



Executive Summary

Evaluation of the Independent Public Schools Initiative

Commissioned by The Department of Education, Western Australia

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) at the University of Melbourne (UoM), in partnership with Shelby Consulting and Murdoch University was contracted by the Western Australian Department of Education (DoE) to undertake an evaluation of the Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative. Now in its fourth year, the IPS initiative was designed to give greater autonomy to schools, and to reduce bureaucracy within the WA public school system (DoE, 2011). The initiative also aims to facilitate stronger engagement between schools and their community using different accountability processes, while still supporting schools within the public system.

This executive summary provides a high-level summary of the key findings of the evaluation, which was commissioned in September 2011. There were four key evaluation questions:

1. What are the effects of the Independent Public Schools initiative on participating schools?
2. What effect has the initiative had on the public school system overall?
3. Are there any issues that are hampering the efficiency or effectiveness of the Independent Public Schools initiative?
4. What advice can be provided to guide future implementation of the IPS initiative?

1.2 EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS

The evaluation adopted a rigorous evaluation framework to utilise and integrate multiple sources and forms of data, both quantitative and qualitative as well as ensuring a high level of stakeholder engagement. Data was collected across two stages and included information accessed from the Department of Education, a survey of principals,

interviews with key stakeholders and in-depth school site visits.

1.3 EVALUATION FINDINGS

Overall, the story of the implementation of the IPS initiative is a positive one, with the concept of IPS being agreeable to most principals in Western Australia. IPS principals overwhelmingly maintain that even in this early phase of the implementation, the initiative has considerably enhanced the functioning of their school, created the opportunity to access more benefits, and that it will lead to increased outcomes for the whole school community. Expectedly, there are challenges and some dissenting voices particularly around issues such as:

- increased workload, mainly in the transition to becoming IPS; and
- the creation of a set of schools that have advantages over other schools.

The decision to apply to become IPS was a large undertaking for many schools and while many factors come into play, a particularly relevant dynamic is that of “readiness for change.” The rationale for those principals choosing to apply to become IPS primarily relates to their awareness of, and desire for, the perceived benefits of IPS. Principals chose not to apply for a range of reasons, including lack of perceived benefits for their school, satisfaction with the status quo, insufficient capacity for change or philosophical opposition to the concept.

1.3.1 VARYING LEVELS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Overall, the implementation of the IPS initiative is on target, although schools are at different points on a continuum of readiness and adoption that is dependent on factors such as:

- priority for change,

- community engagement,
- capabilities of the leadership team,
- the principal's mindset, and
- levels of support from the system and the community.

There are a number of impacts of the IPS initiative that emerged throughout the evaluation. The centrality of the principal as a change agent was clearly demonstrated. In particular, the transition period was critical, as it was the phase at which the principals gathered the necessary resources, information and skills required to commence and implement the initiative. These impacts are discussed, in brief, in the sections that follow.

1.3.2 PRINCIPALS

The mindset of the principal was one of the most critical factors in supporting the adoption of autonomy. In particular, the mindset that is adopted during the transition period is critical, as it is during this phase that the principals gather the necessary resources, information and skills required to commence and implement the initiative.

There is little doubt that in this early phase of the initiative IPS schools are very satisfied with the initiative. IPS principals felt empowered and believed that they were able to empower their teachers and better cater to students' specific needs. They were motivated by both the freedom and responsibility for selecting their staff and receiving their budget as a single figure over which they had control. Principals claimed high levels of change in their role, feeling more accountable and autonomous, and more empowered to make changes and lead their staff in improving the teaching, resources and climate of their schools. With greater autonomy, principals argued that they were also more motivated and invested in the success of their schools, thus encouraging a stronger sense of entrepreneurship and engagement as school leaders: for example, this notion of mindset can be seen in the four areas such as the principal's self-belief, the belief in autonomy, feeling of support and their skills of adopting suitable flexibilities. As would be expected, the principals exhibited different

levels of these attributes - the stronger the attribute, the greater the depth of implementation.

The principals claimed that there were critical success factors to the ongoing success of the IPS, and these included effective principals who are able to perform as education leaders and able to build relationships with teachers and communities. It was felt that support should be tailored to the capabilities of the principal, and their school context; particularly for less experienced and aspiring principals of whom there are expected to be a higher number in future IPS cohorts.

1.3.3 TEACHERS

Another critical element of the model is the role of the teacher. It is clear from the evaluation that principals believe that the IPS initiative has had a positive impact on many teachers, with a number of principals reporting that IPS teachers demonstrate an increased motivation and energy to bring about changes, while being more empowered to initiate innovative practices which support effective teaching and learning. The views of teachers were varied, with some expressing enthusiasm about how becoming an IPS had led to increased collaboration, additional resources, professional development and support tailored to their students' specific needs, while others voiced concerns about the impact of IPS on workload and careers paths.

One benefit of IPS frequently noted was increased school control over staffing, such that they are able to recruit staff appropriate for their school context and needs, and can choose whether or not to accept redeployees. It is noted, however, that this does not mean that redeployees are necessarily of lesser quality but that they may not fit the purposes in the IPS schools.

It does appear that most teachers in IPS felt more professional, accountable and in control of their careers, which has led to a greater feeling of self-worth. At this stage in the implementation of the IPS initiative, however, these findings are more at the level of perception and attitude. It will thus be important to now also monitor what happens inside

IPS classrooms over time, and for principals to use their greater autonomies to fully realise the benefits of these perception changes within the classrooms.

1.3.4 STUDENTS

It is envisaged that IPS will have positive spin-offs for whole school communities, and thus it is important to consider how it has impacted students. In this early phase of the IPS development there is little evidence of changes to student outcomes such as enrolment or student achievement. Given the complexities of the relationship between such outcomes and the degree of school autonomy that is reflected in the literature, this is perhaps not surprising.

Significant increases in student achievement as a consequence of the IPS initiative are likely to take time to be realised, and will emerge from an increased focus on effective teaching practices and broader school-changes, such as the development of positive learning environments. Barrera-Osorio et al. (2008), for example, suggested that, as student learning occurs as a cumulative process, students will only begin to demonstrate learning gains from autonomy reforms after at least five years of exposure. Similarly, changes in student behaviour, enrolment, and attendance are likely to emerge from more innovative school-wide approaches towards behaviour management and teaching, both of which can be enacted under the IPS initiative.

1.3.5 SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

Whole school cultural change is also observable in the IPS initiative. Schools in IPS have been more engaged in strategic thinking and where school communities as a whole believed in the vision of IPS that was championed by the principals, this strategic thinking was more evident.

Further, schools in IPS reported increased engagement with their community and accountability via their school board, as well as increases in school profile, and school and community pride, with some parents suggesting the school was more inviting. It was reported that some schools had also increased

their level of collaboration and sharing of resources across schools, to their mutual benefit. The other public schools did not note any particular change with their community and as many suggested, they were relatively satisfied with their current status.

There is little doubt at the school level that the implementation of the IPS initiative has increased the opportunity for change and reform. The consequences of becoming an IPS, however, have led to differing degrees of progress and success in enacting these changes at this stage. Given that schools are at varying levels of readiness to adopt IPS, it would appear that there is no one-size-fits-all model of adoption, and therefore support must be tailored accordingly. Many IPS are approaching their “peak of implementation phase” and now their task is to use the benefits of this implementation to realise the impact on teachers and students. To achieve this, schools need principals who are ready to champion the next change within the classrooms, they need the support of the whole school community, and most importantly, they need the support of an education system that is responsive to the direction and resources to promote these changes in the classroom.

1.3.6 SYSTEM

The implementation of the IPS initiative has, overall, had a positive effect on the public school system by raising its profile and contributing to a sense of renewal and positive reform. The complexity that occurs as a consequence of working towards school change as well as system change, however, cannot be underestimated. While the system has adapted to support this innovation, this process of adaptation is still developing and it will be important to continue to monitor this level of change and support over time. At a whole system level there are demonstrable changes in working conditions. Changed roles and increases to the administrative and managerial responsibilities under autonomy have inevitably altered the workload of school leaders, although most acknowledged that this additional burden would reduce somewhat over time, and point to benefits for IPS school communities.

Within legislative and industrial constraints, the IPS initiative essentially shifts decision-making from central office to schools, and involves central office providing a supportive role to schools. This has necessitated a realignment of roles, culture, systems and resources in the Department. This process has been occurring at different rates and changing priorities appear to have also triggered in-depth reviews of processes and policies, with a view to providing better support to all schools including deployment of staff.

Equity was also a predominant theme, particularly for principals not in the IPS initiative. For example, there was a common view that the optimal placements for regional and indigenous schools need to be a focus for the sector. The evaluation, however, found no evidence to date to suggest that very remote, remote, regional and metro schools were differentially impacted by the IPS initiative. Related to this, concerns were voiced by some principals who did not apply or who were unsuccessful in their application to take up IPS that there is the potential for a 'two – tiered' system to emerge. Significantly, it must be questioned as to whether multiple ways of operating schools will be inherently negative, given the contextual diversity of WA. It is interesting to note that schools that applied to IPS but had not been accepted, suggested that they were seen to have failed to reach a standard, and claimed there were negative impacts on staff morale and community confidence as a result. However, there was no evidence of substantial differences in outcomes between schools that were selected into IPS and those that were not.

Overall, stakeholders were positive about the implementation of the IPS initiative. The need for continued review of central policy and processes, and a more open central culture to better support schools was highlighted as needing to continue and improve, along with a readiness to tackle legislative and industrial barriers in the future.

The theory and direction of the research logic has been validated by the evaluation results. The evaluation provided information to determine the IPS process of change, as well as an opportunity to review and refine the initial model, with a view to future development. While there is the sense that the initiative is some way through its implementation phase, it has yet to realise a fully developed process that can produce long-term gains. There is little doubt that the main elements of the initial logic are core to the implementation of the IPS initiative: the principal and the principal's role in relation to their teachers and school community as suggested by the evaluation's normative model developed early 2012.

The implementation of IPS is ongoing, and there are a number of factors and outcomes that can be considered in the medium and long term. Strengths, such as the motivated, energised, and engaged character of the Western Australian IPS initiative must be capitalised on, and factors which potentially limit the adoption of the innovation must be addressed. The key theme to emerge from the evaluation that needs to be considered is the importance of understanding a school and principal's readiness to adopt the IPS innovation. Considering that there are many levels of autonomy or flexibilities that schools can adopt, schools should be encouraged to opt in according to their level of readiness and support from their communities. Further, the transition process is critical to the successful implementation: most importantly, once the school level outcomes are in place, directing the focus of support to the classroom and teacher empowerment may be beneficial.

There are number of considerations that emerged from the evaluation and many of these ideas focus on targeted professional development for principals, and critically, on teaching and learning. A number of specific elements for future focus include:

- Considering the development of a more structured assessment of a school's and principal's readiness to engage in autonomy, one that allows for self-review and establishing strategic targets.
- Encouraging a direction that moves towards principals building on positive school culture gains to focus on the classroom and empower teachers to have greater impacts on students.
- Enhancing the successful transition program to build another level of support for principals ready to focus on classroom change.
- Providing support for principals to develop a 'mindset' that aids a progressive model of autonomy.
- Considering the importance of community engagement and specific means of targeted development and support (e.g., building partnerships across schools).
- Considering the particular role, placement and importance of redeployees.
- Enhancing capacity around monitoring and evaluation within the sector and the schools, particularly on the effect on school climate, attendance, and achievement outcomes.
- Encouraging schools to set achievement targets based on data, and to engage in continual review of these targets.
- Considering the current evaluation as a baseline from which to build and ensure the evaluative data forms the basis of further progression of the initiative.

Ultimately, this evaluation has found that the IPS initiative, while still in its early phase and not without challenges, has set the scene for school improvement, been embraced by most principals and had a significant impact across a range of areas within schools and the broader system.