Facing the Facts about IPS



The Independent Public School (IPS) program commenced with 34 schools in 2010. Today, of just over 800 public schools in Western Australia, more than 75 per cent are IPS.

Typically, those outside the IPS system are smaller schools in lower socio-economic environments. Theoretically, the IPS was to create distinctive schools that were closely engaged with their communities. It was to shift the locus of control to deliver more responsive and better decision-making.

It was meant to lead to higher satisfaction among students, parents, communities and staff, as well as the broader public. It was to improve performance and care to deliver better student achievement and wellbeing. It was not to be about the system abandoning schools.

There can be little doubt that such a major reform has impacted the shape, function and culture of the whole public education system – by design and otherwise.

How has IPS impacted student achievement and wellbeing? School effectiveness? Teachers and school leaders?

Facing the Facts highlights a raft of issues and calls for a full evaluation of IPS to build on strengths and address weaknesses in the current system.

The report does not recommend turning back the clock. Rather, it asks that an independent evaluation look frankly at where public education in WA now finds itself and provide evidence-based recommendations to deal with our present situation and plan for the future.

There is a wide range of views about IPS among both the profession and the wider community.

Surely, we might all agree it is worthy of evaluation.

Some pointers from recent reports

In *Facing the Facts*, Dr Carmen Lawrence told us that policy and direction, funding and staffing, teacher and school leader workload, satisfaction, turnover and performance, as well as student achievement and satisfaction, all need urgent attention.

In every case there remain unresolved issues arising from the implementation and consequences of IPS.

Policy and direction:

- There is a lack of clear and shared strategic intent across the system. Schools need to be clear about what is expected and all parts of the system should align their efforts to support schools to succeed.
- Research and policy review are needed before significant changes are implemented, based on evidence and best practice. Ongoing monitoring, evaluation and feedback should inform decisions. The scope of devolved authority needs to be redefined with a focus on improving outcomes for students.
- Well-resourced support services, both within schools and based in regions, are essential to ensure relevance and timely access. Support systems for teachers and school leaders, including professional development and mental health resources, need to be local and responsive. The profession needs a sense of belonging to a coherent system.

Funding and staffing:

- The whole public education system is under-funded and within the system, funding distribution needs to respond more robustly to disadvantage and complexity of student need. Every school should have access to the staff, resources, infrastructure and support needed to get the job done. Guidance is needed on the most effective use of resources, ensuring quality and reducing waste.
- Staffing policies need to be fair and transparent. They should not contribute to duplication of effort and inequality of outcomes.

Teacher and school leader workload, satisfaction, turnover and performance

- Teachers and school leaders are over-burdened and students are missing out. The ever-increasing volume, complexity and intensity of workload is grinding the profession down. Educators need to feel valued and supported.
- Administrative tasks need to be reduced and simplified.
- The implementation of further change in public schools should be focused on outcomes for students and based on more effective system-level planning, including prior consultation with teachers and school leaders and their union, to prevent imposing ever-growing and competing workload demands on staff.

Student achievement and satisfaction:

- Educational performance is stagnating and inequality is increasing.
- All students should have the opportunity to succeed.
- Teachers need quality curriculum materials, time to prepare and assess, and a minimum of distraction from their core business of student learning.

***Facing the Facts* recommends:**

- Improving student outcomes should be the principal and explicit objective of any changes to education policies and practice.
- With a view to identifying the key structural changes needed to improve the functioning of the school system in WA, a thorough, independent review of the Independent Public School (IPS) system should be undertaken to achieve:

  o Improved student outcomes.

  o Greater educational equality.

  o Equity and probity in teacher and school leader selection and promotion.

  o Accountability, including the use of funds for designated purposes.

  o Better access to support services and curriculum resources.

Even in the department's own *Understanding and Reducing the Workload of Teachers and Leaders*, report authors Viviane Robinson and Peter Hamilton told us that the core work of teachers and school leaders has expanded, that expectations are out of hand, that misunderstanding, fear and over-conscientious compliance must be addressed - and that more system support is needed.

In relation to staffing, Robinson and Hamilton recommend:

- That a small group of principals in collaboration with Workforce personnel be convened to revise the recruitment process so that: principals retain authority over the decision to fill a position, final approval of the wording of the

advertisement, composition of the short list, if any, and final selection of the successful applicant and a dedicated regionally or centrally based HR expert is responsible for the administration of these steps and ensuring they are compliant with relevant standards.

On system direction they recommend:

- That the current three system priorities for schools should remain unchanged until satisfactory progress is achieved, so leaders and teachers at all levels can focus on them and be given the space and time to learn what is required for success. Ongoing monitoring by the system is required so that progress can be assessed.
- That the Focus document and all other relevant documents should stress the intimate relationship between good teaching, good teacher-student relationships and student success and wellbeing.
- That the Department review how well the Quality Teaching Strategy, Behaviour Management Strategy and Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy are communicated to schools as mutually supportive and essential components of the core business of teaching and learning.

And on system support:

- That the current IPS settings giving principals greater autonomy be retained, but the department review how it can reduce the workload associated with increased school level decision making, particularly in relation to school selection of improvement initiatives, staff selection and infrastructure development.
- That the capacity of school psychologists and other specialists to support principals in achieving an effective whole of school approach to managing student behaviour is reviewed and increased.

Meanwhile, the Public Sector Commission's Agency Capability Review of the Department of Education is keenly awaited, especially in relation to leadership culture and governance; service excellence; relationships; workforce; and resources and risk. While the review may be unlikely to go to IPS itself, its review of agency capability is in the context of an IPS-based system.

Let's hope that some opportunities for improvement will be seized:

- Progress needs to be monitored, major reforms such as the IPS need to be evaluated and strategic decisions need to be evidence based.
- Priorities for the whole department need to be reduced, focused and communicated.
- Effort and expenditure need to be coherent and strategically aligned at all levels.
- A concerted effort is required to reduce workload in schools, address the teacher shortage and focus on the core business of public
  school education.
- Department support services need to be more local, accessible and responsive to need and proactively aligned to change management.

What just happened?

Along the way, of course, there was more than the IPS agenda at play.

Over the same period of time and under successive governments, the funding of public education has reduced. Policy change has been unrelenting and poorly supported.

Perhaps as a by-product of approaches necessary during the Covid emergency, a culture of command and control has taken hold in the system.

Commercialisation has grown as schools desperately seek out resources and services, including professional learning, to meet the demands of the curriculum and student wellbeing – quality is variable, costs are prohibitive and teacher professionalism is reduced.

There is tension between those who seek to split out the principal class and those of us who see school leadership and teaching as roles in one and the same profession.

At the same time, society has been changing. Parenting is changing, mental health issues are growing, behaviours are becoming more aggressive, harms driven by social media are growing and cultures of both entitlement and complaint are rife in the community.

For those in schools it feels like you are more likely to be told what to do, less likely to be properly resourced and supported to do it and more likely to cop the blame – and the shame – when there is an issue. So much for connected autonomy.

Little wonder then that Dr Lawrence tells us that: “The cumulative impact of frequent policy changes, including the increased isolation of schools generated by the IPS initiative, has steadily increased both the intensity and complexity of workloads, lowered morale, increased burnout and created an environment where teachers feel undervalued and disrespected.” Note that Robinson and Hamilton question “whether the job of teaching as currently performed and organised is doable and sustainable.”

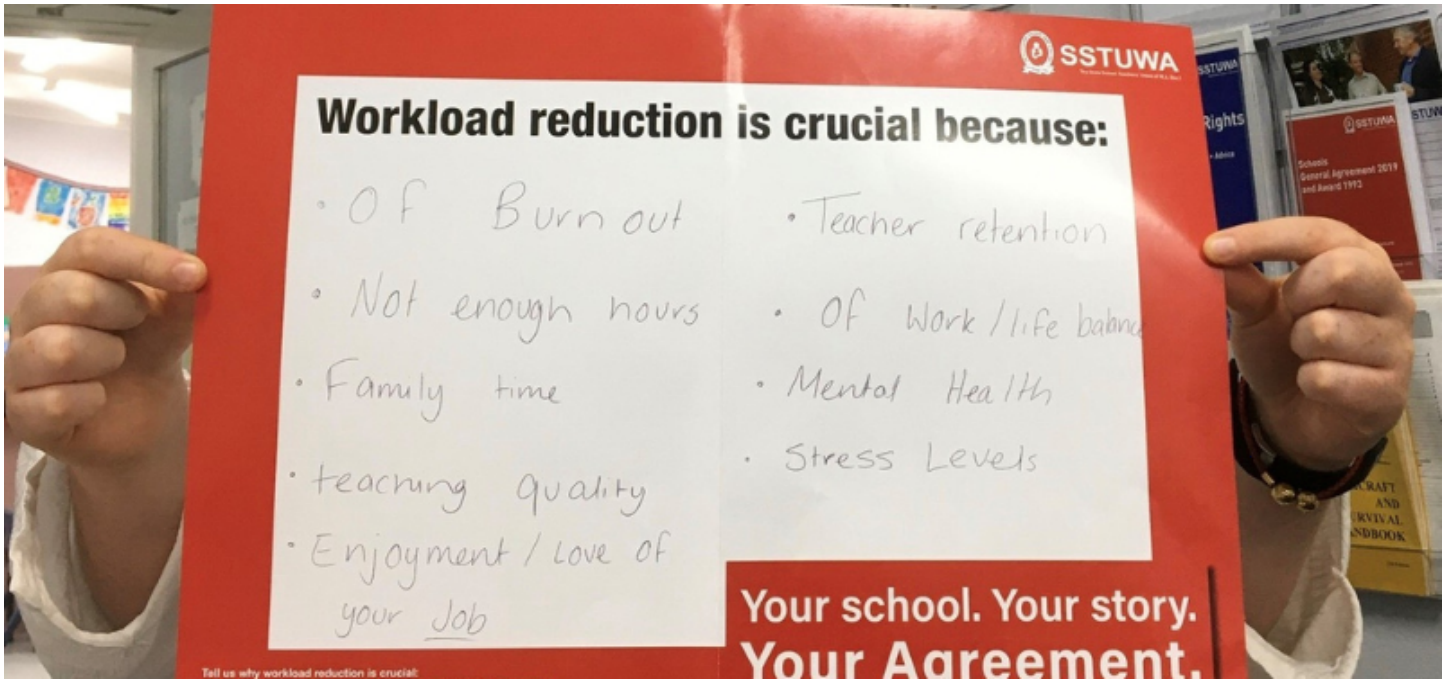
It’s time to face the facts

Facing the facts about IPS (in each case) doesn’t mean just chucking IPS out or just winding the clock back. On the other hand, why is IPS treated as some kind of special beast that is above question and proper evaluation? Public education is a complex system that demands an evidence-based approach. Building a more effective, equitable and sustainable public education system is a noble and never-ending pursuit – and it needs to go way beyond branding and badging.

Further, the branding and badging that was so core to the expansion of IPS is, paradoxically, diluted - with the majority of schools now IPS, with all schools now operating under the Student Centred Funding Model and with some of the more superficial aspects of IPS, such as school boards versus school councils, more widely understood to be superficial.

The soft re-branding of IPS to connected autonomy won’t cut it when, for the most part, we can’t see that much real autonomy and we can’t see that much real connection. In many ways IPS is now rather old news. We need to look to the future.

In this era of data, accountability and transparency it is time to face the facts, evaluate IPS – which essentially means evaluating the public education system – and formulate a balanced way forward, devoid of ideology.





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