School accountability

In discussing the relationship between assessment and learning, Broadfoot (1996: 21) claims that "assessment is perhaps *the* most powerful policy tool in education." Increased accountability for schools has been a high priority policy issue across much of the developed world for decades (OECD, 1989; 1993), with significant impetus being given by large-scale initiatives in the UK and USA over recent times (McCarty, 2008). National policy revisions in Australia focused on educational governance and accountability were first signalled in a paper with the title of *Strengthening Australia's Schools* (Dawkins, 1988). All States and Territories have developed their own school accountability systems over at least the past decade (Rowe, 1999; Caldwell & Harris, 2005).

School accountability policies and systems typically include the following main ideas (Abelmann et al, 1999; Leithwood & Earl, 2000):

1. The school is the basic unit for education delivery and hence *the school is the primary site where teachers and administrators are held to account*.

2. Schools are primarily accountable for *student performance* (e.g., via measured achievement on tests in basic academic subjects).

3. School-site student performance is evaluated against externally-set *standards that define acceptable levels of achievement* (e.g., via national benchmarks on aspects of reading, writing, spelling and numeracy).

4. Evaluation of school performance is typically *accompanied by a system of consequences* – rewards and sanctions, penalties and intervention strategies – for its relative success of failure in meeting the specified standards which are communicated to a constituency.

The Prime Minister recently placed improved school accountability firmly on the national policy agenda in a key speech delivered on 27 August 2008 at The

National Press Club in Canberra (Rudd, 2008). It is important to consider this proposal for a national policy partnership -- its rationale, features, potential benefits and possible collateral impacts – as it holds out the promise for significant educational reforms in the years to come.

School accountability on the national policy agenda

Rationale

The rationale the Prime Minister provided for his government's policy shift made use of international comparative data and was firmly couched in terms of a priority emphasis on improved national economic productivity, especially for the most disadvantaged, to result from its proposed 'Education Revolution':

> *While Australian schools stand up reasonably well in international comparisons, our competitors are quickly catching up. A 2006 OECD study shows Australia's average performance in reading literacy worsened between 2003 and 2006, primarily because of a decline in the percentage of high-performing students. It shows that in scientific literacy, 40 percentof Australia's Indigenous students, 27 percent of students in remote schools and 23 percent of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile performed below the OECD baseline. Australia also has relatively low levels of Year 12 completion by OECD standards. After doubling in the 1980s and early 1990s, our retention rates have flat-lined at around 75 per cent since 1992. 30 per cent fewer Indigenous young people reach a Year 12 qualification than non-Indigenous.*
>
> *Why does this matter? Because students with low literacy and numeracy in Year 9 are more likely to get frustrated and leave school early – and more likely to end up unemployed or only marginally attached to the workforce.*
>
> *Conversely, the evidence shows that each additional year of schooling increases individual earnings by around 10 per cent. Another recent study found that increasing a country's literacy scores by 1 per cent against the international average is associated with an increase in living standards of 1.5 per cent of GDP per capita. That is why, through COAG, we are developing reforms aimed at achieving the ambitious national goals of lifting Year 12 or equivalent attainment to 90 per cent by 2020.* (Rudd, 2008)

Initiatives in three policy areas are to be pursued through COAG, each directed towards improving school accountability for attaining these goals: improving the quality of teaching; making school reporting properly transparent; and lifting achievement in disadvantaged school communities.

Improving teaching quality

The Prime Minister affirmed the importance of quality teaching for improved student outcomes across several domains:

> *Research shows that nothing at school influences student outcomes more than excellent teaching. It has measurable impacts on cognitive, affective and behavioural development. Studies suggest that the quality of teaching accounts for something between 30 and 60 per cent of the outcome across these areas.* (Rudd, 2008)

But he also strongly implied that Australia, unlike some other countries, was not attracting its 'best and brightest' into teaching and that school leadership was also in need of strengthening. We need, he said, more high-quality teachers and school leaders working in schools, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas:

> *A McKinsey report on the world's best performing school systems last year highlighted the importance of recruiting the top university students into teacher training. In Korea, those recruited into teaching are in the top 5 per cent of students; in Finland, they are recruited from the top 10 per cent and in Singapore and Hong Kong, the top 30 per cent.*
>
> *I believe our teachers are our greatest economic asset. We need to re-establish in Australia that teaching is a great profession and a great calling for the best and brightest of our university graduates. We must insist on teaching excellence in every school.*
>
> *And insist that school leadership is strengthened, particularly in schools where the learning needs of students are most acute. Of the school-based influences on outcomes, school leadership is second only to teaching in its importance.* (Rudd, 2008)

The new National Policy Partnership on Quality Teaching is designed to:

- establish new national standards to reward both principals and the best performing teachers;
- provide additional funding to encourage school systems to invest in teacher recruitment, development and excellence; and
- include measures to recruit the nation's most talented graduates into teaching and place them where they can make the greatest difference.

Transparent school reporting

Regarding this national policy priority, the Prime Minister implied that while there may be many schools with high proportions of under-performing students who have failed to improve on these performance patterns over time, it was difficult to accurately establish those in most need of extra support:

> *Right now, we do not have accurate, comprehensive information to allow rigorous analysis of what schools and students are achieving. This must change….There is little doubt that greater transparency will reveal some schools in Australia may be seriously underperforming and may have been struggling for some time. Many, but not all, of these schools serve disadvantaged communities. Many, but by no means all, of these schools are in the government school system.* (Rudd, 2008)

It is clear that a significant accountability *quid pro quo* will be required before these schools obtained extra funding support:

> *The Government is committed to investing substantially in our schools to deliver better outcomes. But we will not be making those investments without demanding greater accountability in return…..*
>
> *All Australian schools – public and private – need to do more to demonstrate the outcomes they achieve with the resources they receive from the broader community. This is not about creating an arbitrary public league table. It is about ensuring that all schools, all teachers and all students are focused on achieving the results we need as a nation and realising the potential also of each child….*
>
> *That is why today I announce that we will be making agreement on individual school performance reporting a condition of the new national education agreement to come into effect from 1 January 2009.*
>
> *Within a year, we want to see increased information available to Australian parents. And within three years, a report that shows not just how their child is doing, but how their child's school is performing compared to similar schools. Knowing where there is underperformance will help us to target additional resources.* (Rudd, 2008)

Lifting achievement in disadvantaged school communities

Regarding the third national policy priority, the Prime Minister announced that a National Policy Partnership, beginning in 2009, will contain measures to help:

- *attract high performing principals and teachers to underperforming schools;*
- *provide funding for intensive learning activities and additional coaching for those students who are falling behind;*

- *create robust networks of parents, other schools, local communities and businesses to help students in transitioning successfully to work or further education; and*
- *to provide incentives for individual schools to extend their reach through longer opening hours, after-school study support, sports and other activities to help keep students engaged in their studies.* (Rudd, 2008)

There is also no doubt that school leaders and teachers in the most at risk areas are contending every day with greater complexity in performing their important roles. They face the daily impacts of poverty on many families, increasing numbers of second language learners and students with learning difficulties, complex evidence of early language developmental delays… a host of issues that require the highest levels of professional skill and judgment.

To make a real difference in these situations, the government anticipates making "additional investments of around $500,000 per year for an average sized school, with funding targeting areas "where intensive learning support can make the greatest difference to student outcomes – like early intervention and support for children with developmental challenges" (Rudd, 2008).

It is currently not clear where extra funding for schools serving Indigenous communities, especially those in remote locations, fits in the overall policy strategy. Here the situation is critical and money alone is unlikely to change long-standing and chronic school failure -- which has been tolerated, even expected, for many years. Principals and teachers currently experience few negative consequences for this chronic failure, often being promoted out from disadvantaged Indigenous school contexts to more desirable locations. What is apparent from the Prime Minister's speech is that education authorities will be expected to take tough action in schools that fail to improve after the provision of extra funding:

> *We should not tolerate underperformance. It damages the students irreversibly. It fails their families. And therefore it must change. Where it is clear that individual schools are not up to the mark, we need to be prepared to invest money and effort to lift their performance. And where despite best efforts, these schools are not lifting their performance, the Commonwealth expects education authorities to take serious action – such as replacing the school principal, replacing senior staff, reorganising the school or even merging that school with other more effective schools. Tough action is necessary if*

> *we are to achieve real change. And it's tough action that our reform payments will reward.* (Rudd, 2008)

At the same time, the Commonwealth government has also introduced legislation tying school attendance to welfare payments, with a trial to be initiated in up to eight communities across at least WA and NT from 2009. It is hard not to see this 'tough' initiative as being directed particularly at Indigenous families and communities. It is also difficult not to conclude that such a policy shifts addresses only part of the 'mutual responsibility' expectation. What consequences follow, for example, if school staff do not ensure that engaging programs are provided to attract and retain students in attendance? As well, can we afford to ignore the results from the Hall's Creek trial, which failed to demonstrate that this policy actually resulted in improved school attendance by Indigenous students?

Issues in reforming school accountability systems

As with any proposal for increased school accountability, a tension exists between the uniform requirements of the external national system as proposed, the policies of State and Territory systems and other education providers, and the individual particularities of schools and their communities. This is particularly so with their spread and diversity across this vast continent.

The educational literature (e.g., Newmann, King & Ringdon, 1997; Abelmann et. al., 1999) suggests that there are several issues that are likely to arise in applying improved accountability systems across Australian schools. These issues will centre on three main areas: specific models, assumptions and indicators used for implementation; the differential organisational capacities of schools; and diversity in the current mechanisms that schools use for internal accountability purposes.

Implementation issues

Insitutionalising national benchmark testing as 'high-stakes' assessment

The first issue concerns conceptions of the standards used for desired student outcomes. This year has seen the first consistent use of common testing in aspects of literacy and numeracy for the full national student cohorts in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The results for 2008 were recently announced at a meeting of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for Education, with each fronting the media to comment on why students in their jurisdiction were relatively (un)successful -- with a focus on the particular domains, year levels or student demographic features associated with their main challenges. A key COAG target is to "halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade"

It is clear that all Australian governments have invested significantly in national benchmark testing in 'the basics' as a key performance measure for schools. It is therefore likely that it will be used for even more accountability purposes in the years to come. This national testing is rapidly attaining the status of what is referred to in the literature as a 'high-stakes' assessment -- at least in the minds of school leaders, system administrators, policy advisers and politicians if not of many teachers, students and parents.

There is a large corpus of international literature related to high-stakes testing and its educational, economic and political effects. Amrein and Berliner (2002) outline the main arguments in support of such high-stakes tests, and summarise the evidence related to their effects, in the following terms:

- *students and teachers need high-stakes tests to know what is important to learn and to teach;*
- *teachers need to be held accountable through high-stakes tests to motivate them to teach better, particularly to push the laziest ones to work harder;*
- *students work harder and learn more when they have to take high-stakes tests;*
- *students will be motivated to do their best and score well on high-stakes tests; and that*

- *scoring well on the test will lead to feelings of success, while doing poorly on such tests will lead to increased effort to learn.*

Supporters of high-stakes testing also assume that the tests:

- *are good measures of the curricula that is taught to students in our schools;*
- *provide a kind of "level playing field," an equal opportunity for all students to demonstrate their knowledge; and that*
- *are good measures of an individual's performance, little affected by differences in students' motivation, emotionality, language, and social status.*

Finally, the supporters believe that:

- *teachers use test results to help provide better instruction for individual students;*
- *administrators use the test results to improve student learning and design better professional development for teachers; and that*
- *parents understand high-stakes tests and how to interpret their children's scores.*

The validity of these statements in support of high-stakes tests have been examined through both quantitative and qualitative research, and by the commentary of teachers who work in high-stakes testing environments. A reasonable conclusion from this extensive corpus of work is that these statements are true only some of the time, or for only a modest percent of the individuals who were studied. The research suggests, therefore, that all of these statements are likely to be false a good deal of the time. And in fact, some research studies show exactly the opposite of the effects anticipated by supporters of high-stakes testing.

Publication of 'league tables': school rankings using high stakes tests

In many countries, including the UK and the USA, student achievement levels on high stakes tests are reported in the media as school rankings in so-called 'league tables'. This is a burning issue for many educators, especially in the teacher unions. The fear is that the government's approach is built upon 'deficit' views of schooling -- particularly of principals and teachers. What really counts, the unions say, is how well schools are resourced to better support those students who fail to meet national benchmarks, and Australia is currently second last in the OECD rankings of direct public expenditure on public education (AEU, 2008). Nobody disputes the need for basic skills but test scores in literacy and numeracy are only key indicators and are not the whole game -- there are many important areas of knowledge and skills that paper and pencil testing of the basics can't adequately measure.

If the accountability/testing system narrows the curriculum to the basic skills that count in league tables, the risk is that the whole education system incrementally moves away from its overall goals of an autonomous, creative workforce. It's axiomatic from the *No Child Left Behind* initiative in the USA and from basic skills testing in countries as diverse as the UK and Singapore, that if you raise the stakes on this testing and use it as the sole measure of success the whole system will tend to concentrate all its efforts on hitting the target of better test scores. The *Harvard Civil Rights Project* report (Lee, 2006) reports from the USA that the higher the stakes of the testing the more likely there is to be a lowering of benchmark standards, the greater the distortion of data and increased instances of outright misrepresentation.

Many collateral effects and unintended policy outcomes have been identified as arising from the increased 'accountability pressure' from high-stakes testing regimes (Figlio and Getzler, 2002: Amrein and Berliner, 2002; Hanushek and Raymond, 2004; Jacob, 2005; Lee, 2006; McCarty, 2008). These reported effects include:

- A narrowed curriculum, with significant teaching to the test;
- Adoption of poorly researched but 'mandated' instructional programs;
- Low teacher morale and increased teacher attrition;
- Failure to adequately assess and support special needs and NESB students;
- Retaining of more low-performing students at grade-level;
- Denying admission to students deemed at risk of test failure and otherwise pushing low-performing, mostly minority students, out of the system;
- Elimination of bilingual education funding and the squeezing out of Native language and cultural instruction from school curricula;
- Inability to sustain any claimed early gains and an increase in equity gaps;
- Lowered retention rates in the senior years;
- Lack of promised support to struggling schools; and
- Manipulation of results at school, system and state level.

Potential of 'value added' performance measures for school accountability

Given the controversies over collateral effects of league tables based on raw test scores, it is perhaps not surprising that the Prime Minister clearly wishes to rule them out from his particular school accountability policy:

> *This is not about creating an arbitrary public league table. ….Simplistic league tables don't really tell us how well a school is performing…. about the student population that the school started with – and its level of educational advantage.(Rudd, 2008)*

However, he presents a clear accountability argument for more sophisticated comparisons of sub-sets of schools with similar demographic starting points:

> *Everyone understands why a private school on Sydney's north shore might do better than a comprehensive government high school in the outer suburbs. But it is not unreasonable to expect that schools with a similar mix of students and similar starting points should do equally well. What parents most want to know is what difference a school is going to make – in other words, the extent to which it is adding value to the results of their students. Parents overseas can get this information. Australian parents – and students – deserve the same.* (Rudd, 2008)

There has been a consensus for over a decade amongst specialist educational evaluators working across several national contexts that 'value added' comparisons of school performance -- using appropriately contextualised data related to size (ie student enrolment), type (i.e. primary, secondary, special, P/K-10/12), location (i.e. city, rural, remote) and the community serviced (e.g., low/mid/high-SES, Indigenous) -- are more desirable than raw score league table rankings (e.g., Fitz-Gibbon & Tymms, 1993; Hill, 1995; Rowe, 1996; Fitz-Gibbon, 1997; Goldstein, 1997; Saunders, 1999).

It is apparent from media reports that the Rudd government's view of school accountability in its education revolution has been strongly influenced by discussions held with Joel Klein, Chancellor of Education for New York City, where all schools receive a yearly progress report:

> JOEL KLEIN: What we do is aggregate based on where the school starts and compare it to comparable schools. We also compare it to the entire city so that we see how far they have to go in absolute terms. But our basic comparison is an apples/apples comparison and so that way what you really are trying to look at is the school making progress and for everyone of our schools, we set a progress target each year and say this is how much

> we expect you to move forward and what we measure is students; in the third grade what they scored on their standard tests and the same students in the fourth grade.
>
> So we look really at the progress, we don't compare one third grade class to the next year because those are different kids. We compare one third grade class to the gains they made in the fourth grade and we do it apples to apples.
>
> It's very, very powerful and illuminating because it enables people to say well how come that other school which is a mile away is making real progress and they started their kids in the third grade with the same level as ours? And in the fourth grade ours went forward and theirs went nowhere. (Attard, 2008)

The Minister for Education announced that Chancellor Klein has agreed to visit Australia in November to discuss with business, government and education leaders how the reforms in New York City:

> …have focused on transforming education systems to meet 21st century purposes, making schools more accountable for their teaching and learning, attracting and retaining the best teachers and empowering principals and school leaders to drive academic and cultural change in schools. These reforms have seen remarkable outcomes, including:
> - significant increases in school graduation rates in New York City since 2002, after a decade of near-stagnation; and
> - continual improvement in student achievement against State maths and reading standards (Gillard, 2008).

The visit by Chencellor Klein is likely to focus on his Children First Reforms, in particular, on the Children First Intensive (CFI) --- a professional development program that:

> ..supports school leaders and teachers to thrive in the New York City Department of Education's new environment of empowerment and data-driven accountability. The mission of CFI is to support each school in closing the achievement gap and expanding its sphere of success via several activities:
> - Disseminates knowledge about the concepts behind the Children First, including accountability tools of Progress Report, Quality Review, Periodic Assessments and Achievement Reporting and Innovation System;
> - Trains Senior Achievement Facilitators to help schools integrate the Accountability Tools into school planning;
> - Develops school-based Inquiry Teams that engage in a process of deep self-study using quantitative and qualitative data. Made up of teachers and administrators, the teams select a target population of struggling students. By investigating the changes needed to accelerate these students' progress, Inquiry Teams reflect on and inform the structures of learning within the school as a whole (NYC DoE, 2008).

It is likely that the Australian visit by Chancellor Klein will focus considerable media attention on the issue of value added indicators of school success. This remains a controversial issue within the education profession, including among researchers. We know that there are some inherent limitations to the usefulness

of single test indicators in providing reliable judgments about the relative quality of educational institutions (Goldstein & Thomas, 1996; Goldstein & Spiegelhalter, 1996).

The main reasons for these limitations (Rowe, 1999) relate to the validity of providing a simple summary picture of what are important and complex features of schooling: that is, attempting to compress multi-dimensional school activities into a single, linear scale for comparison purposes lies at the heart of the problem (Bentley et. al., 2004: 26). Value added scores tend to group around a broad average, with only a few 'extreme' schools standing out as either very 'good' or very 'bad' according to the measured criteria. The need to review school performance data over a longer period of time to even out yearly cohort effects and the extent of statistical uncertainty attached to any value-added estimates of school performance has led some key researchers working in the UK context to conclude that:

> *Schools cannot be summarized by a single value added score – they are differently effective for different kinds of pupils in different subjects… in other words, for most schools there is no statistically valid way that they can be ranked .(Goldstein et. al., 2000)*

What is clear, however, is that in this country COAG has embraced an ambitious and holistic 'participation and productivity' agenda ranging across the early childhood development, schooling, and skills and workforce development sectors – all with "indicative progress measures" which are to be "disaggregated by Indigenous and socio-economic status". The overall target is to lift the 'attainment rate' to Year 12 or its equivalent to 90% by 2020, and to halve the gap in Indigenous student attainment rates in that period (DEEWR, 2008). While there is no doubt these aims are worthwhile, the question remains as to who exactly is to be held accountable for their attainment? Some argue that research findings strongly imply that policy makers should be very cautious in ascribing responsibility only to school staff for the attainment of any global outcomes or value added indicators:

> *When we know, for example, that family educational culture accounts for at least 50% of the variation in student achievement (e.g., Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), how is it possible to claim that schools alone should be held accountable for such achievement? (Leithwood & Earls, 2000)*

Issues arising from differential organisational capacities of schools

Concern for building capacity entered the school reform discourse in the 1990s, but without unanimity on a specific definition. The critical defining feature of organizational capacity in schooling came to be viewed as:

> *The degree to which the human, technical, and social resources of an organization are organized into an effective collective enterprise…. For schools, the key… is shared commitment and collaboration among staff to achieve a clear purpose for student learning*. (Newmann, King & Ringdon, 1997: 47)

Schools vary considerably in the extent of their organizational capacity. While developing a clear sense of collective efficacy is very important in every school, research with restructuring schools in the USA indicates that it is "a daunting challenge, independent of the extent of external accountability, technical resources, professional development, or school autonomy" (Newmann, King & Ringdon, 1997: 47). A paper commissioned by our Institute, in collaboration with QUT and QSA, was completed by Stuart McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai (2008) in Maori and Pacifica school communities in New Zealand. They locate this difficulty for schools in developing collective efficacy within the mindsets of teachers, in their everyday discourse and assumptions about the students and their families:

> *Where teachers' talk is mostly on the seemingly insurmountable or intractable difficulties and where that talk locates the locus of the difficulties in areas outside of the teachers' immediate control such as employment, low parental interest, housing or language 'difficulties' (all of which in some sense may need to be better understood for our schools to be more effective, but may be outside of a teacher's immediate control) there is a low collective sense of efficacy that undermines teacher's personal sense of efficacy. Bandura (1995) describes a depressing cycle in which a sense of unsolvable problems lowers beliefs in personal effectiveness, which in turn results in a decreased commitment to teaching and innovating. The resulting impact on students further reduces teachers' sense of being effective.*
>
> *At the other end of a continuum is there is a high sense of collective efficacy where teachers collectively share a sense of solving difficulties and of making a difference, and have the evidence to support these beliefs. High levels of collective efficacy at the*

> *beginning of an academic year predict a school's academic achievement at the end of the year. This can be demonstrated even when different characteristics of children, their prior levels of achievement and staffs' levels of experience are controlled.*

Issues in diversity of school internal accountability mechanisms

Essential components of accountability -- such as clarifying standards for student performance, collecting evidence relevant to levels of success, and exerting peer pressure to attain school goals -- are generated largely within a school staff. As well, systems initially designed for internal accountability purposes also come to constitute a major source of cohesion within the school. (Newmann, King & Ringdon, 1997). An individual teacher's sense of responsibility, the expectations about students shared by teachers, and the school's internal accountability processes act in sets of close mutual relationships with each other:

> *A given school's response to the problem of accountability is the result of how it resolves the tensions, inconsistencies, and complementarities between individuals' personal values, their shared expectations, and the mechanisms by which they account for what they do*. (Abelmann et al, 2000:5)

What appears to matter most in generating powerful internal accountability systems in schools is the extent of alignment between these three features – whether and how they work together in a coherent manner. There are two main ways that schools can produce greater internal alignment: by selecting staff who share a common set of values, and/or by consciously using the structures and processes of the organisation to progressively socialise people into a set of common views and expectations of each other. These issues of alignment particularly matter when external accountability systems come into play:

> *… how a school responds to external accountability systems is largely determined, not by the details of these external systems, but by the degree of alignment between the school's internal accountability mechanisms and the requirements of the external accountability system.* (Abelmann et al, 2000:5)

Schools are thereby differentially placed to respond in certain ways when attempts are made to introduce additional accountability requirements from the

outside. Twenty years ago a prominent researcher in the USA characterised this difference in 'school readiness for reform' by positing three types of schools:

- *Sand*: a minority of schools - where reform is doomed to fail because of a mix of complacency and turmoil;
- *Brick*: an overwhelming majority of schools where staff are able and willing to change (if convinced) but who are unlikely to develop their own reform - preferring detailed blueprints, guaranteed support and dedicated resources; and
- *Seed*: a minority of schools - where there is a clear capacity to translate a school vision into reality, where leaders are willing to engage a cohesive staff in key decisions, and are well-informed on current research and best practice (Slavin, 1988).

For most schools, therefore, externally-driven reforms for accountability purposes require well-supported and localised mobilisation of evidence and resources.

Alternative approaches to school accountability

Features of four approaches to school accountability can be described and differentiated, with versions of each currently in evidence across the developed world (Leithwood & Earl, 2000). The first two approaches arose from earlier emphases on privatization and consumerism, while the latter two are more recent alternative approaches to school accountability:

- *Market competition approaches*: Increased competition amongst schools for 'student-clients' drives differentiation, choice and commitment regarding education services.
- *Decentralisation of decision-making approaches*: De-regulation provides increased autonomy for site-based management over key decisions, thereby delivering efficiency and cost-effectiveness in responding more directly to parental and community needs.
- *Professional standards approaches*: Clear standards of professional knowledge, skill and performance are promulgated (with consequences for attainment and failure to comply) for entry-level and advanced teaching practitioners, as well as for school leaders and administrators.
- *Evidence-based, school improvement approaches*: The emphasis is on using goal-setting, data analysis and monitoring, and combined with strategic planning tools, financial incentives and rewards for success to drive systematic school reform.

It is perhaps not surprising that the Prime Minister's proposal includes elements of each of these four approaches to school accountability. We're clearly at a policy cross-roads in Australia on the issue. The internationally comparative

student data suggests that Australia is a 'high quality – low equity' country, and in common with some others (notably the US and UK) is struggling to maintain high quality while also improving on equity in student outcomes. In Australia, there is considerable variation between schools of different status, locations and jurisdiction -- with the 'between-school' variance accounting for 17.4% of the total variance in the OECD PISA results. This data also suggests that the 'high quality - high equity' systems - including Finland, Sweden Ireland, and, in the case most similar in student demographics to our own, Canada - have not gone down the expanded testing / high stakes accountability route. They've found more moderate ways to improve their outcomes by careful selection of strategies drawn from across the four approaches outlined above.

What these systems have stressed are higher levels of professionalism, more targeted use of educational approaches, and more strategic use of data to mobilise resources and action. In particular, in each of the high quality - high equity systems teacher quality counts: they have much better resourced programs of teacher education and professional development, more innovative schemes for attracting high quality teachers, and have increased the overall status of teaching. Struggling schools and districts, who have difficulty in attracting and retaining quality teachers and leaders, are carefully identified and supplied with appropriate technical expertise to solve their problems. School leaders can compare their results on a range of indicators with different categories of schools, and schools have access to a wide range of data for their annual reporting to parents and communities. But there are no published league tables that can be misrepresented and distorted. There is the clear expectation that all children can learn if appropriately taught, and that all schools can succeed if appropriately supported.

With a few notable exceptions, most State and Territory systems in Australia do not systematically target schools that are struggling, identify the exact nature of the issues and problems, and come to the party with targeted interventions, resource support and leadership change. However, there are some instances

where systematic approaches to school reform and renewal have demonstrably worked; including WA's efforts in early literacy, ACT work in middle schooling, Queensland's IDEAS schools and some of the New Basics schools.

Transformational leadership for accountability in learning communities

It has long been established that variations in teaching practice *within* a school are more powerful influences over student outcomes than differences *between* schools (Newmann, 1991). We also know that reciprocity between school leaders and teaching staff is crucial to impact positively on student achievement, and that school capacity and enhanced accountability go hand-in-hand (Elmore, 2000). Both these processes appear to be best fostered via shared professional learning and close collaboration on consistent use of internal school processes (Silins & Mulford, 2002), particularly in providing feedback to students about their learning (Hattie, 1999). Leaders at all levels must provide a combination of specific pressure to implement a change, with appropriately targeted support for staff involved in its implementation (Huberman & Miles 1984; Fullan, 1993). To achieve change that represents real improvement in schools, it is often difficult to strike the right balance of top-down and more facilitative forms of power. School leaders can use facilitative power to transform their schools by helping staff members develop and maintain a collaborative and professional school culture, by fostering teacher development and by helping staff solve problems together more effectively (Leithwood, 1994). But it is crucial that in providing support, the focus is still on changing practice:

> *The norms and values that go with ambitious conceptions of learning and improvement grow out of practice, not vice versa. School improvement doesn't happen by getting everyone to come to the auditorium and testify to their belief that all children can learn – not if it means sending everyone back to the classroom to do what they've always done. Only a change in practice produces a genuine change in norms and values.* (Elmore, 2002: 4)

From this perspective, school leaders are encouraged to use facilitative power to make transformational - or second-order changes - in their school practices:

A change is perceived as first-order when it is:	*A change is perceived as second-order when it is:*
▪ An extension of the past	▪ A break with the past
▪ Within existing paradigms	▪ Outside of existing paradigms
▪ Consistent with prevailing values & norms	▪ Conflicts with prevailing values & norms
▪ Focus on simple and incremental change	▪ Focus on complex and transformational reform
▪ Implemented with existing knowledge & skills	▪ Requires new existing knowledge & skills
▪ Implemented by a few experts	▪ Implemented by many stakeholders

Sources: Leithwood (1992); Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003)

When the focal points for change are large-scale reforms (Elmore, 2000) and improving professional learning to ensure better student outcomes (Senge et al., 2000; Fullan, 2006a), or even responding proactively and creatively to high demand for student enrolments (Avenell, 2007), the pressure felt in already high-performing schools to become authentic learning communities is particularly high (Dufour et. al., 2006). In this intensified change mode, such schools become sites of "continuous inquiry and improvement" (Hord, 1997) where outcome data provides crucial feedback on the quality of the school's performance (Elmore, 2000) and where improved school identity, teachers' professional esteem and enhanced community support are actually achievable goals (Crowther et al., 2001). In schools operating as learning communities, teacher development encourages deep learning and leads to shared norms of "deprivatised practice" (Darling-Hammond, 1997). These in turn induce reciprocal pressures to maintain an unrelenting focus on improvements in the quality of student outcomes:

> *Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement.* (Elmore, 2000: 20)

As Bentley et. al. (2004) summarise the point, there are many dimensions which help us "to imagine how a school that was high in public value might look" and from which "proxy indicators' of value adding might be developed:

- Entrepreneurial and distributed leadership making use of all social, cultural and financial resources
- Mission statement developed through public and community engagement and grounded in local circumstances
- Teachers as skilled developers of human, cultural, social and intellectual capital
- Learners playing an active, responsible and powerful role in driving the school forward
- Range of learning pathways offered, that have been constructed with the learners
- Intelligent accountability facilitating adaptive learning
- Formative assessment of both students and schools
- Differentiated support to create a level playing field for participation and decision making
- Parents as co-educators and co-learners
- School as a community asset whose distinctive competence is teaching and learning
- Diverse means of engagement between the school and all its stakeholders
- A focus on inter-relationships – between students, home, community and others
- Innovation via regular collaborations with diverse groups of people and other schools, to keep the school outward-looking.

The trend towards lateral extension of capacity building and accountability systems has been identified as operating successfully in some schools in Australia. 'High demand public schools' that operate as learning communities (Avenell, 2007) are also opening up their practice to scrutiny from a wider community of expertise - via active participation in geographic clusters and electronic networks, and through formation of strategic alliances with other schools, educational institutions and a variety of other organisations (DEST/Phillips KPA, 2006). Examples of schools, districts and systems learning systematically from each other have also been reported in the USA, Canada and the UK (Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Fullan, 2006a) and were

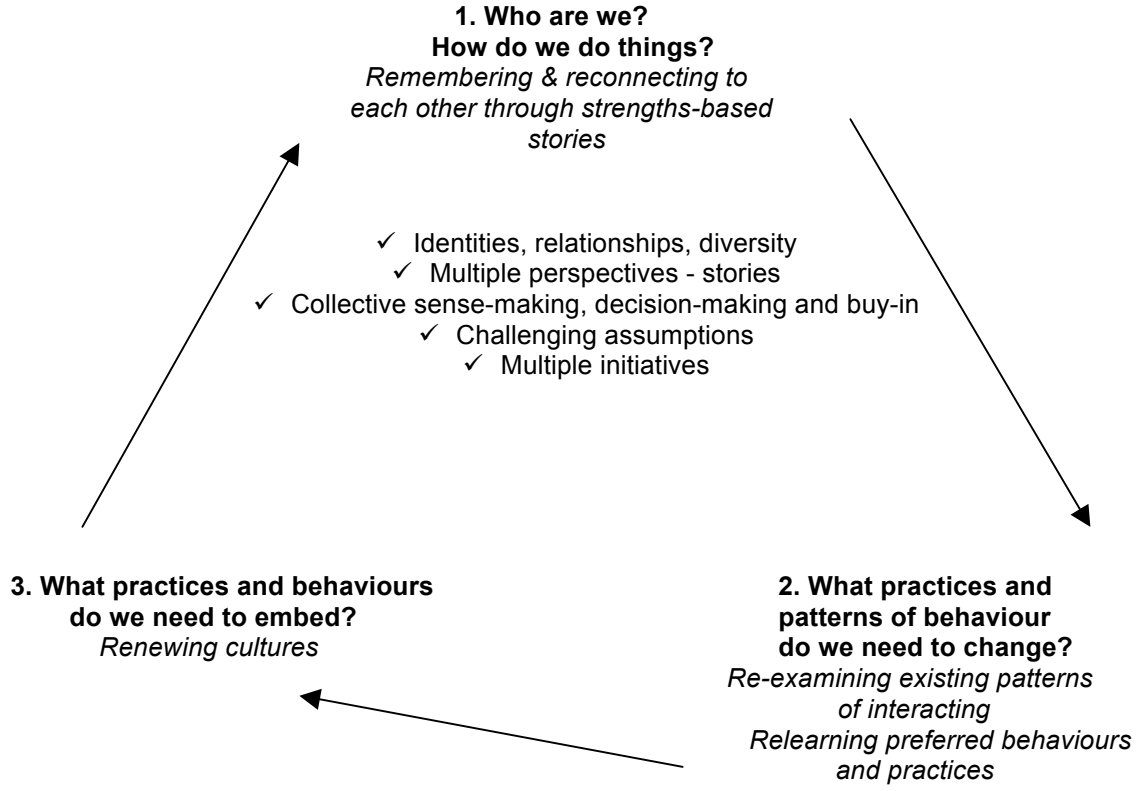
recently summarized and exemplified in a key report to the OECD (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008). To create stronger school performance accountability we need to focus within and around schools on creating authentic learning communities. These are sites:

- where collaborative professional dialogue and deep, rigorous personal and collective reflection are part of everyday school practice;
- which focus on local data and having hard conversations (e.g., around 'why are we producing this outcome?' and 'how can we do it better?' questions);
- which overcome any individual teacher defensiveness towards rigorous accountability by creating cultures of trust, disclosure, engagement, critical reflection and dialogue;
- which build from a strength-based foundation by acknowledging the commitment of school leaders and teachers in promoting the success, efficacy and identities of children and community members;
- which use or create a framework to make effective use of locally negotiated processes and procedures for performance accountability, recognition and celebration; and
- where improved accountability is viewed as a key element in the challenge of transforming a schooling culture into one characterized by both 'high-expectations' and 'high-performance'.

Through the Institute we are developing such a network of 'high-expectation, high-performance' school hubs acting as Stronger Smarter Learning Communities. We assist leaders in negotiating their local school-community accountability processes and procedures. Our approach is founded on belief and experience that any group of people usually already hold the collective knowledge and wisdom to successfully meet the challenges they face. This is especially profound when dealing with the complex challenges of Indigenous education.

Accessing this collective knowledge and wisdom requires time and focus, to remember and share stories of success and strength to reaffirm the heritage of particular groups. Successful use of this knowledge and wisdom requires deep listening and reflection, and collective sense-making and decision-making

processes. *Engoori* from Mithaka country in SW Queensland offers such a set of collaborative leadership processes (Gorringe & Spillman, 2008)



The *Engoori* process begins by honouring people and identities, with initial focus on questions such as '*who we are'* and '*how we should be doing things'.* This provides a strengths-based platform from which to move forward. It stands in stark contrast to a commonly practiced consultation process that begins with deficit-type questions such as '*what are the issues or problems"*? Grounded in strength of identity and the positivism of success, people are able to uncover and own habitual patterns that enable or disable them from meeting particular challenges. Eventually other ways of seeing, talking and doing can be practiced, ritualised and embedded using a 'whole school review matrix' (Spillman & Costanzo, 2004).

At the Institute we also make use of an 'accountability matrix' developed specifically in Queensland to confront the need for fundamental transformation of

indigenous education outcomes for external accountability purposes (MACER, 2004; Sarra, 2007). We emphasise the relational accountabilities of school leaders in supporting, developing, monitoring, challenging and intervening within their school community to transform it into one characterized by both 'high-expectations' and 'high-performance'.

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Conclusions

Australia is at a key national intersection point on school accountability policy. There is a strong political consensus that parents and the wider community have a 'right' to expect transparency concerning the outcomes obtained by schools and that school leaders and teachers should expect to be held accountable for their part in obtaining improved student performance over time. This paper is predicated on the assumption that professional educators have an obligation to ask themselves hard questions concerning their professional performance, and that there are both individual and shared responsibilities in such processes. There are many crucial accountability challenges for the profession to resolve.

The Prime Minister and the government have invested significant capital and political will behind the issue, placing accountability for school outcomes as a key item on the national 'productivity agenda'. It's right that Australian educators feel uncomfortable about the current focus on accountability because there's little to be comfortable about regarding the long-term pattern of schooling outcomes for disadvantaged young people, particularly for Indigenous students in remote communities. From the perspective of Indigenous education, the recently proposed reforms for school accountability are long overdue.

The government has challenged the profession regarding what should constitute fair measures and reasonable indicators for schools in the value they add to the performance of students. This is a complex and difficult task. There are many issues to confront and many collateral effects and unintended consequences to

avoid in developing a strong national approach to school accountability. This is attested to in the significant international literature synthesised in this paper. But educators should embrace the challenges that come with that task and not be 'spooked' by the potential for adverse consequences. There are also many opportunities provided by this invigorated focus on school accountability in the National Policy Partnerships.

There are clear ways forward that affirm the crucial importance of quality teaching, collegial practice and transformational leadership. School accountability could be the trigger for the formation of authentic learning communities across the country, each directed by high expectations for high performance, and each networked with others. The potential exists for these learning communities to be the crucial foundations for delivering a real future for all our children. To do this we must acknowledge with honesty our own need for resolution of this our shared national shame: our failure to extend to all our brothers and sisters what we take for granted in our own lives – the gift of learning. School accountability is that important.

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