

1. Readings

OFSTED Summary of Twenty Schools performing above expectations (an extract from Notepad Issue No.1 (2010) The Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools

The OFSTEAD [\[i\]](#) Report [\[ii\]](#) *20 Outstanding Primary Schools - Excelling Against the Odds* provides an in depth report on the 20 Primary schools working in a high needs student population that have consistently demonstrated outstanding results when looked at from a value added perspective. That is, relative to other schools that serve a similar student population profile these schools have demonstrated, over a sustained period of time, high levels of student achievement and are also assessed as outstanding in the regular school review process conducted by OFSTED.

It is a fascinating report and I commend it to anyone with an interest in this important issue. The report resists the urge to reduce the findings to a list of magic bullets but does identify some key characteristics and areas of focus and attention that are prioritized across all these schools.

Some characteristics were consistent across all 20 schools such as:

- having a stable high quality staff with high levels of cohesion - some degree of principal autonomy in recruitment assisted in getting to this state
- prioritising detailed collaborative planning - including down to the level of detailed lesson plans
- explicit sharing of understandings about what constitutes high quality teaching plans and high quality classroom practice and a shared language for this across the school
- clearly communicating to students about the process of learning and a shared language about the process of learning how to learn
- relentlessly raising the expectations and aspirations of both pupils and parents

However for other characteristics, the commonalities were more complex. For example schools took very different approaches to decisions around the design and content of the curriculum - some integrated learning - others did not; some grouped by ability and not others. If there was a commonality of approach in this area it was that outstanding schools 'understand the needs of their pupils and shape the curriculum to match them very closely. [They] ... have the confidence and the imagination to take the statutory curriculum and make it their own'.

The strongest characteristic relates to the approach taken by the 20 schools to assessment. The report emphasizes that not one of these schools taught to the national tests. Rather they focus on ensuring that all teachers are able to accurately assess where all of their students are on a learning sequence and are highly competent in understanding what is needed to move the students to the next level. Student progress is closely tracked by teachers and students are taught to assess where they are on a learning continuum.

This report assures the reader that 'several of these schools were in dire straits in the mid or late 1990s when a transforming head teacher was appointed. Their predicaments were all too familiar, for example, overwhelmed, exhausted, inept absent or sick leaders, poor behaviour, low standards, tired and demoralized teachers, antipathetic, anxious or often aggressive parents'.

The report concluded that the turn-around journey for these schools had some very clearly defined and consistent features including:

- restoring order and calm so that teaching and learning can take place.
- ensuring that high expectations are set and that everyone - pupils, parents, staff and governors - is clear what those are.
- getting pupils and parents involved, engaged and committed so that they cannot later complain that they 'did not know'.
- leading by example; demonstrate the behaviours expected of others.
- setting and demonstrating high standards for teaching and learning.
- looking early on at the curriculum, the school day and pupils' experiences of school.
- monitoring and evaluating every aspect of the school's performance.

And the most important one of all - ensuring staff ownership and commitment to mutual accountability - or in the report's words '*gauging the ability of staff to adopt consistent approaches: in teaching and learning, in applying policies - especially behaviour - and in routines and basic practices. As one chair of governors said: 'Staff need to be aboard the bus' when the school embarks on its journey of improvement'.*

Australia is at the beginning point of implementing of a national education transparency agenda. We can, even at this early point, identify schools that add value, based on the assumption that NAPLAN is a proxy for student performance (in spite of its known limitations) and ICSEA^[iii] a robust tool for assessing school population relative advantage or disadvantage. As the transparency agenda unfolds, opportunities to undertake this sort of research using as rich a data set as possible, should be given the highest priority.

[i] OFSTED is the office for Standards in Education and Children's Services and Skills and its role is to regulate and inspect to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people and in education and skills for learners of all ages.

[ii] <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Twenty-outstanding-primary-schools-Excelling-against-the-odds>

[iii] Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

References

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