

AU Australia: A National Leadership Panel on Education

Opening & Framing

- Matt Johnson begins with an Acknowledgment of Country (Dharug/Duraban land near Sydney) and notes that the panel includes national presidents from:
 - Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)
 - Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASEPA)
 - Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA)
 - Catholic Secondary Principals Australia (CSPA)
 - Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA)
 - Independent Primary School Heads of Australia (IPSHA)
 - Australian Special Education Principals Association (AEPA)
 - Plus the Australian Government Deputy Secretary for Education, Meg Brighton.
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Angela Falkenberg – Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

Angela (from Adelaide, South Australia) introduces **APPA** and its core belief: when primary leaders are trusted, supported and genuinely heard, children, staff and communities thrive.

Key Points:

- **Start Well, Learn Well campaign (2026):** A national campaign to highlight how primary schools build belonging, identity and community, and hold families through both “ordinary days and extraordinary times”.
- Primary schools nurture curiosity, connection and confidence – the foundation for all further learning.
- **Goodwill and role creep:** Much of schools' impact is powered by goodwill from principals, staff and communities going far beyond job descriptions.
 - But schools are increasingly being asked to host or deliver non-education services.

- APPA questions whether “because we are here, should we be here for everything?”
 - **Principals’ wellbeing and conditions for leadership:** APPA argues workload, trust, role clarity and system coherence should be treated as essentials, not optional extras.
 - They have commissioned **world-first research** on how threats/violence against school leaders reduce their effectiveness and harm teaching and learning.
 - **Humanity at the core & OECD “Education for Human Flourishing”:** Angela references OECD’s work on **education for human flourishing** – young people need more than knowledge: they need meaning, purpose and capabilities like adaptive problem-solving and ethical judgment.
 - In the age of AI, technology should **enhance** human potential, not replace humans.
 - Her “future classroom” vision: tech frees teachers to focus on relationships, creativity and mentoring.
 - **Policy message:** “Back to basics” is not enough; children deserve more than a “basic education”.
 - Primary education must be seen as a **cornerstone**, not just a stepping stone.
 - Transformation doesn’t come from the top alone: it happens when the profession stands, speaks and learns together.
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Andy (ASEPA) – Australian Secondary Principals’ Association

Andy represents **ASEPA**, which supports leaders of public secondary schools across Australia.

Main Themes:

- **Moving beyond one-size-fits-all schooling:** Schools are shifting towards flexible learning models built around students’ interests and capabilities.
 - Frameworks like **Big Picture Education** connect learning to student passions and real-world projects, balancing content knowledge with skills like critical thinking and collaboration.

- **AI and new technologies:** Educators are embracing AI to support learning, personalise instruction and reduce administrative burden – not to replace teachers.
 - **Student agency & entrepreneurial mindset:** ASEPA runs a national **Entrepreneurial Skills Project** in partnership with **Young Change Agents**, an organisation that builds entrepreneurial skills in young people.
 - The project develops an **entrepreneurial mindset** rather than “making everyone an entrepreneur”.
 - Sets up youth councils and partners with local organisations so students tackle authentic community problems.
 - Strengthens civics education and creates more engaged citizens.
 - **Rethinking what “success” means:** ASEPA is a partner in the **New Metrics for Success / Next Generation Learning** project with the University of Melbourne and Melbourne Assessment.
 - This initiative develops new assessment practices that value leadership, teamwork, ethical thinking and other capabilities alongside grades.
 - Aims to “see and value the whole student”, not just a test score.
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Dr Chris Duncan – AHISA (Heads of Independent Schools)

Chris is CEO of **AHISA**, representing principals of independent schools educating roughly a third of Australian students.

Key Elements:

- **Educational neuroscience & critique of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT):** AHISA has been working with University of Sydney researchers (Assoc. Prof. Minkang Kim and Dr Derek Sankey) on educational neuroscience.
 - Together they published what they consider the first comprehensive educational, philosophical and neuroscientific critique of **Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)**, which is influential in Australian policy debates.
 - They argue CLT relies on an outdated, 1980s “mind as information-processing computer” model.
 - Brains are self-organising and deeply shaped by emotion and feeling.

- There is **no neurobiological evidence** for an actual measurable “load”.
- **Neuroscience-informed conditions for learning:** Chris refers to a **rapid literature review** commissioned by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW), *Maximising learning and teaching: moving ahead with educational neuroscience*.
 - From this work, six “necessary conditions of learning” are highlighted (interwoven, not linear):
 1. Paying attention and actively engaging.
 2. Repetition and rehearsal.
 3. Monitoring errors and using feedback.
 4. Seeking and finding meaning and value.
 5. Enabling positive and addressing negative emotions in learning and assessment.
 6. Thinking creatively, imaginatively and analogically.
- **Evidence-based teaching redefined:** The review positions **evidence-based teaching** at the interface of:
 - Scientific research,
 - Teachers’ pedagogical expertise,
 - The values of the school.
- Chris criticises policy fashions that marginalise teacher expertise and treat “evidence” as something external to practice.

Martin – IPSHA (Independent Primary School Heads) & Barker College

Martin is national president of **IPSHA** and Head of Junior School at **Barker College**, a large co-ed independent school in Sydney’s northern suburbs.

Core Ideas:

- **Character, capacity, confidence:** He frames primary education as developing:
 - **Capacity** – knowledge and skills to handle challenges.

- **Confidence** – built from capacity, not just rankings or scores.
 - **Character** – heart, ethics, and the ability to positively impact others.
 - Success is defined as each child’s growth, not league-table positions.
 - **Belonging, relationships and adaptability:** Students must feel safe and happy to learn; strong relationships and a sense of belonging are foundational.
 - Teaching must be flexible and adaptable to local contexts – especially in remote and Indigenous communities.
 - He highlights Barker’s three Indigenous campuses in regional NSW as an example of locally responsive, community-based education.
 - **Dialogue on system constraints:** In conversation with Matt, he notes that rigid structures (fixed hours, uniform models) can limit innovation.
 - Independent schools often have more flexibility, but large system schools need similar room to adapt.
 - Angela then jumps in to reinforce:
 - The need to respect **practice-based evidence** – the expertise of teachers in the classroom – alongside research evidence.
 - “Scalable is not same-able”: scaling good practice does not mean making everything identical.
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Matt Johnson – AEPA (Special Education Principals) & “The Inclusion Illusion”

Matt (also speaking as a special school principal) focuses on **inclusion and special education**.

Main Points:

- **Disability Royal Commission & contested inclusion:** He references Australia’s **Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability**, whose report included divided recommendations about special schools.
 - Three commissioners argued for **phasing out special schools and support classes**, interpreting them as “segregated” and contrary to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- **Matt counters that:**
 - Around 98% of students with disability already attend mainstream schools.
 - Special schools serve students with the most profound and complex needs.
 - Inclusion is about **programs and supports**, not just a location.
 - Parents who choose special schools strongly advocate for them; choice is central to equity.
 - **Workforce and complexity:** Complexity and diagnoses (especially autism) have increased markedly; the intake of special schools has become “very pointy-end”.
 - There is a shortage of specialist teachers and therapists; universities have reduced in-depth special education degrees, often only providing a broad “inclusive education 101”.
 - **Multi-disciplinary, highly personalised work:** Special schools build:
 - Individual learning plans,
 - Behaviour and management plans,
 - Independent living and health plans.
 - They coordinate inter-agency support (health, National Disability Insurance Scheme, allied health, etc.).
 - Daily communication with families is the norm; teachers and aides are effectively working with adults and systems as much as with students.
 - **Link to global survey themes:** Using results from Gabriel’s global survey, Matt shows how special schools exemplify the six themes: more human education, learning that matters in real life, reinvented teaching, personalised pathways, genuine teacher support, and deep family–school partnerships.
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 **Meg Brighton – Australian Government Department of Education**

Meg is Deputy Secretary for Schools at the **Australian Government Department of Education**.

Policy Perspective:

- **Context & questions:** Society, knowledge, skills and technology (especially AI) are evolving rapidly; education systems must adapt.
 - Central questions for the federal department: How to ensure systems are ready for future challenges? How to keep teachers and school leaders **central** to policy formation? How to help every learner thrive in a rapidly changing world? How to attract, support and retain teachers?
- **Teacher voice & global dialogue:** She describes efforts to embed teacher voice and principal associations in national policy processes.
 - She references international discussions (e.g. world summits on teaching) where the student-teacher relationship is seen as a form of **shared human heritage** that must be protected in the age of digital transformation.
- **Australia's federal structure:** Education is a shared responsibility between the Commonwealth, states/territories, and a large non-government sector (about one-third of students in Catholic and independent schools).
- **10-year national plan for “equity and excellence”:** A cross-sector, 10-year plan anchors reforms with associated funding across: Early childhood, Schooling, Universities.
 - Three major reform pillars in schools:
 1. **Equity & excellence** – high-quality, evidence-based teaching tailored to individual needs, with extra support for those who need it.
 2. **Strong & sustainable workforce** – better initial teacher education (ITE), clearer expectations of knowledge, skills and attributes, and support for teachers as lifelong learners.
 3. **Wellbeing for learning** – structured approaches to wellbeing to ensure students feel safe, connected and ready to learn, including attention to character, resilience and belonging.
- **Digital wellbeing: social media age restriction:** Meg notes that, from **10 November**, Australia is implementing a world-first **national social media age restriction** so under-16s cannot have accounts on major platforms, combined with widespread school mobile-phone bans, to support wellbeing and focus on learning.
 - (The details are still evolving in public policy and legislation, but the direction is clear.)

- Meg closes by acknowledging that, despite progress, there is still significant work ahead, and thanks the associations for their partnership.
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Entities Mentioned and Key URLs

Below are the **main** organisations, initiatives and frameworks referred to in the segment, with representative URLs:

Australian Professional Associations

- **Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)** – National body for government, Catholic and independent primary principals; leading the *Start Well, Learn Well* campaign.
 - Website: <https://appa.asn.au>
- **Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASEPA)** – Represents leaders of public secondary schools across Australia.
 - Website: <https://www.ASEPA.asn.au>
- **Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA)** – Represents leaders of government primary schools nationally.
 - Website: <https://www.agppa.asn.au>
- **Catholic Secondary Principals Australia (CSPA)** – Peak body for secondary principals in the Catholic sector.
 - Website: <https://cspa.catholic.edu.au>
- **Independent Primary School Heads of Australia (IPSHA)** – Association for heads of independent primary schools (Martin is national president).
 - Website: <https://www.ipsha.org.au>
- **Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA)** – Represents principals/heads of independent schools educating about one-third of Australian students (Chris's organisation).
 - Website: <https://www.ahisa.edu.au>
- **Australian Special Education Principals Association (AEPA)** – National body for leaders in special education (Matt's association).

- Website: <https://www.aepa.org.au>

Government Bodies & Commissions

- **Australian Government Department of Education** – Federal department responsible for national policy in schools, early childhood and higher education (Meg’s role).
 - Website: <https://www.education.gov.au>
- **Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission)** – National inquiry referenced in Matt’s “inclusion illusion” discussion.
 - Overview: <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au>
- **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** – Australia’s national funding scheme for people with disability, a key partner for special schools.
 - Website: <https://www.ndis.gov.au>

Schools & School Networks Mentioned

- **Barker College** – Co-educational independent school in Sydney with Indigenous campuses (Martin’s school).
 - Website: <https://www.barker.college>

Projects, Initiatives & Partners

- **Start Well, Learn Well** – APPA’s 2026 national campaign highlighting the role of primary schools in building strong communities.
 - Campaign info: hosted via APPA – example media: <https://www.appa.asn.au> (campaign details in news/media section).
- **Young Change Agents** – Social enterprise partnering with ASEPA on the *Entrepreneurial Skills Project* to build entrepreneurial mindsets in students.
 - Website: <https://youngchangeagents.com>
- **New Metrics for Success (Next Generation Learning)** – University of Melbourne/Melbourne Assessment project co-designed with schools (including ASEPA) to broaden how student success is recognised and assessed.
 - Project page: <https://www.newmetrics.edu.au>

- **Educational Neuroscience work with University of Sydney** – Collaboration between AHISA and University of Sydney scholars (Minkang Kim, Derek Sankey) on neuroscience and critiques of Cognitive Load Theory.
 - Example reference: https://www.sydney.edu.au/education_social_work (see research profiles for Dr Minkang Kim/Derek Sankey)
- **Maximising learning and teaching: moving ahead with educational neuroscience** – Rapid literature review for the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW) that outlines six conditions for learning.
 - AISNSW (organisation): <https://www.aisnsw.edu.au>

International Frameworks & Organisations Referenced

- **OECD – Education for Human Flourishing** – OECD framework emphasising adaptive problem-solving, ethical competence and broader human capacities, referenced by Angela.
 - Overview: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-for-human-flourishing_73d7cb96-en.html
- **PISA High Performing Systems for Tomorrow (HPST)** – OECD project that further develops the human-flourishing agenda and frames competencies for future-ready education systems.
 - Project page: <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/pisa-high-performing-systems-for-tomorrow-hpst.html>
- **International Confederation of Principals (ICP)** – Global network of principal associations; Matt mentions publishing in the ICP magazine.
 - Website: <https://www.icponline.org>
- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** – Referenced implicitly when Matt discusses commissioners favouring full inclusion in line with UN children's rights.
 - Text: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>