
From the President

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In addition to the privilege of being the National President of ACEL, I have a fantastic day job that gets me into schools and in contact with school principals and their staff on a daily basis. In fact over the past seven weeks, in conjunction with my Executive Team, I have been working my way around the state of Queensland to talk to all 1233 of our system's school principals in addition to all staff in the seven regional offices in order to collaborate on how we can ensure that all of our students can achieve to their potential. These are challenging conversations, as I am sure they are in all other jurisdictions, because it is abundantly evident that our school leaders and staff are already working as hard as they can, with most working above and beyond the expected contribution. So the question that keeps me awake at night is: if our school personnel are giving their all, then what more can we do to lift the performance of all students across this state and country?

For a number of people this question is often answered with another question along the lines of: aren't our results good enough already? In fact I spend a lot of time having this debate as it can be difficult to gain agreement that the national and international measures that are used to measure system and jurisdictional performance are those that truly indicate the measureable health and well-being of a particular school's performance. For the most part those results show a performance plateau over the past five years without any jurisdiction being able to move to the next level. Teachers, however, have a palpable moral and professional investment in their work, so challenging the prevailing view on current performance standards can be quite an emotive experience. My view, however, is that NAPLAN measures the most important elements of a 21st Century skill set that every person requires to be able to successfully navigate their way through life with real options and hope. No matter what we do throughout our life, under-developed literacy and numeracy skills will be a significant disadvantage. In fact when PISA and other international tests are disaggregated on a jurisdictional basis, for the most part, they triangulate the NAPLAN results and teachers never tell me that for individual students their NAPLAN results present aberrant performance levels. In simple terms, the results are pretty accurate when compared to most school generated data. Let me note, however, that I understand that schools do, and teach, much more than the sum of their NAPLAN results but they are the headline indicators which punctuate most conversations about performance standards.

Although my one-page column does not allow me to adequately make the full case, my point is this: if our teachers are working at full capacity and our system performance is not at the level that our nation and students need it to be, then what are we to do? In relation to this question I share three points that Harvard Professor. Richard Elmore reiterates in his important body of work about school improvement. Firstly (and I paraphrase), working hard does not necessarily mean we are doing the right work! Secondly, data can tell us how we are going but it doesn't tell us what we need to do, and thirdly, for those who provide reasons why improvement can't occur in various schools or locations, they are wrong because it is already being done.

My recent tour and meeting with all Queensland principals has positively reaffirmed each of Elmore's points noted above. There are a significant number of incredibly clever leaders in our schools who have skilfully shifted their school's focus onto doing the right work or, as Marzano terms, high yield strategies. I have also been gratified to listen to principals who are well researched and skilled in what works to ensure that they use their abundant data to change practice in order to bring about better performance without increased effort. Most importantly however, is the increasing acceptance by high performing school leaders that the answers to wicked problems of practice and barriers to bringing about improved performance are most often located in neighbouring schools or somewhere close by. The solutions are in high performing Australian Catholic, Independent and Government schools and we need to leverage that expertise rather than considering each of the sectors to be a separate island or team in competition with each other. Rarely are the solutions we need in Finland, Hong Kong, Shanghai or other much touted locations.

The point of my piece is that we have some of the world's best practice right here in Queensland and every other state or territory in this country but we don't seem to have the time or processes in place to effectively scale up what is already working down the road.

ACEL has a role to play in helping to identify and grow the practice that will help all of us to improve. Don't be bashful about telling us your evidence-based story through this publication and other avenues we provide in order to improve the performance of Australian Schools. Your country needs you and ACEL is here to help! I am convinced that authentic collaboration is the platform upon which we can lift the nation's school performance.