



Education and Health Standing Committee

Inquiry into the Department of Education's Independent Public Schools initiative

Submission by Western Australian Secondary Schools Executives Association

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WASSEA will present at the public hearing on Tuesday May 17 at 2pm

- a) The implementation of the initiative, including support provided to schools transitioning to become Independent Public Schools and the use of Delivery and Performance Agreements.**

The training and selection process for IPS has changed considerably since the first schools came on board in 2010. The first rounds of training were punishing for school leaders (this includes Managers of Corporate Services). Training was thorough but rolled out in a very short time frame and at the end of the year when schools are extremely busy. We welcome the change in the way training is now offered and the fact it can be accessed at varying times throughout the year so that principals (and other significant school staff) who move into an already established IPS, have the opportunity to access the preparation they need to effectively lead their schools. The ongoing preparation of school leaders and the preparation needed to apply to become IPS has also made the transition into IPS more seamless. It allows schools to work with their communities to identify priorities and anticipated changes prior to the actual IPS announcement. It also distributes the training load throughout the year.

The Delivery and Performance Agreement (DPA) has grown and become more prescriptive since 2010 and this is a matter of concern. It was a concise document of approximately four pages and is now eleven pages long. This in itself may not cause too much concern, as the lengthened document does clarify some points that were previously unclear but it also contains the statement: *'student and school characteristics funding is used to implement appropriate teaching and learning adjustments to support demonstrated outcomes of students for whom it is provided'*. While this seems reasonable, schools do not actually know the particular students for which targeted social disadvantage funding is allocated and therefore are not really able to agree to this clause. WASSEA has asked on a number of occasions for this information to be provided so that principals and their school communities (it must be co-signed by the Board Chair on behalf of the Board) are not in breach of the DPA. It is far easier to make sure allocated funding targets Aboriginal students, those with an identified disability and those with English as their second language as those students are clearly identified.

b) The ongoing role of the Department of Education, and other agencies, supporting Independent Public Schools.

Independent Public Schools operate under the same legislative and compliance frameworks as all schools and as such need to continue to be well supported by their Department. While generally this is the case, there have been many instances in the last year where schools have been caught up in red tape and unnecessary workload because more constraints have been placed on the system as a whole. The initial focus of the IPS was to encourage schools to question policy that did not fit with good practice in their school – although of course all schools must operate under the Education Act. Unfortunately now policies have been revised and tightened, often without consultation with school leaders and kick back is discouraged. WASSEA is pleased to see that there has been some recent changes to this and more consultation to ensure common-sense interpretation of policy.

Many IPS leaders have complained to WASSEA this year, both individually and through submissions from collegiate networks, about the reduced flexibility in ways of operating, the perceived clawing back of initiative (contrary to IPS ethos) and a feeling of constraint they feel was not previously there. In addition, the workload of school leaders has increased exponentially and this is a joint association and union wide concern.

It is important that the Department maintains the level of support it now offers schools, and ideally this support would be increased. There have been three years of budget cuts to education and it is keenly felt in the reduction of the number of people to support schools system wide. In addition these budget cuts have meant cuts at school level for many schools and there are less people to do the work. IPS brings with it a layer of accountability and administration that was not previously experienced. Reducing supports within the school and within the Department has put a strain on the effective operations in IPS and on the health of our school administrators.

The work of Prof Philip Riley, The Australian Principal Occupational Health Safety and Wellbeing Survey, is now supported by five years of data. *'The greatest source of stress for all Principals and deputies/assistants in every state and every sector is the sheer quantity of work, closely followed by a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning' (Riley, 2015).* He also states in Recommendation 3, that employers should *'Trust rather than rule educators'*. While this seems to be the basis of an autonomous system, there have been numerous additions to the list of compliances required since IPS was introduced. In an autonomous environment this list should have decreased!

Riley in his 2014 summary of the survey results, clearly outlines the importance of professional support to the mental health of school leaders. *'The principals and deputy/assistant principals identified as coping least well with their daily tasks had the lowest levels of professional support from colleagues and superiors while those that coped the best reported the highest levels of professional support'*.

With the number of IPS now at 445, it is hard to understand how the Director General can effectively be the direct line manager and performance manager to all the IPS principals. The Delivery and Performance Agreement was crafted to assist with this but does not give any direct feedback to principals as to their performance, nor does it open conversations regarding future employment pathways or promotional opportunities. Some principals miss this kind of personal interaction.

c) How independent Public Schools are monitored through informal and formal review processes and the transparency of reviews for the school community.

Independent Public Schools are reviewed every three years (approximately) by an external review team (Department of Education Services – DES review). Our members have no issue with this and in fact most welcome the opportunity to share the work they do with the reviewers, their communities and ultimately the Department.

Prior to IPS and currently, the Department has its own review processes for all schools and in particular schools with areas of concern or with exemplary practice are subject to an External Review Group (ERG) investigation. The ERG will leave a challenged school with a clear and rigid set of guidelines on how to proceed to improve process. WASSEA acknowledges the right of DoE to conduct reviews of schools and sees the value in a process that assists schools to evaluate their data and act accordingly. We dispute the need to make the summary of the review public and in the case of IPS it can have the effect of undermining the school leadership and Board direction. We believe it would be better to work with the school and school community to address any challenges rather than exacerbate them with bad publicity.

d) The impact on the engagement and performance of students, in particular those with additional needs.

IPS has certainly allowed schools to use their budgets more flexibly and in theory create learning environments that suit the cohort of students they cater for. Many principals will argue that they are not doing anything different since becoming IPS and that they have always found creative solutions to tricky issues, but the major difference for them is that they are released of the constraint of asking for permission to use funds flexibly (in other words there are less bureaucratic hoops to jump through). IPS school leaders are now better placed to work with their communities to implement local solutions to local challenges but the actual benefits to students are hard to quantify as there are many variables in play. The 2013 *Evaluation of the Independent Public Schools Initiative* stated that demonstrated gains in learning from autonomy reforms would likely take five or more years of exposure. There have been six full years of IPS now – the Department is best placed to provide data on gains or not of students at IPS across a number of variables. It is certainly true that WA has performed well and has increased student outcomes in recent NAPLAN testing but whether that is due to IPS is just a conjecture. The other question of course is whether this is a useful measure.

e) The outcomes of formal and informal reviews of Independent Public Schools.

It is curious that IPS can now be subject to both DES and ERG reviews in a short time-frame. In fact a good 'mark' on a DES review does not translate to a good result on an ERG so it has been confusing for schools to understand the parameters of school autonomy and the improvement agenda. How can one review applaud the development and implementation of the Business Plan and soon after another review call for a change of operation?

f) The process and extent to which the Department of Education incorporates review outcomes into its management of the Independent Public Schools initiative and ensures that Independent Public Schools act on review outcomes.

There are clear processes in place for schools that have been through an ERG and there are monitored timelines for meeting the directives.

DES reviews come with affirmations and challenges/recommendations. It is expected that in an autonomous environment the school leadership will work with the rest of the school, the Board and community members to decide the next direction for the school. Autonomy is about local solutions to local issues.

g) The impact of Independent Public Schools on staffing arrangements.

There is no doubt that for many school communities one of the main attractions of applying for IPS status was to take advantage of being able to merit select all staff. This certainly remains a key feature of the initiative and has been carefully quarantined as a benefit as many of the other benefits of becoming IPS have been made available to all schools. For example, all schools now operate on a one line budget where this feature was originally only for IPS. Unfortunately for those schools who have not elected to become IPS (there are varying reasons for this including location, community readiness and support, changes in and capabilities of the leadership team, principal's ethos and school priorities), it has meant marginalisation in that they are the few remaining schools to take surplus to need staff. For these non-IPS it can be a significant issue in that these surplus staff may not always be a good fit for the school or the position they are assigned. System priorities trump individual non-IPS priorities in this instance. WASSEA is opposed to a system that causes any schools to be perceived as less important, capable or worthy than others and we feel that staffing constraints for non IPS can be a significant barrier to school improvement, student outcomes and community acceptance.

In addition many regional IPS have not noticed a benefit in being able to select their own staff, as in some regional areas it is always hard to recruit teachers and changing the 'status' of the school alone will not solve this problem.

14 April 2016

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