



CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO PROF. PETER SHERGOLD AC (Chair)
in relation to

THE REVIEW OF SENIOR SECONDARY PATHWAYS

5 December 2019

THE REVIEW OF SENIOR SECONDARY PATHWAYS RESPONSE FROM CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AUSTRALIA

Preamble to response

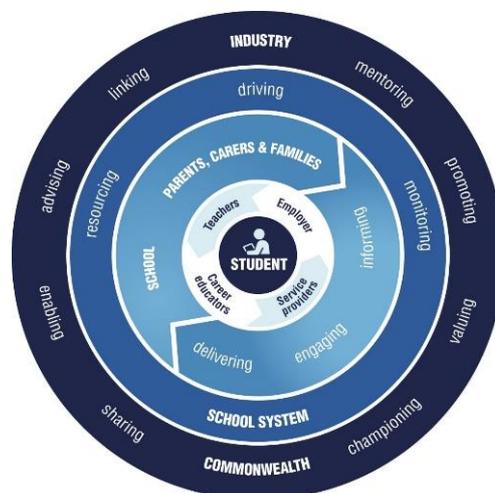
The focus of Catholic School Parents Australia's (CSPA's) submission to the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways is clearly from a parent perspective. This preamble to CSPA's response borrows from the submission made by CSPA (Feb, 2018) in response to the *Optimising Stem Industry-School Partnerships: Inspiring Australia's Next Generation* issues paper.

The 2016 Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) Report¹ noted how 88% (29%, 12%) of 14-15 year-old boys and 86% (32%, 12%) of 14-15 year-old girls talk to their parents about their future plans – career aspirations. The bracketed percentages represent teachers and career counsellors respectively. The strategic role that parents play in relation to their children's career aspirations, in a vast majority of families, is very clear.

The report of the National Career Education Strategy Working Group (November 2017)² noted that:

Research has found parents and other family members have the most significant influence on school students' career aspirations, and on their subject choices. They tend to shape students' ideas, raise or lower their ambitions and push them in certain directions. The more engaged parents are with their children's future educational aspirations and with their school, the better the educational outcomes for the young people (p. 13).

At right is Figure 2 (p. 8) from the report showing Stakeholder roles in student-centred career education - Parents/Carers/Families have central prominence.



Parent engagement has been named by successive governments as a core component of the national reform agenda, yet it has been the least defined and least resourced area. After fifty years of research, parent engagement is more clearly defined as are ideas around its implementation, however parent engagement is still not widely evident in a vast majority of schools. There seems to be little understanding of *why* parent engagement is important and *how* to effectively work with families to support their children's learning and development.

Catholic School Parents Australia's DET sponsored nation-wide, cross-sectoral research project has added positively to this space by outlining key contemporary strategies around the implementation of parent engagement for student learning in primary and secondary schools. Research undertaken with principals and parents informed the generation of twenty-two modules which are freely available to all schools via the *Gearing up for parent engagement for student learning* website, which is available at <https://www.parentengagementcspa.edu.au/>

In an earlier submission to government, CSPA suggested that given the extensive research available around parent engagement as an influence on student learning, that parent engagement not be viewed as an

¹Baxter, J 2016, LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2016: The career aspirations of young adolescent boys and girls, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, pp. 25-26.

²Improving career education for school students in Australia: initial advice and recommendations for Australian Government consideration. Report of the National Career Education Strategy Working Group, 8 November 2017.

external factor but as a *partnership factor* affecting student learning outcomes. Also, it is noted that there is increasing evidence of the positive impact of parent engagement on student learning within lower socioeconomic contexts (e.g. refer to Vaughan & Schoeffel³, 2019), and this provides a welcome variation to the usual trend of lower SES correlating with lower student learning outcomes. There is much evidence to suggest that better student education outcomes correlate positively with student post school undertakings.

Whatever the outcomes of this review, CSPA strongly recommends that parents be included at every level and stage of the process. In exploring our response, CSPA will now respond to three of the questions and make some general concluding comment.

1. What are the essential skills and knowledge with which young people should leave secondary school in order to enhance their lifetime career prospects whilst meeting Australia's future workforce needs? Whose job is it to make sure they acquire them?

CSPA believes that by the time students complete secondary school, they should have had ample opportunity to develop essential skills which are included in the variously described categories as *general capabilities*, *21st century skills*, *employability skills*, *future skills* and STEM skills.

The seven general capabilities within the Australian Curriculum encompass the knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that, together with curriculum content in each learning area and the cross-curriculum priorities, will assist students to live and work successfully. The descriptor '21st century skills' seems to be somewhat dated whereas general capability skills (employability skills referred to by industry) seems more suitable and aligns with the Australian curriculum. Below is a list of the top ten *Future Skills* required for work in 2020 as suggested in a World Economic Forum Report⁴ (the bracketed number indicates the skill's 2015 list position).

- a) *Complex problem solving* (1).
- b) *Critical thinking* (4).
- c) *Creativity* (10).
- d) People management (3).
- e) Coordinating with others (2).
- f) Emotional intelligence.
- g) *Judgement and decision making* (8).
- h) Service orientation (7).
- i) *Negotiation* (5).
- j) *Cognitive flexibility*.

Conceding that there would be enthusiastic discourse around which of the listed skills are learned through various content specific studies, it is proposed that STEM would majorly contribute towards the learning of the italicised skills. This is reinforced by Adams (2017)⁵ who, with reference to others, suggests that the seven most important STEM skills involve: Statistics, Problem-Solving, Creativity, Argumentation, Intellectual Curiosity, Data-Driven Decision-Making, and Flexibility. A report (2017) promoted by the University of Sydney shows that 75% of the world's fastest growing occupations require STEM (analytical, scientific, mathematics and technical) skills.

³Vaughan, T. and Schoeffel, S. Evidence-informed parental engagement, in Teacher Magazine, October, 2019.

⁴Future of Jobs Report, World Economic Forum, 2016.

⁵The 7 most important STEM skills we should be teaching our kids available at <https://www.weareteachers.com/important-stem-skills-teaching-kids/>

It is CSPA's strong belief that if there is to be change around a greater focus on the skills developed through STEM related school studies then a key focus of governments and schools needs to be a coordinated approach to more proactively informing parents of the positive benefits of their children's work, from within their early years, of STEM related studies. Existing challenges such as a fear of Maths by many adults, including teachers, continues to have a detrimental effect on students engaging in the broader STEM related disciplines and needs addressing as part of this coordinated approach.

In a recently released strategic plan of Innovation and Science Australia (ISA)⁶ the first listed imperative for action in education is *better preparing students for post-school STEM occupations*. The whole STEM narrative will require discerned national reflection as there has been much discussion over the past forty years around a lack of student take-up of Maths/Sciences at secondary and tertiary levels. CSPA believes this change in culture will be a complex challenge and will require cooperation and participation from all education stakeholders – including parents.

A 2017 study⁷ found that, while in Australia digital literacy will be a key skill required for 90% of future jobs, *35% of 15-year-olds are not digitally literate or proficient in technology*. CSPA believes that technology skills, together with agreed skills discerned to be essential, need to be adequately measured by an appropriate authority to have genuine educational currency. Such accountability is a fundamental requirement if, for example, skills passports are to be utilised.

A 2018 OECD report⁸ asserts *educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations. Education today is much more about ways of thinking which involve creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making. It is also about ways of working, including communication and collaboration, as well as the tools they require, such as the capacity to recognise and exploit the potential of new technologies, or indeed, to avert their risks*.

There has been much talk, it is now time to develop an effective national strategy and implement it. A goal of our education system, no matter the pathway undertaken, should be to produce students who are mentally agile, creative, reflective and armed with an array of critical and structured thinking skills that prepare them for life-long-learning.

2. Are current arrangements both in schools, at work, and in tertiary education supporting students to access the most appropriate pathways? Are routes sufficiently flexible to allow young people easily to change direction?

In the paper⁹, *Career education: why is successful engagement with parents important?* developed by the Career Industry Council of Australia, it is stated that, *Parents, guardians and carers still remain the number one influencer of a young persons' career decision making. In developing a quality school career education plan, parental engagement in the elements of career advice and information and awareness of various pathways is essential*. Later, in the same report, it states *Knowing when to engage with parents in relation to their child's career development journey and the style and type of engagement that is provided by schools is key to its success. The focus of career development related parental engagement in the later years of schooling has long been the subject of debate by career development theorists, who insist the concept of career development should be extended to earlier stages of child education and development and - by implication - parental engagement strategies targeting those developmental stages*.

⁶Australia 2030 – Prosperity through innovation - A plan for Australia to thrive in the global innovation race. Aust. Govt, 2018.

⁷What skills do students need to thrive in the future? in The Educator, 01 Aug 2018.

⁸Schleicher, A. *The case for 21st-century learning*. OECD Education Directorate (2018).

⁹Career Industry Council of Australia, *Career education: why is successful engagement with parents important?* (nd).

CSPA believes that, in most instances, the greater the degree to which parents are authentically engaged in their children's learning and in partnership with their school around their learning, the more likely it will be that realistic pathways will be pursued post year 12. For example, conversations and discussions at home about learning pathways based on children's academic strengths and skill sets such as those outlined above should, in most instances, positively contribute to discernment of effective learning pathways. It is suggested that parents and schools working in partnership will also help to align aspirational parent expectations with discerned senior school and post school study/training/job choices. Significant resources are used up annually by students who, for an array of reasons including poor choices, discontinue studies before their completion. Better discernment around informed decision making would surely improve this situation and make better use of the limited resources available.

CSPA also believes that maximising the flexibility for students to move between academic and VET courses in both senior secondary and post-secondary pathways will more adequately provide for the career learning needs of senior secondary and tertiary students. Greater collaboration between all sectors/agents of education, with the learner at the centre, is a foundational requirement for this to be possible.

Once again it is stressed that the role of parents must not be undervalued. While for most it is unlikely that parents have the content knowledge in relation to their children's learning in senior secondary school, their considered interest and support for their children's learning, in partnership with the school, is vital. The parent voice needs to be an informed voice of reason.

3. What are the barriers to allowing all students to have equal access to the pathways that are available?

Unfortunately, when it comes to senior pathways, it is not a level playing field with many students for instance, some in remote and/or rural/regional settings not having access to the human (e.g. school career counsellors), physical (e.g. VET options available through school trade training centres) and workplace training resources (employers) which are usually available in many metropolitan areas. Further, when it comes to parent engagement in the career pathways of their children, it can be quite a minefield of information to understand - what to many seems a very complex system that only a person dedicated to the task is able to understand. Many parents, therefore, might leave it to the school to be the main support for their child in making decisions, however, this is a further instance where parent engagement is vital. Tapping into parent knowledge of their child and their interests, strengths and skills, not only by way of academic achievement but also in their life beyond school, can be critical for the child in exploring a well-informed career pathway. This helps to ensure that they are more genuinely following their interests and passions rather than being presented with limited options which emerge through their academic studies.

Concluding comment

By the conclusion of year 12, a student has spent approximately 15% of their life at school, so one should not underestimate the role that parents, who are central to the context that makes up the dominant portion of the other 85%, have on their child's learning and career choices. In relation to senior secondary pathways, CSPA recommends that a clearing house of annually updated, easily accessible information in relation to post school academic and VET options be made freely available to schools, students, parents, tertiary educators, employers and workplace training providers.

Key education agencies must work together more effectively to mitigate against the dominantly polarising narratives associated with *academic* and *VET* pathways and to broaden the perceptions of what success looks like in its many guises. This is a critical issue which also relates to the mental health and wellbeing

of our children and young people and it is essential that skills in decision making and resilience are being developed both at school and at home. Two vital educating agencies are schools and parents and each must be empowered by the other through enriching partnerships around the learning of children and young people.

CSPA greatly appreciates the opportunity to take part in this important discussion via our submission to this review.