Autonomy and accountability

The importance of independence

Independent schools have a reputation as providers of high quality education in Australia, recognised for their leadership and innovation. Underpinning this success is their autonomy as self-managing schools.

Self-management is the distinguishing characteristic of Independent schools, differentiating them from government schools, which are owned and managed by state and territory governments, and Catholic systemic schools, which are operated by Catholic education authorities.

While some Independent schools belong to small systems, most are managed by their own school board or council who are the key decision-making bodies, accountable to their parent and school community and responsible for the school’s educational programs, financial decisions, staffing, co-curricular content and current and future development.

International research has established a link between school autonomy and student achievement. Autonomy enables schools to respond more flexibly and innovatively to their local community and to their own students’ needs.

The importance of accountability

The research which links school autonomy with student achievement also points to the importance of accountability. It is where autonomy is coupled with appropriate accountability – for educational provision and student outcomes as well as for responsible financial management – that it has been found to be associated with better student outcomes.

Independent schools are highly accountable, being responsible to their local communities, required to meet public standards of educational and financial accountability, and comply with the legislative, regulatory and reporting requirements that apply to all schools.

The freedom of students and their families to exercise choice in schooling is one of the most demanding forms of accountability for Independent schools.

Governance

In their governance arrangements, Independent schools are expected to meet the standards of social and financial accountability applying to corporate entities or charities.

Independent school boards or councils are responsible for making sure their schools meet these standards. They play a key role in ensuring schools are accountable, particularly in matters of self-regulation. School governors represent one of the largest volunteer bodies in Australia. More than 10,000 people who come from every walk of life are members of Independent school boards or councils.

The Principal of an Independent school is, in turn, accountable to the board or council for the school’s day to day running and educational programs, including how they relate to the strategic directions and ethos of the school.
Regulatory environment

Independent schools must meet the criteria established by the relevant state or territory government for registration as a school. In all states and territories, Independent school registration is regularly reviewed to ensure that schools maintain appropriate standards and meet requirements in relation to staffing, facilities, environment, management, curriculum and reporting requirements.

In order to receive Australian Government funding, Independent schools must be not-for-profit institutions and comply with wide-ranging and detailed legislative requirements. These requirements are specified in Sections 75 and 76 of the Australian Education Act 2013.

Independent schools are bound by a range of other legal requirements associated with their operations. For example, as companies limited by guarantee or as charities, they are accountable to the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, the Australian Taxation Office and the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

As employers, Independent schools must comply with legislation and regulations covering such issues as equal employment opportunity, industrial awards and work health and safety.

As educational institutions they must comply with health, safety, privacy and child protection requirements as well as regulations relating to building and fire codes.

Education accountability

The Australian Government requires, as a condition of funding, that all schools commit to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which was endorsed by all state, territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2008.

Through this commitment all Australian schools, including Independent schools, are working towards common goals in education and to the achievement of performance measures, including testing for and reporting against literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

All Independent schools are engaged in the implementation of the Australian Curriculum developed under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and participate in national student assessments such as national literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN).

The development of national goals, directions and policies is for the most part a collaborative effort involving all school sectors. The Independent school sector is actively engaged in these developments. At a national level, this engagement is achieved through representation by the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) and Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) across a range of bodies.

Financial accountability

Independent schools must demonstrate that the funds they receive from government has been expended appropriately, and must provide extensive financial data to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training for this purpose.

A balance between accountability and autonomy

The steady growth of the Independent sector is evidence of public confidence in the accountability of Independent schools through a mix of self-regulation, contribution to education policies and educational and financial compliance.

Autonomy enables Independent schools to respond effectively and creatively to the needs of the students and communities they serve. Through self-regulation and comprehensive regulatory and accountability regimes, there is a strong system of accountability for in place for Independent schools.