

Better Policy begins with Better Questions

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is committed to being more than a stakeholder consulted after the fact. We are calling for genuine partnership; early, deep, and enduring engagement in policy inquiry, design, and implementation.

Why, because how a problem is defined determines what solutions are imagined

As Albert Einstein famously said, *“If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it.”* In education policy, too often, we rush to solution without shared understanding of the issue. The result? Well-intentioned ideas that fail to land at the school level, not because of poor implementation, but because the original diagnosis missed the mark.

The value of inquiry before co-design

School leaders are on the ground. We understand the nuance of issues as they manifest in diverse communities. A student’s poor attendance may be framed as a teaching challenge, leading to interventions focused on engagement. But what if the core issue is housing insecurity? Without robust inquiry, we risk treating symptoms, not causes.

Before we design policy, we must **co-define the problem**. This means committing time and trust to investigate:

1. What is the ‘problem’ represented to be?
2. What assumptions underpin this representation?
3. What has been left unquestioned?
4. Who has shaped this view of the problem - and who has not?
5. What effects does this framing produce on schools, children, and families?
6. And crucially - *how else might we see this?*

(Carol Bacchi, 2012)

This level of inquiry is not academic, it's practical. It saves resources, reduces misdirected effort, and leads to solutions that work in context.

Policy Co-design is not enough, it must be coupled with agile, context-aware implementation

We also advocate for agile implementation strategies, built on respect for local expertise. School leaders know what will work, where, and for whom. Yet when policies falter, schools often carry the burden of blame, rarely is a mismatch seen as a policy design failure.

At APPA, we believe:

- Context matters. Not all good ideas scale.
- Progress is better than perfection. We need flexibility to adapt and iterate.
- Implementation plans should be co-created, not cascaded.

We are not seeking to critique for its own sake, we are offering partnership. Schools are not endpoints for policy delivery; they are partners in public good.

We urge system leaders and policymakers to work with APPA in thoughtful inquiry and collaborative design. Together, we can define the right problems and create solutions that truly serve Australia's children and communities.

Angela Falkenberg, APPA President
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