Old School

New School

Transforming school education for the 21st century: consultation outcomes

November 2017
The ‘New School’ system for the 21st century looks like this:

- Responsibility is shared by Government, educators, parents, students and industry
- New, innovative ways of teaching and learning, as well as tried and tested approaches, are encouraged and implemented nation-wide
- Evidence-informed practice is supported and educators can access the knowledge they need to succeed
- Teachers are celebrated and revered for their success and the profession attracts the best and brightest
- Schools harness technology to help teachers facilitate a richer learning experience for students
- Education is inclusive and all students have the opportunity to learn, succeed and thrive at school
- Schools allow for and promote educational pathways that release the potential of all young people
Foreword

Our education system in NSW has long delivered quality outcomes for students and for society as a whole. We have good schools, thousands of passionate and dedicated teachers, and parents who aspire to help their children succeed in education and in life.

There are serious signs, however, that we must act now to transform and modernise our school education system. Otherwise, we risk leaving our next generation behind and our economy in jeopardy.

While Australia’s school system is a good one, our performance continues to decline relative to other countries in key global benchmarks. This is a significant concern in the competitive globalised economy we live in. In line with our dynamic economic environment, our labour market is changing.

We hear directly from our member businesses that a significant proportion of young people leaving school need to be better prepared for work. Recent research supports this: business needs workers with the enterprise skills that enable them to adapt to the challenges and opportunities the changing economy presents.

Business relies on our school system to provide the foundations for this future workforce. We rely on our schools to provide young people with the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for their transition to further study, work and for life as capable, valued members of society.

The current school system needs help to accelerate its transformation into the ‘new’ system of the future - a school education system that meets the needs of the 21st century student and society.

When we first embarked on this project to identify ways to transform schools we recognised that business could not go it alone. Educators, government decision-makers, parents and young people themselves want to see students not only survive but thrive both in school and after their transition to further study, work and adult life.

As a result, through the first phase of our longer-term campaign to transform schooling we consulted with an array of the nation’s best education thinkers, influencers and change-makers, as well as parent groups, young people and industry. We did this by hosting a School Education Forum in August this year involving a series of workshops of more than sixty participants, facilitated by Ian Harper, one of our nation’s foremost economists and thought leaders.

This report captures the insights and outcomes from the Forum, as well as the more than thirty hours of targeted follow-up interviews with selected participants. It provides a series of principles that set out a vision for what a best practice, 21st century school education system should look like, as well as providing some early actions that will set us on the pathway toward that vision.

To capture insights from the Forum in a visual way a graphic artist ‘recorded’ our discussions in illustrated form. Throughout this report you will see examples of the lively, inspiring and solutions-focussed discussions.

As we heard from our stakeholders and as this report makes clear, transforming an entire school education system – one of the largest in the world – is a challenge that cannot be achieved overnight. There is no silver bullet.
At the same time, there needs to be the political and community will to make rapid, incremental changes now, to set us on the pathway for transformation.

We know this from the experience of Finland, widely recognised as a world leader in school education and student achievement. While the Finnish experiment took place over 25 years, their Government took immediate action to kick off the reform process, including amalgamating its education bureaucracies, overhauling its National Curriculum, empowering local schools and principals and dramatically lifting the standing of vocational education and training within school.

Finland embarked on this reform program region by region. While we cannot, and should not, transfer the Finnish system to Australia wholesale, there are important learnings here for our political decision-makers.

Several of our recommendations take on these learnings.

We are calling on the Government – the ‘architects’ of the school system - to deploy innovative teaching and learning approaches to scale in one or more regions. While there are pockets of excellence in both public and private schools, we are keen to move beyond testing through pilots to adopting evidence-based, new methodologies on a larger scale.

The Department of Education should identify regions in New South Wales to deploy proven approaches in multiple schools to scale. In secondary schools, this should involve working with a coalition of principals to trial a vocationally intensive approach for their school, similar to the successful examples of Southern Cross Catholic Vocational College or the public Bradfield College. In primary schools, the Department should, after consulting with principals, identify its forthcoming Asset Management Strategy at least two regions where schools will have collaborative learning spaces introduced and project learning methodology used by teachers.

To build the confidence to do this, there needs to be clear evidence about what works. Government Departments must work together with universities, the vocational education and training sector and industry to collect, share and analyse de-identified data on student performance and outcomes. Data tracking what students study, how they learn and are taught, and their outcomes after school including transition into the workplace, higher education or vocational education and training would be invaluable for policymakers and educators.

The origins of the Higher School Certificate (or HSC) lie in the 1950s and it remains overwhelmingly geared toward the needs of students who plan to progress to higher education. With the increase in the minimum school leaving age, the HSC must be rethought so that all students obtain benefit from those final two years in the classroom.

While it is very positive to see many more students continue learning after school, not every student wants or needs to go to university. Many students would benefit from focussing on a vocational pathway to work, which we know produces excellent job outcomes that often surpass those offered by the higher education sector.

To address this, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) should look towards revamping and upgrading the HSC to recognise not only the academic achievement measured by the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) but the achievements of students undertaking vocational pathways.

We also need to create the right organisational arrangements to improve the standing of vocational education and training and encourage more students to take part. The NESA should investigate opportunities to increase its expertise in vocational curriculum design and strategy, and to strengthen the industry representation on its Board.

Most teachers are passionate about their jobs and their role in giving children and young people the knowledge and skills they need to be productive members of society. We want to celebrate and develop these teachers and attract some of the best and brightest to become the next generation of educators.

That is why we want teachers to have the time and capacity to be teachers. Their time needs to be freed up from administrative tasks and refocussed on their core skills as education experts. Like their peers in Finland and Singapore, teachers should be highly respected for their important role as educators and their opportunities to learn and further develop their professional careers.
should be expanded. We will be working with principals, teachers and teacher groups over the coming months to identify strategies to achieve this.

One early step identified in our conversations with teachers is to create professional learning communities. These communities would involve online hubs that connect teachers with evidence-based practice, whether via academia or industry-led solutions such as that delivered by Social Ventures Australia, as well as a medium for sharing their on-the-ground knowledge about the teaching and learning approaches that work. These communities should also facilitate a voluntary peer-to-peer mentoring system to help new teachers, or teachers in remote areas who lack peer support, to have the support they need to build confidence in themselves as educators.

School curriculum needs to help students prepare for the 21st century workplace. A young person with enterprise skills is able to contribute from day one on the job, even if they lack work experience or technical skills in their industry. There is also an increasing body of evidence showing students develop their foundation literacy, numeracy and ‘enterprise’ skills - such as communication, collaboration and problem solving - in the earlier high school and even primary years. We need to ensure that our schools are capable of imparting these enterprise skills from kindergarten right through to Year 12 if we are to ensure students leaving school are employable and, more importantly, have a satisfying, productive work life.

As a result, the Chamber is calling for educators to build enterprise skills into the school curriculum. Enterprise skills should be measured and assessed in a similar way to literacy and numeracy skills. Our education authorities nationally and at the jurisdictional level should work together on a strategy to achieve this, with the direct involvement of educators and industry.

I am proud to say young people, the users or ‘clients’ of our education system, were at the fore of our discussions, as they should be in any conversation that involves schooling. Two students shared their direct experiences of school in a panel session at the Forum, and ten young people were involved in our workshops. We heard directly from them that young people desire greater ownership and control over their experience at school, particularly in the later years.

A key way of achieving this is by providing young people with comprehensive, up-to-date information about the career pathways that best fit their capabilities, interests and personalities. Introducing an industry-led careers advice model in collaboration with schools and external specialist organisations would help ensure students have the right information about the job outcomes their subject choices and performance at school will lead to.

These are the results of our early, intensive effort to engage on opportunities to transform schools for the better. Over the coming months, the Chamber will be opening up a dialogue with educators, parents, young people and with business to test our concepts for change and add to them.

With the Federal Government soon to release the results of the ‘Gonski 2.0’ review of education, there is a perfect opportunity to start setting our education system in NSW and nationally on the path to change.

Together, we can transform our old school into the ‘new school’ of the 21st century.
Six ideas to start building a ‘New School’ system now:

- Identify a region in NSW to pilot proven teaching and learning approaches to scale, including project-based learning and vocationally intensive schooling

- Support data driven change by publishing longitudinal data tracking student progress, performance and outcomes

- Revamp the HSC as a final credential that recognises different modes of achievement and sets all students on the right pathway to work

- Recognise teachers and support their development through professional learning hubs, supported by an opt-in mentoring program

- Ensure every child in every school can access the support services they need to learn and thrive, including comprehensive careers advice and an industry-led mentoring program for high risk students

- Integrate enterprise skills within the school curriculum and measure their attainment from Year 9 onward