students feel safe while at school
- Builds self esteem and confidence in students
- Has students who are happy
- Encourages students to think for themselves
- Assists students to have respect for others
- Has teaching staff who have a caring attitude towards students
- Develops students to their potential
- Teaches students to be self motivated
- Provides reports which keep parents well informed
- Assists students to have respect for themselves

The top ten items of importance for primary parents and for secondary parents showed little variation, except in the rating of class size as one of the ten for primary school parents.

Overall parents in independent schools are satisfied with the educational services provided. Significantly however there are areas which schools would rate as core business where parents’ perceptions are that schools could perform better. In each of the categories of the parent survey respondents were generally very satisfied with school leadership, co-curricular programs and the school’s image and reputation but significantly less satisfied with fundamental areas of school life in curriculum, quality of teaching and learning, and behaviour management. Rank ordering of these categories from highest to lowest satisfaction is indicated below:

- Image and reputation
- Support staff
- Co-curricular program
- School leadership
- Communication
- Quality of caring and support
- Spiritual and personal development
- Boarding issues
- Curriculum
- Quality of teaching and learning
- Behaviour management.
The survey analysis allows for the calculation of gaps between the importance of an item and the parent’s perception of the school’s performance. The top ten items of concern to parents across all schools are spread across the above categories and are as follows:

- Provides for the individual learning needs of students
- Encourages students to voice their concerns
- Develops students to their potential
- Helps to motivate and challenge students
- Has teaching staff who use effective teaching strategies
- Provides support to allow students to meet expectations
- Has appropriate class sizes
- Assists students to develop their individual strengths and interests through a personal development program
- Effectively implements an anti-harassment program
- Builds self esteem and confidence in students.

The staff survey response rates were between 42% and 79% across schools with 520 staff responding. Although to date the sample is small there are significant trends to be noted given the high response rates for each school. Staff rate the following as most important in the workplace:

- Trusts me to do the job for which I was employed
- Ensures that students feel safe while at school
- Is an enjoyable place to work
- Encourages positive staff morale
- Provides job satisfaction
- Provides a caring and supportive environment
- Has staff who care for and support students
- Values my contribution
- Is able to attract professional staff
- Is able to keep professional staff.

It is significant that, of the top 20 items staff rate as important, only 6 items reached the satisfaction benchmark. This would tend to support what leaders and managers in schools would know to be true, and is supported by the research literature, that there are major areas of concern with respect to morale within the teaching profession and with teachers’ capacity to cope with the rapidity of social and educational change. There are however pointers emerging from the survey data which will assist schools to work toward easing the difficulties found in most teaching environments.

Overall satisfaction for each category within the survey is ranked below, highlighting that teachers are generally satisfied with performance in areas related to their daily work with students and parents but less satisfied with organisational aspects of their work. The categories ranked from highest to lowest satisfaction are:
• Quality of caring and support
• School mission and values
• Administration and support
• Quality of teaching and learning
• Leadership of immediate supervisor
• Work group cohesion
• Communication
• Professional development
• Involvement and change
• Leadership and management
• Monitoring performance
• Job satisfaction and morale.

Not surprisingly for school leaders the highest gaps between importance and perceptions of performance are in the following areas:

• Time to do the job
• Open communication between staff and management
• Being valued and recognized
• Conflict resolution
• Implementing and monitoring change
• Having an enjoyable place to work
• Monitoring performance.

In conclusion, the Benchmarking surveys for independent schools in Australia are proving to be a most effective tool in the management strategies employed by schools to keep in touch with parent and staff perceptions, and to plan school improvement initiatives. Schools in the initial rounds have begun using the data to that end and as additional schools join the program in 2001, a substantial data bank of information from which independent schools can draw in support of their leadership and management efforts will continue to accrue.

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