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## What makes a good school?

Prime Minister John Howard sparked debate this week by attributing continued growth in private school enrolments to parents' preferences for schools that eschew political correctness and teach values. His claim raises the interesting general question of how parents choose schools for their children and, perhaps more importantly, what we know about the characteristics of outstanding schools. Recent educational research has shed light on both these questions and suggests that highly effective schools—that is, schools that achieve high standards regardless of gender, family backgrounds or socioeconomic status—have a number of features in common.

First, highly effective schools have strong and effective school leaders whose primary focus is on establishing a culture of learning throughout the school. The school is organised, and resources are allocated, in pursuit of this overarching purpose. The principal, with the support of the school leadership team, drives the development of school policies and sets and articulates goals for school improvement. A high priority is placed on professional learning, leadership and collaboration among all school staff. In highly effective schools, principals are in constant and meaningful communication with the school community and work to build partnerships beyond the school in pursuit of the school's objectives.

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Second, in these schools learning is seen as the central purpose of school and takes precedence over everything else. High expectations are set for student learning, whether in classrooms or other learning contexts. There is a deep belief in the ability of every student to learn and to achieve high standards with appropriate and sensitive teaching.

Class time is used as learning time; classrooms are calm and busy; and interruptions to learning are discouraged. Outstanding schools recognise and celebrate successful learning and high achievement.

Third, in highly effective schools, teachers have a thorough and up-to-date knowledge of their subjects and a deep understanding of how students learn particular subjects. This understanding includes an appreciation of how learning typically proceeds in a subject and of the kinds of misunderstandings learners commonly develop. In these schools, teachers know their students well: their individual interests, backgrounds, motivations and learning styles. These schools insist on the mastery of foundational skills such as reading and numeracy, and also work to encourage high levels of critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and teamwork. Teachers in highly effective schools encourage students to accept responsibility for their own learning and teach them how to continue learning throughout life.

Fourth, highly effective schools are characterised by outstanding school cultures. In these schools students have a sense of belonging and pride. They enjoy learning and are engaged and challenged. The school provides a physical and social setting that is safe, well organised and caring. Values of respect, tolerance and inclusion are promoted throughout the school and cultural and religious diversity are welcomed and celebrated. In such schools there is a strong commitment to a culture of learning and continuous improvement and an ongoing search for information and knowledge that can be used to improve on current practice.

Fifth, highly effective schools have well-developed systems for evaluating and monitoring their performance. They promote a culture of self-evaluation and reflection and collect and use data to inform decision making at all levels. They recognise the importance of providing meaningful performance information to a range of stakeholders, including parents. These schools place a high priority on the early identification and remediation of gaps and difficulties in student learning.

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They give timely feedback to students in forms that can be used to guide further learning, and they encourage students to develop skills in monitoring their own progress.

Finally, effective schools have high levels of parent and community involvement. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting their children's learning. Parents are involved in setting goals for the school and in developing school policies.

The school itself is seen as an important part of the local community and these schools often find ways to involve business and community leaders in the work of the school, as well as to establish partnerships with other agencies and businesses to advance school goals.

Not all parents have the same expectations of schools and parents often have different priorities for their children. But research suggests that parents have a shared interest in seeing their children attend schools that are safe and supportive and in which their children are happy and learning. They also look to schools to promote values such as respect for others, honesty, tolerance, fairness and the pursuit of excellence.

by Professor Geoff N Masters

Chief Executive Officer, the Australian Council for Educational Research

First published by the Brisbane Courier-Mail, 22 January 2004

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## Assessing students' social and emotional development

Increasingly, parents and the wider society expect that schools educate students to reflect on and develop their core values. ACER has three survey programs that can assist schools to assess the quality of the values education they offer their students. The questionnaires reveal students' views of themselves and their world. They also assess the effect schools are having on their students' social, emotional and spiritual development.

These surveys address issues that are:

- At the core of schools' mission statements and pastoral care programs
- Modelled in school structures, practices/processes and expected staff behaviour
- Representative of the broad 'world view' of individual schools
- In line with public expectations that schools' obligations to students and their families extend well beyond the classroom.

The first of the programs is the [Attitudes and Values Questionnaire](#) (AVQ). It is designed for current and former secondary school students. It aims to assess the impact the school is having on its present students and reveal how that impact has stood the test of time with ex-students.

This survey looks at a range of social and emotional issues with the option for schools to also address one or two religious dimensions.

It is ideal for those schools seeking to educate the 'whole person' for life. It uses language that is accessible and reports very comprehensively, providing detailed data on the school taking the survey as well as comparative data with equivalent schools, not identified in the report, that have already completed the questionnaire.

The quality of the responses is enhanced by the fact that the survey is completed anonymously.

The School Life Questionnaire (SLQ), also done anonymously, adopts a more focused stance, looking at the quality of life students are experiencing in their school. There is both a primary and secondary school version of this survey.

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The SLQ enables schools to collect information that can be analysed in order to:

- Look at the social environment of the school
- Reflect on the aims of the school and particular emphases and ethos
- Explore the extent to which these aims are recognised and accepted by students
- Examine the organisational structure of the school and its impact on student experiences
- Make judgements about the effectiveness of policies concerned with curriculum, teaching practices, assessment, programs and organisation.

Finally, the [Social-Emotional Well-Being Survey](#) (SEWBS) has four forms that, combined, cater for the whole school from Kindergarten to Year 12.

The program surveys students at Years 2-4 and 5-12. Teacher surveys on their students are available at Years 2-12 and there is a teacher only survey of students K-1.

Schools can take any combination that suits their needs.

The surveys measure students' attitudes and competencies that underpin both social-emotional well-being, and responsible behaviour, and which have also been linked to educational under-achievement. The surveys also provide information on students' perceptions of good practice in their community, home and school.

Further information:

John Morath, Education Consultant by [email](#) or phone (03) 9277 5624 or 0407 353 648.

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## The Australian Language Certificates

Registrations will open in March for the 2004 Australian Language Certificates (ALC) program, which celebrates and encourages the learning of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) in schools. The program is an initiative of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, which has provided financial support for the Certificates over the past thirteen years. It is administered and funded by ACER. A key aim of the program is to motivate students to continue learning a language by providing them with recognition of their achievements.

The program operates at three levels: First Certificate (currently only offered in Japanese), Beginners' Certificate and Intermediate Certificate. The Beginners' certificate is for students with 80-200 hours of language instruction. For the Intermediate level, students should have received between 200 and 300 hours of language instruction, and are likely to be in their third or fourth year of language study.

The materials are based on 'best practice' in language assessment as well as on the experience of practising teachers. They are specifically designed for students in upper primary and secondary school language programs. The materials aim to cater for students of varying ability levels whilst ensuring that all participants are both challenged and rewarded. For Beginners' and Intermediate tasks, a number of questions are presented in the target language. This is done for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure that there are some challenging tasks for students and secondly, to provide a model for teachers in designing their own assessment tasks. Participating schools retain all materials.

Participating students receive a personalised certificate, which provides a description of the level of achievement in both listening and reading.

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Registrations for the 2004 Australian Language Certificates program will open in March with tests taking place as follows:

3 August: Japanese First

4 August: Beginners' - Japanese, Indonesian, Italian, French, German

5 August: Intermediate - Japanese, Italian, French, German

To register or obtain further information, visit the [ALC web site](#) or email the ACL office at [. \(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](#)

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## ACER UPDATE

### **Masters appointed College president**

ACER chief executive Geoff Masters has commenced a 2-year term as President of the Australian College of Educators (ACE). During his term Professor Masters says he intends to place special emphasis on advancing the five objectives of the College, which are to provide a voice for the profession; to promote professional standards; to recognise and encourage excellence in practice; to support professional learning; and to raise the status of the profession) and on building the College membership.

### ***iAchieve at home* now available**

During January ACER launched a new online assessment service for parents and students to use in the home. The *iAchieve at home* website currently provides assessment materials in English and mathematics suitable for children in Years 3 to 10. These materials can be used to evaluate a child's progress and to identify areas of strength and weakness: information that complements teachers' reports. It is recommended that students participating in the *iAchieve at home* program complete a test at the beginning and towards the end of the school year. The first test is available now at [www.iachieveathome.com.au](http://www.iachieveathome.com.au)

### **VicRoads Consultancy**

As part of the ongoing monitoring of the novice driver tests in Victoria, Vic Roads has requested ACER to review the test data from the last 12 months.

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## Future teachers project

ACER's Teaching and Leadership research program has a new project entitled Future Teachers Project - Phase 1. The Victorian Institute of Teaching has asked ACER to:

- design an instrument for surveying the perceptions of beginning teachers and their employers about the effectiveness of current teacher education models in Victoria;
- analyse the findings;
- report on changes that stakeholders believe should be made to teacher education programs to better prepare future teachers; and
- report on practical steps that could be taken to ensure that future teaching graduations have the desired knowledge and skill.

ACER staff will working closely with the VIT's Accreditation team. The project is due to be complete in April.

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Australian Council for Educational Research  
Private Bag 55, Camberwell, Victoria Australia 3124  
Tel: + 61 3 9277 5555  
Fax: + 61 3 9277 5500  
Web: [www.acer.edu.au](http://www.acer.edu.au)

